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## Allusion as Form: *The Waste Land* and *Moulin Rouge!*

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*Abstract:* Allusion is usually considered a literary technique, but relatively little attention has been paid to notion of allusion as a literary form. In this essay, I attempt to describe the ‘allusive form’ based on two prominent examples, T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* and Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge!* Though radically different, the two works embody distinguishing characteristics of the allusive form. These are intertextuality, or a dependence upon outside sources for sense and significance; heightened and self-conscious artificiality; a confrontational attitude toward the audience; elitism, based on the exclusivity of allusions; appropriation of multiple cultures; and pervasive anachronism. Though prone to numerous failures, the allusive form allows the creation of a unique dialogue between artist and audience, as well as a precarious simultaneity of past, present, and future.

At the end of her essay ‘On Alluding,’ Carmela Perri observed that besides its familiar usage as a literary technique, ‘allusion may also be a literary mode’ and that allusion may be used ‘centrally, as the informing principle of composition.’<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Perri did not elaborate on this idea of allusion as mode, or what I will call the allusive form. My goal is to describe some of the qualities of the allusive form by looking at two primary examples: T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* and Baz Luhrmann’s film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). Although these heavily allusive works come from different media and different time periods, they share many fundamental similarities, which are distinguishing characteristics of the allusive form.

In order to discuss allusion as a form, we must begin with allusion itself. Once distinguished by benign neglect as a subject of literary theory, allusion finally began to attract serious critical attention in the 1960's with the rise of Structuralism,<sup>2</sup> and has continued as a fertile topic of critical discussion. I offer the following composite definition of allusion, based upon recent critical discussion:

Allusion is language shared between two works.<sup>3</sup> This shared language is specific and verifiable, and the author intends it to be recognized by the reader.<sup>4</sup> The allusion has a literal, 'non-allusive' meaning within the alluding text,<sup>5</sup> as well as a meaning within its original context. The alluding text and the alluded-to text interact dynamically,<sup>6</sup> each informing the interpretation of the other: 'Literary allusion is a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts.'<sup>7</sup> A successful allusion is thus a completely new thing, a fusing of old and new texts to convey meaning that neither text can carry alone.<sup>8</sup> The connections between the two texts can only be made by the reader, for such linkages exist only within the reader's mind.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, authors cannot have final control over the meaning of allusions, which may open up other avenues of meaning to the reader.<sup>10</sup>

This apparently simple description encompasses several thorny issues. First, 'shared language' limits allusion to what might be called quotation, but often involves distortions or alterations that strictly quoted language does not. Furthermore, it limits allusion to the field of literature, and specifically to the 'shared language' of literature. In this context, Gian Biagio Conte speaks of 'reusable language' that is 'preserved in the poetic memory.'<sup>11</sup> Reusable language is the formalized language of literary art, distanced by its disruptive, artificial qualities from the purely communicative language of the everyday. Reusable language participates in the recognizable literary traditions of a given culture. Precisely because it appears in the 'poetic

memory' of a culture, such language is available to be recycled by others participating in that literary tradition.

Limiting allusion to the realm of shared language also serves to distinguish allusion from the larger phenomenon of intertextuality. Julia Kristeva famously coined the term,<sup>12</sup> although in her work it was 'suggestive of the overarching interplay of all cultural materials,'<sup>13</sup> and nothing so limited as the borrowing of literary language. Nonetheless, subsequent critics seized on the term, making intertextuality and allusion virtually synonymous.<sup>14</sup> One consequence of this conflation of categories is that many critics view any outside reference in a text as a type of allusion.<sup>15</sup> In order to keep the field of inquiry manageable, I will use the term 'allusion' to refer only to what Udo J. Hebel calls 'quotational allusions,' or the distinct subset of intertextuality which specifically references the 'reusable language' of art.

At its most utilitarian, quotation is a literal word-for-word repetition of a source, usually semantically marked with special punctuation, and given a clear attribution, as in a news story or an academic essay. Fidelity to the original is primary. A literal quotation remains firmly embedded in its original source, distinct and easily separable from its new setting. That is, it travels in only one direction: backward. In contrast, the literary quotational allusion points both backward and forward. When Eliot writes in *Ash-Wednesday*, 'O my people, what have I done unto thee,' he uses a literal (though unmarked) quotation of Micah 6:3. But Eliot omits the Biblical verse's punctuation and closing ('what have I done unto thee? or wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me'), introducing ambiguities not present in the original. Placed in the context of the poem, narrated by a spiritual seeker, the line may now read as the self-recrimination of a guilty conscience, while still retaining its original significance as an accusation by God against a faithless people. The verse's historical association with the Christian

Holy Week, wherein it becomes the cry of the rejected savior, adds another layer of meaning: is the speaker thus identified with the suffering Christ, and if so, ironically or otherwise? Unlike a simple quotation, a quotational allusion must have significance in its original setting (the past), literal meaning in its current setting (the present), and an entirely new metaphorical weight that is produced by the interpolation of past and present, through ongoing recognition and assimilation by readers (the future).

A second issue concerns author intentionality. After a period of absolute ascendancy under Romantic criticism, authors were overshadowed by New Criticism's 'intentional fallacy,'<sup>16</sup> and were famously declared dead by Post-Structuralism.<sup>17</sup> If authors are dead or at least irrelevant to the text, then it is pointless to speak about intentionality. Indeed, Post-Structuralism has had much to say about intertextuality but little about allusion. However, recent critical focus on cultural studies (exemplified by New Historicism) has resurrected the author as an important part of the cultural fabric that produces texts.<sup>18</sup>

The death of the author helped to productively focus attention on areas such as reader response, but it also tended to make the literary text a strangely autotelic object, as if it were self-generated out of the tangled webs of language and culture. Productive study of allusion requires us to consider the allusive process as dynamic, communicative, and very human. Authors read, or they could not mine the works of the past for inclusion in their writing; readers also 'write' the texts they encounter, bringing their own literary, cultural, and personal associations to bear in the creation of meaning.

Author intentionality also bears on the issue of whether allusions are overt or covert. Harold Bloom defends a traditional definition of allusion as solely covert. Commenting on the history of the term, Bloom notes that allusion has 'a fourth meaning, which is still the correct

modern one...involves any implied, indirect, or hidden reference. The fifth meaning, still incorrect but bound to establish itself, now equates allusion with direct, overt reference.’<sup>19</sup> As Bloom predicted, critical opinion is now nearly unanimous on this point.<sup>20</sup> Allusions must be overt for a simple reason: unless the reader recognizes the allusion, the allusion has failed, because the activation of the meaning produced by the alluded-to and alluding texts can only occur with the reader’s participation. As with the tree falling in the forest, if no one hears the allusion, it makes no sound.

Insistence on the overt, intentional, and verifiable nature of allusions also helps to prevent the study of allusion from dissolving into a shimmer of cultural sparks. Perri notes that the purpose of the intentionality requirement is to ‘disqualify unconscious echoes’<sup>21</sup> on the part of the author. As Conte puts it, ‘One text may resemble another not because it derives directly from it nor because the poet deliberately seeks to emulate but because both poets have recourse to a common literary codification.’<sup>22</sup> Another difficulty is that well-trained readers, such as literary critics, are apt to find subtle intertextual links to the past in almost every word of a literary work. Discussing intentionality, Allan Pasco raises this important point: ‘With nothing but internal evidence, how are we to know who created the allusion—the author...or the critic?’<sup>23</sup>

The issue of recognition leads us to the role of the reader. Once nearly invisible to critical theorists, the reader is now considered indispensable to the functioning of allusion. The author may supply the allusion, but only the reader can activate it, dynamically linking the old and new texts in an interpretive process. Perri describes the reader’s activity as a five-step process: the reader comprehends the literal meaning of the allusion, recognizes it as a reference to a source text, realizes that further interpretation is required, remembers aspects of the source text’s meaning, and connects these aspects to the alluding text to complete the allusion’s meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Given this active communication between author, texts, and reader, a crucial problem exists if the reader fails to recognize an allusion. For allusion to operate at all, the author and the reader must have a shared pool of poetic memory on which to draw,<sup>25</sup> and the author assumes a (possibly nonexistent) knowledgeable reader when engaging in allusion.<sup>26</sup> Conte goes so far as to suggest that the author ‘establishes the competence of his (or her) own Model Reader, that is, the author constructs the addressee and motivates the text in order to do so,’<sup>27</sup> although this Model Reader seems consigned to the margins of the literary enterprise, subject to the mercy of the author. In contrast, Pucci offers the ‘full-knowing reader.’ Such a reader is full-knowing not because the reader has complete knowledge of the literary field, but because the reader has, finally, complete control over the activation and interpretation of allusions, a control that the author cannot transgress.<sup>28</sup> While this approach recognizes the importance of the reader, it does beg the question of the consequences of a failed allusion.

When, then, does allusion cease to be a device and become a form? In the allusive form, allusion is employed so systematically that it becomes a structural element, even an organizing principle, not an ornament or accent: take away the allusions, and the work effectively ceases to exist. *The Waste Land* is the most infamous example, although nearly all of Eliot’s early poems could qualify. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is frequently cited as an example,<sup>29</sup> but perhaps *Finnegan’s Wake* is the more obvious candidate. Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge!*, a movie musical whose soundtrack is formed almost entirely from borrowed pop songs, moved the allusive form onto the big screen and in front of popular audiences, a startling development for a form generally considered erudite and obscure.

Up to now I have spoken about texts and readers only, primarily because nearly all criticism dealing with the theory of allusion is literary criticism.<sup>30</sup> However, allusion as art form

is grounded in allusion as technique, and allusion as technique has no inherent qualities that would limit it to literature alone. Even the narrow definition of allusion as language shared between two works can be easily transposed into other realms of art: shared musical phrases, or shared visual images, for example. *Moulin Rouge!* clearly ‘quotes’ a number of well-known visual images, such as the distinctive moon face from Georges Méliès’ 1902 film, *Voyage dans la lune*, or the dancing waiters from *Hello, Dolly!* (1969).

*The Waste Land* and *Moulin Rouge!* embody several distinctive characteristics of the allusive form. First and most obviously, allusive art works are also heavily and intentionally intertextual. Beyond the strict limits of ‘shared language,’ allusive works systematically employ other borrowings to create their effects. For example, both *The Waste Land* and *Moulin Rouge!* borrow myths as frameworks on which to build their stories: the Grail myth and the myth of Orpheus, respectively. The Rhine Maidens of the *Nibelungenlied* make a transformed appearance in *The Waste Land*, and the Christian Garden of Gethsemane and Road to Emmaus form part of the setting. *Moulin Rouge!* simultaneously borrows story elements from Verdi’s *La Traviata* (already based on Dumas’ book and play *Camille*), Puccini’s *La Boheme*, and Zola’s *Nana*. Portions of *Moulin Rouge!* are modeled on French farce (the ‘elephant room’ scene) and Shakespearean comedy (the mistaken identity of the hero). These instances of deliberate intertextuality are closely related to the more straightforward instances of allusive language within the allusive art form.

Second, the allusive form is aggressively artificial. Certainly all art forms are by definition artificial, ‘made things’ that are accepted as made things by their audiences. But here I distinguish between art forms that strive for naturalism—for the seamless, transparent presentation of a world that at least has the appearance of reality—and forms that reject



naturalism to revel in artifice. In this sense, allusion and other intertextual references ‘should be distinguished from the customary rhetorical situation in which texts are considered by artists and audience alike to be mimetic analogs or representations of real-life people, places, or things.’<sup>31</sup>

By drawing attention to itself, intruding on the conventional narrative flow, systematically deployed allusion continually reminds audiences that they are dealing with an artificial construct.

In *The Waste Land*, this already heightened artificiality is ratcheted up by Eliot’s footnotes, which draw maximum attention to the poem’s status as made thing—not just made, but made out of other made things. The notes act almost as a frame in which the poem is presented to the reader.<sup>32</sup> In *Moulin Rouge!*, the artifice is similarly emphasized by the use of numerous self-reflexive framing devices. Originally presented to audiences sitting within theaters, watching a screen, the film opens with a proscenium arch and a red curtain, which is raised on a facsimile of a silent film, with borders around a sepia-toned text card. Subsequently the plot of the film uses a play-within-a-play device, so that these multiple frames become like nesting Russian dolls, each with an ever smaller one inside. *Moulin Rouge!* also participates in one of the most self-consciously artificial genres available, the classic Hollywood musical, interspersing it with the comically exaggerated sound-effects and visual tropes of animated cartoons.

Third, the allusive form is confrontational, because it makes unrelenting demands on the audience’s interpretive powers. One of allusion’s primary effects is to create cognitive dissonance for the reader. Allusion creates a gap between the alluding text and the alluded-to text which the reader must cognitively bridge. Conte compares this to the gap between letter and sense that a rhetorical figure creates.<sup>33</sup> Perri and Ben-Porat refer to semantic models, under which allusion is able to be both denotative (evoking a specific entity) and connotative (evoking

qualities of that type of entity).<sup>34</sup> The mental energy required for readers to constantly jump from the present text to an older one is considerable, and if readers must supply the gaps in their ‘allusive competency’ by engaging in ‘textual archaeology,’<sup>35</sup> or going outside the text to research its allusions, the demand is indeed extreme.

Fourth, the allusive form is elitist, because it requires the highest level of cultural competency from its audiences. *The Waste Land* demonstrates a particularly effective, but particularly exclusive, use of the allusive form. Its failures lie mainly at the surface: one objection against *The Waste Land*’s allusions is that they sometimes fail to make literal sense within their current setting and therefore rupture the reader’s basic comprehension of the poem in ways that external research can never fully remedy. Eliot’s reputation as a ‘difficult’ poet is based in large part on this type of exclusivity. Such elitism was a deliberate effect, and indeed a professed goal, of Modernism. Eliot himself famously stated that modern poets ‘must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.’<sup>36</sup> James Longenbach identified this commitment to difficulty as an attempt increase the status of poets as specialists.<sup>37</sup> Robert Graves and Laura Riding commented more bluntly that ‘the modernist poet, left without any public but the highly trained literary connoisseur, does not hesitate to embody in his poems remote literary references which are unintelligible to the wider public and which directly antagonize it.’<sup>38</sup>

The elitism of the allusive form is not restricted to the sort of ‘high culture’ allusions so common in Eliot’s poetry, such as untranslated passages of the *Aeneid* and *Divine Comedy*.

*Moulin Rouge!* is loaded with allusions to what is normally thought of as ‘pop culture.’ But the extraordinary breadth of knowledge required to excavate all of *Moulin Rouge!*’s references is not necessarily less than that required for *The Waste Land*. For audiences not immersed in contemporary Western pop culture, *Moulin Rouge!*’s allusions will remain as opaque as Eliot’s untranslated lines of ancient verse are to most contemporary readers. The self-consciousness of the allusive form also tends to create the impression that an allusive work is a massive in-joke, one that only the cleverest audience member can share. Initiation into the mysteries of the cultural field of reference is a requirement for audiences of the allusive form; those outside the mysteries are excluded.

Fifth, the allusive form is polycultural. By this I mean that it happily pillages a wide-ranging selection of cultural contexts. *The Waste Land*’s numerous allusions cover several languages besides English: Classical Latin, Renaissance Italian, modern French, and modern German, with a smattering of Greek in the epigraph. The poem’s concluding section draws on an episode from the Upanishads, incorporating the Hindi words (*datta*, *dayadhvam*, *damyata*) heard by the god Prajapati’s creations. *The Waste Land*’s characters come from a variety of countries and economic backgrounds: European aristocrats, English working-class women, a French merchant. Though it is less aggressively polyglot, snippets of French, Italian, and Hindi may also be heard in *Moulin Rouge!*’s soundtrack. *Moulin Rouge!* appropriates Indian culture, in this case via the Bollywood musical, whose lush visual style is imitated throughout the film. Quasi-Indian décor fills the ‘elephant room,’ and the plot of the ‘Spectacular Spectacular’ play-within-a-play is nominally set in India. The set of ‘Spectacular Spectacular’ is a sort of hyper-Bollywood extravaganza transported onto the stage. A remixed fragment of an Indian film tune, ‘Chamma Chamma,’<sup>39</sup> is included in the play’s climactic scene. The Bollywood musical’s legacy as an

American cultural product reinterpreted by India and exported back to Western audiences makes it only more suitable for inclusion here.

Sixth, the allusive art form is anachronistic. Just as it borrows from other cultures, the allusive form borrows from other time periods, and this historical borrowing contributes to an overall effect of temporal dislocation. *Moulin Rouge!* is ostensibly set in the Paris of 1899, a fiction generally upheld in its sets and costumes. But this nominal setting is immediately undercut in the opening narration, as the character Christian labels it ‘the summer of love,’ shifting the historical frame of reference to San Francisco of 1967; subsequently the characters begin belting out popular songs dating from the 1940’s to the 1990’s. Lacking a conventional narrative structure, *The Waste Land* does not have such an obvious temporal setting, although details indicate that several episodes are set in post-WWI England. But the characters who populate *The Waste Land* shift from the Renaissance (Elizabeth and Leicester; Shakespeare) to the Classical world (Antony and Cleopatra, also via Shakespeare) to the timeless landscape of mythology (Tereus and Philomela; Tiresias). All of these periods co-exist within the poem, as ancient Tiresias is witness to the banal sexual encounter of a modern couple.

Given this set of troublesome qualities (intertextuality, artificiality, confrontation, elitism, polyculturalism, and anachronism), we might also observe that the allusive form is fraught with artistic perils. All too easily, the disparate elements brought together by the allusions simply do not cohere into a new whole, leaving audiences frustrated and exhausted. Early reviews for *The Waste Land* demonstrate this reaction. Reviewer Charles Powell called it a ‘mad medley,’<sup>40</sup> and a vitriolic review by F.L. Lucas compared *The Waste Land* to Alexandrian poetry, ‘disconnected and ill-knit, loaded with echo and allusion, fantastic and crude, obscure and obscurantist.’<sup>41</sup> A more sympathetic reviewer cautioned that Eliot was ‘walking very near the limits of

coherency.’<sup>42</sup> Similar reactions greeted *Moulin Rouge!*. J. Hoberman called it ‘a voracious vacuum-cleaner of a movie—hoovering up a hundred years’ worth of junk.’<sup>43</sup> Even a positive review could call *Moulin Rouge!* a ‘movie museum’ in which ‘we are treated to or assaulted by an astonishing variety of cultural references.’<sup>44</sup>

Allusive works are also prey to allegations of plagiarism at worst, and lack of originality at best. Eliot commented that one justification for including the notes to *The Waste Land* was to counter the accusations of plagiarism that had greeted his earlier, heavily allusive poems.<sup>45</sup> Such accusations show a basic misunderstanding of the nature of allusion. Plagiarism, unlike allusion, seeks to be invisible and undiscovered, and furthermore, it does not attempt to create any tensions of meaning between the old and new usage of the plagiarized materials.<sup>46</sup> In turn, *Moulin Rouge!* was frequently described as hackneyed and derivative; one reviewer called it ‘a deliberate mishmash...of clichés and stereotypes.’<sup>47</sup> One person’s archetype is another’s stereotype.

Perhaps the most serious danger of the allusive form lies in what Hebel calls ‘textual erosion,’ or the loss of the allusion. Because an effective allusion must first have a literal meaning within the alluding work, audiences may easily miss the allusion without feeling a violation of the surface integrity of the work. ‘The culprit for such an aesthetic failure cannot be easily identified.’<sup>48</sup> Should the author be blamed for coyly concealing the allusion,<sup>49</sup> or the reader for being ‘allusively incompetent’?<sup>50</sup> Allusions that are unmarked, that is, not set off for the reader by some semantic device such as quotation marks or italicization, are particularly prone to this failure. Michael Riffaterre has examined how readers may recognize even unfamiliar, unmarked allusions, focusing on lexical clues in the text.<sup>51</sup> Once the reader recognizes even one allusion, this recognition may alert the reader to the likely presence of more.

Readers may also come to a particular work already warned to expect allusions; a reader aware of Eliot's reputation or having caught a review of Luhrmann's film will know what awaits them.

Eliot's notes certainly provide the reader with adequate warning that allusions are central to *The Waste Land*, and in some ways equip the reader to understand those allusions. The notes might be viewed as an attempt by the author to create the ideal allusive reader. However, the notes are infamous for being opaque, fragmentary, and often misleading. Eliot can identify the thrush as a North American bird noted for its 'water dropping' song, but not the almost certain source for the thrush in Walt Whitman's 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd.' Similarly, he glosses the word 'laquearia' as a reference to the *Aeneid* (an allusion so tenuous it would not exist for readers without the intervention of the note), but fails to mention the memoir from which he must have derived the character Marie (Marie Larisch's *My Past*). If Eliot creates a reader from the notes, that reader remains notably ill-prepared to interpret the poem. Rather than functioning as explanations, the notes seem more like clues, suggestive hints planted by the author to lead the reader at least part way along the author's intellectual path. The fragmentary quality of the notes suggests too the impossibility of the reader and the author sharing an identical experience of the poem or its allusions.

Textual erosion is somewhat less of a problem in *Moulin Rouge!*, given the ubiquitous distribution of most of its referents, particularly the hit pop songs that form the soundtrack. Nonetheless, some of the borrowed songs in the soundtrack are not well known, a case in point being Queen's 'The Show Must Go On.' On the writers' commentary track for the *Moulin Rouge!* DVD, Luhrmann and co-writer Craig Pearce acknowledge that the song was a problematic choice.<sup>52</sup> They were aware that it was not a major hit and therefore would not be recognized by most of the audience. However, the appropriateness of the song's lyrics and

original context (Freddie Mercury's AIDS diagnosis) to the situation in the film (Satine's impending death from consumption) persuaded them to include it. Textual erosion is also evident in some of *Moulin Rouge!*'s other, more classical references, as in the case of an anonymous poster reviewing *Camille* at Amazon.com: 'Camilles [sic] plot is much like that of my favorite movie, *Moulin Rouge!*.'<sup>53</sup>

Given these potential pitfalls, what does the allusive form accomplish, and why do artists continue to employ it? One advantage of the allusive form is its ability to produce a playful conversation involving the artist, the audience, and the materials of culture, even when the form is at its most difficult. Hebel proposes that the reader who at least recognizes an allusion as an allusion must compensate for her knowledge deficit by engaging in textual archaeology to recover the meaning of the source text.<sup>54</sup> This position gets at least anecdotal support from the many scholarly studies patiently documenting sources of literary allusions. Such source studies are a frequent target of critical scorn.<sup>55</sup> But in fairness, we must acknowledge that source studies are invited, and perhaps in some cases required, by the inherent identifiability problems of the allusive form.<sup>56</sup> This 'archaeological' quality of allusive works may also help to explain some of their appeal: they repay close reading by constantly disclosing new perspectives as readers excavate their sources. They invite the reader into a kind of game of discovery with the author, as the reader encounters new material that affected the author and may in turn shape the reader's ideas. As Michael Dunne has stated about intertextuality in general, 'there is an unmistakable and pleasurable sense of community attached to the process, a community actually or potentially embracing artists and members of their rhetorical audiences.'<sup>57</sup>

The greatest strength of the allusive form lies in its appeal to memory, and through memory, to time. This appeal to memory operates at both the macro level (recorded cultural

history in all forms, including art and literature) and at the micro level (personal experience). By calling upon the artistic visions of the past and making them active in the memory of the living reader, the allusive form shines a uniquely refracted light upon the present. As in the case of *The Waste Land*, that light may be the pale reflection of a dying civilization, potentially reclaimed from oblivion through the ongoing creative action of the poem: ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’ (line 430).

Eliot was particularly conscious of the role of the past in the shaping of the artist, and in turn, of the artist’s role in reshaping the past. Eliot described the poet’s ‘historical sense’ as a feeling that the entire body of literature ‘has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.’<sup>58</sup> Every time the poet produces a new work, the whole is altered, and ‘the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted.’<sup>59</sup> This might almost be a description of the action of allusion itself. Eliot’s insistence on the simultaneity of the entire body of literature suggests an approach to artistic composition which is both historically conscious and not constrained by history. Using the allusive form, Eliot can bring history forward, giving it a simultaneous existence with the current moment embodied by the poem. Allusion may also have functioned for Eliot as a variety of his ‘objective correlative,’ the image, object, or event that can carry emotional associations into the poem without directly stating an emotion.<sup>60</sup>

As an example of Eliot’s allusive technique, consider the tight cluster of allusions deployed in Part III of *The Waste Land*, ‘The Fire Sermon.’ The allusion ‘Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song’ (lines 176 and 183) puts Edmund Spenser’s famous line in the mouth of the narrator. The allusion brings a note of antique elegance into what is otherwise a desolate setting, the trash-strewn modern Thames riverbank, but simultaneously suggests a shared identity



between the past and present, a sense that psychic sterility that afflicts the narrator has affected countless others before. Spenser's *Prothalamion*, the source of the allusion, celebrates a wedding, an ironic juxtaposition given the banality and outright horror of the sexual relationships depicted in the poem. 'By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept' at line 182 recalls another famous poem at the water's edge, Psalm 137; unlike the celebratory *Prothalamion*, Psalm 137 is a lament in exile, which Eliot exploits by substituting a resort city in modern Switzerland for Babylon. The river that runs through these allusions also runs through history, changing but constant, a timeless symbolic anchor amid the anachronisms of the poem. 'But at my back in a cold blast I hear/ The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear,' lines 185-6, alludes to Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress,' where it reads, 'But at my back I always hear/ Time's winged chariot hurrying near.' This allusion reintroduces the love/sex theme by offering a famous example of 'carpe diem' sentiment; here carried to its logical but horrid conclusion—death waits around the corner. Fishing at the river's edge, the speaker repeats the lament of Ferdinand, shipwrecked in *The Tempest*, at line 192: 'Musing upon the king my brother's wreck' (slightly altered from the original 'Weeping again the king my father's wreck'). Death by water is a motif within the poem, offering not only destruction, but the possibility of fruitful transformation, reflected in an earlier allusion to *The Tempest* at line 125: 'Those are pearls that were his eyes,' from the song that Ariel sings to Ferdinand. The 'King' is also the mythological Fisher King, in need of healing; 'the king my brother' suggests an identity between the fisher-speaker and this lost, wounded figure.

Repeated at line 196, the allusion to Marvell is intertwined with a second allusion, to Day's 'Parliament of Bees.' Here, the sound of Actaeon's horn as he discovers Diana becomes the horn of the automobile carrying Sweeney (a character from Eliot's other poems, and an

incarnation of bestiality) to his assignation with the prostitute Mrs. Porter, a character derived from a bawdy WWI soldiers' song. A bowdlerized verse from the song appears at lines 199-201, where it is immediately counter-balanced with a quotation from Verlaine's 'Parsifal:' '*Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!*' ('And oh, these voices of children, singing in the chapel!') The bawdy song of young soldiers on their way to untimely slaughter in the war thus becomes the angelic chant of blessed children. In its original setting, the line refers to the virginal knight's completion of the Grail quest, suggesting both an ironic commentary on the preceding events and the possibility that spiritual fulfillment may still lie ahead. Such a dense interplay of meanings would not be possible without allusion: each allusion comments not only on its source and on its present usage, but also on the other allusions around it.

Although less obviously 'difficult' than *The Waste Land*, *Moulin Rouge!* makes effective use of the dense layering effect allusion allows. This complex layering is put into the service of a simple, melodramatic love story, rather than a meditation on the spiritual aridity of modern life. *Moulin Rouge!*'s innocent, sentimental celebration of love could, in fact, be read as Luhrmann's response to the kind of dislocation Eliot portrays in *The Waste Land*. Nothing about *Moulin Rouge!* is subtle. In every aspect, from its frenetic editing to its saturated colors to its comic exaggerations, it is over the top and then some. But in every aspect, its calculated artifice is put into the service of evoking emotion. As Marsha Kinder observes, 'The film simultaneously suggests that this blatantly artificial genre may be the only realm where such love can still be found, let alone flourish.'<sup>61</sup>

Kinder perceptively notes that 'Luhrmann's renarrativized lyrics are never disturbing, for they are usually more innocent here than in their original source, and that's precisely the point.'<sup>62</sup> Emotional shorthand is the primary goal of *Moulin Rouge!*'s allusions. Satine and Christian's

duet, improbably titled the ‘Elephant Love Medley,’ is a collage of hit love songs. The collage allows the audience to call up their own emotional associations with these songs<sup>63</sup> and thereby invest those emotions in Satine and Christian’s story. Although the duet is remarkably successful in its combination of references, it also displays a striking failure in the use of U2’s ‘Pride (In the Name of Love),’ the one politically-themed song in the medley and the only one that required alteration of its lyrics to make literal sense. Because of its social context (in particular, homage to Martin Luther King, Jr., as a martyr), the song offers the wrong metaphorical associations. The only previously unreleased song in the film is Satine and Christian’s love theme, ‘Come What May,’ a ballad that plays a key role in the climactic reunion of the estranged lovers. In this case, the action required a song which carried no baggage for the audience;<sup>64</sup> this particular song was so important to the denouement that its emotional impact would be lessened if audiences could not fully associate it with the relationship of the protagonists.

Much like Eliot, Luhrmann most often uses allusions to telegraph a particular idea without literally stating it. For example, when Christian is pressed into helping his neighbors organize a radically new and Bohemian stage show, he suddenly begins singing the first line of ‘The Sound of Music.’ As Luhrmann points out, it is difficult to imagine a less radical, less Bohemian production than the squeaky-clean *Sound of Music*;<sup>65</sup> hence the allusion comments ironically on the Bohemians’ goals, and perhaps on the Broadway musical generally. The presence of this iconic opening phrase in Christian’s mouth also serves to mark him as the archetypal Poet.<sup>66</sup> The humor of a modern-day Orpheus spouting musical clichés is another part of this equation.

Similarly, when Satine appears for the first time, her close-up in a top hat suggests Marlene Dietrich as the singing temptress Lola Lola from Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930). Satine sings 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend,' Marilyn Monroe's famous number from Howard Hawks' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953); one chorus of Madonna's 'Material Girl' is interpolated in the song. Not only do the lyrics appropriately describe Satine's gold-digging ambitions, they also associate her with the magnetic sex appeal of Monroe and Madonna, marking her as a woman who is irresistible to men--and, at least by association with Monroe, with a fragile vulnerability to exploitation. She is the archetypal Siren, the dangerous temptress, but she will soon turn into the Prostitute With a Heart of Gold once love triumphs over materialism, just as it does at the end of the video for 'Material Girl,' which, not coincidentally, has Madonna mimic Marilyn's performance.

Unlike *The Waste Land*, *Moulin Rouge!*'s allusions are only rarely critical; the closest it comes to social commentary is in the use of Nirvana's dark hymn to the ennui of consumerism, 'Smells Like Teen Spirit,' as the Moulin Rouge's rich male customers enter the club. One of the film's few subversive allusions is the Green Fairy, who comes to life off the label of a bottle of absinthe. 'Green Fairy' has long been a slang term for absinthe, but this Green Fairy is a visual allusion to Disney's Tinkerbell, and she even releases a shower of fairy sparkles reminiscent of the opening of Disney's 'Wonderful World' television program. Here, however, Tinkerbell is the ultra-sexy pop diva Kylie Minogue, who immediately goes into a dance-floor bump and grind, multiplied Busby Berkeley-style into a chorus line. The world the Green Fairy opens up for our hero is not one of family-friendly wonder, but of drug use and debauchery, the 'underworld' Orpheus must enter. The irony here can be applied in several directions: against the Disney mythos (the voluptuous Minogue strongly resembles a number of Disney's highly sexualized

female cartoon heroines), against the film's mythos (the wonderland that Christian seeks will become his Hell), and even against the filmmaker's pretensions (the film is so overflowing with pop sparkle that its dramatic darkneses are largely unconvincing).

In the case of *Moulin Rouge!*, the light of history, refracted through the lens of allusion, is an aggressively bright and modern light turned on a fantasized past which belongs to no period. Luhrmann has eagerly pointed out that the details of the cinematic *Moulin Rouge* are grounded in historical research;<sup>67</sup> the ridiculous 'Elephant Room' and the enigmatic African performer 'Chocolat' really did exist. But between its archetypal, clichéd plot, its deliberate anachronisms, and its thoroughly stylized visual presentation, *Moulin Rouge!* succeeds in having no historical period beyond the timelessness of fairy tale. Ilana Synder has observed that *Moulin Rouge!*'s 'discontinuous preoccupation with the past precludes any sustained efforts to understand the present' and that it thus illuminates the modern characteristics of 'fragmentation, superficiality, and a failure to engage the present.'<sup>68</sup> *Moulin Rouge!*'s carnivalesque visual style and fairy-tale plot leave it more open to accusations of escapist fantasy than *The Waste Land*, but discontinuous preoccupation with the past is a defining quality of both. I would argue that through its use of allusive form, *Moulin Rouge!*, like *The Waste Land*, is working toward simultaneity, a world in which past and present co-exist and cohere—perhaps not seamlessly, or always happily, but with a unique integrity. Such a creative stance is neither a denial of history nor a withdrawal from the present, but a precarious, synchronous perspective, one that requires considerable effort to maintain.

Discussing literary works that employ poetic quotation, Heinrich Plett has said it 'could be that the author's primary purpose is not to bring his audience into an immediate confrontation with reality, but only with mirrors of reality, i.e. literature....Hence literary texts with high

quotation embody the following paradox: The reality of literature made up of literature is – literature.’<sup>69</sup> The hall of mirrors is a useful metaphor for the allusive art form, which offers reflections of reflections, distortions, and occasional deceptions to the viewer. The allusive form may be a monument to artifice, but it is also an assertion that art lives in a continuous present through the combined effort of the artist and the audience.

## NOTES

1. Carmela Perri, 'On Alluding,' *Poetics* 7 (1978) 289-307, 306.
2. An excellent survey of the modern critical history of allusion appears in Joseph Pucci, *The Full-Knowing Reader: Allusion and the Power of the Reader in the Western Literary Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), Chapter 1, 'Contemporary Versions of Allusion,' pp. 3-26.
3. Pucci, 31. See also Perri, 290; and Ziva Ben-Porat, 'The Poetics of Literary Allusion,' *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1 (1976): 105-128, 108: 'The marker [allusion] is always identifiable as an element or pattern belonging to another independent text.'
4. Allan H. Pasco, *Allusion: A Literary Graft* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 9; Perri, 300; Pucci, 40.
5. Perri, 295; Udo J. Hebel, 'Towards a Descriptive Poetics of Allusion,' in *Intertextuality*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett, 134-164 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 152.
6. Pasco, 13.
7. Ben-Porat, 108.
8. Pasco, 5-6.
9. Ben Porat, 127; Hebel, 138; Pasco, 11; Perri, 300; Pucci, 40-41.
10. Ben-Porat, 108; Perri, 296, Pucci, 43.
11. Gian Biagio Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*, trans. Charles Segal (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 41.
12. 'Intertextuality' first appears in Kristeva's essay 'Le Mot, le dialogue, et le roman,' from *Séméiotiké* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), translated as 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel,' in *Desire in*

*language: a semiotic approach to literature and art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez; trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, 64-91 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978). For a useful history of the concept, see Thaïs Morgan, 'Is There an Intertext in this Text?: Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality,' *American Journal of Semiotics* 3, no. 4 (1985): 1-40.

13. Pucci, 15.

14. An interesting example is Heinrich F. Plett, 'Intertextualities,' in *Intertextuality*, 3-29. Plett's subject is intertextuality, but he selects quotation as a working example, and proceeds with a discussion which is otherwise very much in line with the critical consensus on allusion.

15. See, for example, Hebel, 148-9. Hebel's article catalogs an enormous variety of allusions, including names of fictional or real persons, historical events, places, and so on.

16. See W.K. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy,' *Sewanee Review* 54 (1946): 468-88.

17. The classic essay is Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath, 142-8 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). See also Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué Harari, 141-60 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).

18. Pucci, 7.

19. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 126.

20. See Perri, 290; Pasco, 9.

21. Perri, 300.

22. Conte, 28.

23. Pasco, 17.



24. Perri, 301.
25. See Conte, 57: 'Allusion, in its most demanding form, requires the direct involvement of the reader and his culture;' Perri, 300: 'The alluding author and his audience [must] share the same language and cultural tradition;' Plett, 15: 'Both [author and reader] must be provided with a sufficient knowledge of literary history.'
26. Hebel, 140.
27. Conte, 30.
28. Pucci, 43.
29. For example, Perri (306) offers *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* as examples of allusion as a literary form. Plett (15) mentions German writer Arno Schmidt, sometimes called the German James Joyce. Much of the early poetry of Eliot's mentor Ezra Pound, and especially *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*, is eligible.
30. A notable exception is Mikhail Iampolski, *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film*, trans. Harsha Ram (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Iampolski occasionally includes what I am defining as allusion among his subjects, particularly in his section on quotation, 26-35; however, his highly speculative discussion is not concerned with matters of definition or characteristics.
31. Michael Dunne, *Intertextual Encounters in American Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 2001), 3.
32. I am aware that the some early printings of the poem did not include the footnotes; Eliot claimed they were added at the request of his publisher for the purpose of padding the poem out to book length. Nonetheless, the footnotes have become inseparable from the poem. Although deriding them as an example of 'bogus scholarship,' Eliot acknowledged that the

- notes 'have had almost greater popularity than the poem itself.' See 'The Frontiers of Criticism' in Eliot's *On Poetry and Poets*, 113-131 (New York: Farrar, 1957), 121.
33. Conte, 38.
  34. Perri, 291; Ben-Porat, 108.
  35. Hebel, 140.
  36. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," 241-50 in *Selected Essays*, 248.
  37. James Longenbach, "'Mature Poets Steal': Eliot's Allusive Practice," in *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. A. David Moody, 176-88 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 176-7.
  38. Graves and Riding, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (Folcroft, PA: Norwood Editions, 1978) 103. Quoted by Longenbach, 'Mature poets steal,' 177.
  39. Oddly, the song is not lifted from a musical, but from Rajkumar Santoshi's *China Gate* (1998), an action adventure. However, within that film, it backs an extended dance number worthy of any Bollywood musical.
  40. Charles Powell, review from the *Manchester Guardian*, October 31, 1923. Reprinted in *T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land: A Casebook*, ed. C.B. Cox and Arnold P. Hinchcliffe, 29-30 (Nashville: Aurora, 1970), 29.
  41. F.L. Lucas, review from *The New Statesman*, November 3, 1923. Reprinted in Cox and Hinchcliffe, 33-38, 33.
  42. Anonymous review from the *Times Literary Supplement*, September 20, 1923. Reprinted in Cox and Hinchcliffe, 30-33, 32.
  43. J. Hoberman, 'Film: Kitsch as Kitsch Can,'" *Village Voice*, May 23-29, 2001, <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0121/hoberman.php> (accessed June 4, 2004).

44. Brian McFarlane, 'The Movie as Museum,' *Meanjin* 60, no. 4 (2001) 212+. Retrieved from *EBSCOhost Academic Search Premier* database, November 1, 2002.
45. Eliot, 'The Frontiers of Criticism,' 121.
46. See Pucci, 39, 'If one considers allusion alongside plagiarism, for example which always seeks to hide itself, then the overt quality of allusion is more obvious.' See also Pasco, 9, 'Plagiarism consists of equal, nonmetaphorical terms, and when it is successful, the text in hand does not suggest a source.'
47. Kirk Honeycutt, 'Moulin Rouge,' *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 10, 2001, [http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hollywoodreporter/cannes/review\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=856739](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hollywoodreporter/cannes/review_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=856739) (accessed on June 4, 2004).
48. Plett, 15.
49. Plett, 15; Pasco, 9.
50. Hebel, 153.
51. See Michael Riffaterre, 'Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive,' in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. Michael Worton and Judith Still, 56-78 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 56-8. Morgan, 'Is There an Intertext,' notes that Riffaterre's conclusion is that the alluding text itself is sufficient to explain the allusion, an assertion 'not borne out by experience' (27).
52. Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce, Writers' Commentary. 27, 'The Show Must Go On,'" *Moulin Rouge!* DVD, Disc 1. Directed by Baz Luhrmann (2001; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003). Counter 1:32:09-55.
53. Review by 'karilynx' dated February 26, 2002, <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0451523989> (accessed July 22, 2004).

54. Hebel, 140.
55. Plett amusingly refers to this body of literature as a ‘deciphering syndicate,’ 15.
56. See Dunne, *Intertextual Encounters*, for a perceptive commentary about High Modernism’s devotion to intertextuality and the accompanying need for source studies. ‘We have probably all learned...to function with one eye focused on a primary text and the other focused on one or more intertexts’ (11).
57. *Ibid.*, 5.
58. T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ in *Selected Essays*, 3-11 (New York: Harcourt, 1960), 4.
59. Eliot, ‘Tradition,’ 5.
60. Eliot describes the objective correlative in ‘Hamlet and His Problems,’ *Selected Essays*, 121-26. See also A. Walton Litz, ‘The Allusive Poet: Eliot and His Sources,’ *Yale Review* 78.2 (1989) 254-64, on allusion as a way of ‘avoiding the direct exposure of personal feelings’ (256).
61. Marsha Kinder, ‘Moulin Rouge,’ *Film Quarterly* 55, no.3 (2002) 52-59, 52.
62. Kinder, 54.
63. Writers’ Commentary, 14, ‘The Elephant Love Medley,’ *Moulin Rouge!* DVD. Counter 0:51:10-52:40.
64. Writers’ Commentary, 20, ‘Satine is Dying,’ *Moulin Rouge!* DVD. Counter 1:07:37-08:05.
65. Writers’ Commentary, 3, ‘Meet the Bohemians,’ *Moulin Rouge!* DVD. Counter 0:10:20-30.
66. Writers’ Commentary, 3, counter 0:7:49-8:30.
67. See, for example, the ‘Village of Sin’ section of the film’s official web site:  
[http://www.clubmoulinrouge.com/html/member/background\\_sin.htm](http://www.clubmoulinrouge.com/html/member/background_sin.htm)

68. Snyder, 'Communication, Imagination, Critique' in *Silicon Literacies: Communication, Innovation and Education in the Electronic Age*, ed. Snyder, 173-183 (New York: Routledge, 2002) 176.
69. Plett, 'Intertextualities,' 15.

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