Cinematography Used In Luhrmann’s Films: Analysis Of Moulin Rouge

Choose one of the following Australian directors; Baz Luhrmann, discuss how this director’s career and the films involved reflect broader trends in Australian (and where relevant, international) filmmaking. In your essay clearly define and discuss auteur theory and use at least three films to illustrate and support your essay’s central argument.

Baz Luhrmann is an Australian director who has achieved immense domestic and international success with his unique storytelling, stylistic choices as an auteur and reflections of Australian filmmaking. This is shown through this first film – the first of the ‘Red Carpet’ trilogy; Strictly Ballroom (1992), the last film of the trilogy; Moulin Rouge! (2001), and his most recent box office success adapted from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel; The Great Gatsby (2013).

Baz Luhrmann is an Australian director whose films stand the test of time, combining old-school heart and charisma of Australian films of the 80’s, with a creativity that transports audiences to a different world. Luhrmann has four films in the Top 10 Highest Grossing Australian Films list; Australia (2008) at number 2, Moulin Rouge! is 6th, The Great Gatsby 7th and Strictly Ballroom at 10. Moulin Rouge!, The Great Gatsby and Strictly Ballroom follow Luhrmann’s traditional themes, style, reflections and influences more than t(2008) which is why they are best used to explore those aspects of his filmmaking.

Baz Luhrmann’s first film – Strictly Ballroom encapsulates all the elements of the ‘Red Curtain’ style; a classical story structure, colourful visuals and deliberately artificial performances that contribute to the style’s theatrical nature and plot. (Cook 24, 42) Strictly Ballroom is about a star ballroom dancer who is paired with a plain amateur girl when he insists on incorporating his own steps into routines.

Strictly Ballroom is a cinematic adaption of Luhrmann’s stage play, originally created in 1984 during his time as a student at the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (Sydney). It is based on his experience learning Ballroom dancing as a child – and his Mother teaching the style of dance, and was created in reflection to Luhrmann feeling artistically oppressed (much like the lead character) during the cold war. Luhrmann’s auteur development can be seen between Strictly Ballroom and later films because it is more personal to him and his life, and there was a greater focus on characters and interpersonal relationships then the appearance and visuals – which are still apparent in his debut film.

Moulin Rouge! is the final film in the Red Carpet trilogy and there is a clear stylistic progression from Strictly Ballroom. The film, set in Paris at the Moulin Rouge cabaret, is a jukebox musical directed, produced and co-written by Luhrmann. It follows the story of English poet, Christian and his love interest, star of the Moulin Rouge, Satine. The plot and themes were inspired by the Greek myth ‘Orpheus’, in order to create an integration of comedy, music and tragedy. ‘Moulin Rouge! was absolutely dazzling, purposefully excessive, decadent, showcasing a world that was simultaneously bright and beautiful and also haunting and surreal. (Ruecker, 2014) Like in Strictly Ballroom, comedy and romance are central themes to Moulin Rouge! – with music acting as an important stylistic and storytelling device. More so in Moulin Rouge!, the

music helped move the story forward – classifying it as a musical. The importance of music in Lehmann's films reflects other Australian films previous to, and preceding the release of Moulin Rouge! Such as; The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert, Muriel's Wedding, Happy Feet, Bran Nue Dae and The Sapphires.

The Great Gatsby is Baz Luhrmann's adaption of the F. Scott Fitzgerald novel and is arguably his least reflective film of Australia but it is the perfect middle ground between Strictly Ballroom and Moulin Rouge! in terms of his auteur style. The film follows the story of millionaire Jay Gatsby from the perspective of his neighbour, Nick Carraway, during the Roaring Twenties on Long Island. It combines the dazzling costumes, sets, editing and cinematography that Baz is known for, with a pre-existing source that allows him to mould his auteur styles to an already structured story.

The most common recurring themes in Luhrmann's films are love and romance, tragedy and loss – all of these are seen in Moulin Rouge! and The Great Gatsby, and there are hints of all of them in Strictly Ballroom, however that has more elements of comedy.

Another filmmaking element Baz uses, is revealing the ending at the beginning of his films. In Strictly Ballroom we are shown a montage of how the equilibrium is disrupted, Christian narrates Moulin Rouge! by writing the story on his typewriter – revealing his love interest died, and The Great Gatsby is narrated by Carraway – opening with him telling a doctor about his mental health due to Gatsby's death, before re-telling the story by writing it on a typewriter. Telling the audience at the beginning of the film how it ends is greatly influenced by Shakespeare. "In Rouge!, we constantly remind the audience that Satine is dying so that when she and Christian are having their love scenes, this clanging bell intensifies the experience of being with her while she's alive… in terms of letting the audience know how it's going to end, there's no pretence that we're doing a social or psychological examination of Paris and the conditions of the bohemian artist in 1899". (Luhrmann, 2001)

This is how Luhrmann is able to use narrative, stylistic mise-en-scene devices to create compelling films and reflect Australian filmmaking trends.

Baz Luhrmann is arguably most well known for his stylistic choices and use of pop-culture in his filmmaking. In all his films, Baz is able to bring a modern twist regardless of the time period it's set or the originality of the concept. His recognisable directorial elements make Luhrmann an auteur. Auteur theory aims to investigate the "technical competence, the presence of a distinctive visual style, and an interior meaning" of a directors filmography (Cook and Bernink 256) An auteur can be defined by using consistent themes, that are shown in a unique style, and often the director's name is used as a marketing tactic because it draws an audience that is familiar with the themes/ styles shown in the director's work. (Cook and Bernink 237) Although by definition Baz Luhrmann is an auteur, he works with the same team for majority of his films – departing from the total control typical with auteurs. Other well known auteurs include Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, Wes Anderson, James Cameron and Guillermo Del Toro.

Luhrmann also uses the formalism style, which is when aesthetics call attention to themselves – most present in Strictly Ballroom, Moulin Rouge! and The Great Gatsby. (Stam 49) This can be seen in the dramatic shots, bright and overwhelming party scenes and fast or dreamlike cuts and sequences. Baz Luhrmann's vision for The Red Carpet trilogy was to create audience participation cinema. These are films that connect with the audience more on an emotional level

then cerebral – in order to draw an emotional response from the viewer. When adapting from a pre-existing source material, the film should be an interpretation from the director, creating their vision. The Great Gatsby is a good example of this because Luhrmann interprets it using his own style and visualisation, contemporizing the world of the roaring twenties (Goldfarb), also showing his talent as an auteur. The visuals are energetic, brightly coloured, theatrical and anti-naturalistic. (Scott) As part of this interpretation, Luhrmann had American rapper Jay-Z produce the soundtrack – believing that combining Jazz, Orchestral and R&B would be more atmospheric than period music (Denton, 2016) This use of soundtrack is also seen in Moulin Rouge! by including popular songs of the time, in this case songs by Madonna and Nirvana – this adds to the modern element Baz brings to his films.

Another aspect of his auteur aesthetic is to use colour and lighting to alter the affect of different characters – Gatsby for example is always shot in a way that shows the audience he is the most important person, on screen and in the context of the story. This also allows Baz to show the audience how he is viewed by different characters – Daisy and Gatsby scenes are shot and cut quickly and scattered, demonstrating that she is overwhelmed by him and their affair.

Because Baz Luhrmann is considered an auteur, it's easy to observe his transition over the course of his filmography. Moulin Rouge! includes strong performance elements and an explosion of his style – developed and more present than in Strictly Ballroom. The Great Gatsby shows a full circle in his style development, it is tamer than Moulin Rouge!, and includes refined elements (lavish parties), but brings the focus back to the characters more, like in Strictly Ballroom.

This is how Luhrmann uses his style and creativity as an auteur to reflect trends in his own filmmaking and Australian filmmaking.

Baz Luhrmann is one of the most successful Australian directors and this is due to his eclectic influences that impact his style and filmmaking methods.

He draws strongly from theatre in all his films, particularly the Red Curtain trilogy, but Luhrmann is also influenced by Italian grand opera and Bollywood films – contributing to the mise-en-scene of Moulin Rouge! and The Great Gatsby. Luhrmann also tries to partially film all his movies in Australia, even The Great Gatsby has some scenes filmed in Queensland and NSW. Baz is successful at making small places feel big and worldly, for example ballroom scenes, performances and parties – his ability to do this is directly from his background in theatre. Tied in with this is the narrator of The Great Gatsby; Nick Carraway – he gives "poetic internal description" of his hectic surroundings of the Roaring Twenties and Baz saw protentional by interpreting Nick's internal thoughts visually (Ryan, Past 3284)

Strictly Ballroom was inspired from his own life and experiences and set in Australia, Moulin Rouge! was when Luhrmann could fully explore his artistic capabilities and The Great Gatsby can be seen as the refined, polished final product. Luhrmann also draws from Shakespeare heavily, particularly in revealing the ending of the film at the beginning – adding a suspense that draws the audience in and keeps them anxiously waiting.

"Our biggest Australian films are treated by overseas audiences the way the majority of our films are treated by local audiences: with indifference". (Swift, 2013) Another reason that could contribute to Luhrmann's success is that many recent Australian films set in Australia haven't

broken much domestically or internationally, with the exception of Australia (2008) and Lion (2016). Aside from them and Baz Luhrmann's films, the only other Australian-set money makers are Crocodile Dundee (1986) and its sequel (1988). Luhrmann is able to add some Australian wit, drama and indie charm that makes his films feel Australian, regardless of setting. "In the absence of spectacle (notably provided by Baz Luhrmann's massively successful films, which have topped the domestic box office in 1992 (Strictly Ballroom), 2001 (Moulin Rouge!), 2008 (Australia) and 2013 (The Great Gatsby)), the depiction of quintessential Australian characters and culture has also proven a consistently successful ingredient for domestic box office success". (2015)

Baz Luhrmann remains one of the most successful Australian directors due to his unique vision as an auteur. His films are recognisable for their eclectic storytelling, stylistic choices that are influenced by, and influence current and past Australian cinema and filmmaking trends. Investigated through his debut film; Strictly Ballroom (1992), his arguably most eccentric film; Moulin Rouge! (2001), and his most recent big screen success; The Great Gatsby (2013)

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