

# **Tuberculosis in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001)**

## **The Cinematic Portrayal of a Metaphorized Disease**

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### **1 Introduction**

Tuberculosis is a disease which has claimed high numbers of death since the early stages of humanity. The illness has coined human history, and it is not surprising that it has also found its way into fiction. Especially its metaphorized and romanticized character plays an interesting role in this regard.

Due to that, this paper intends to examine the use of metaphors in the musical film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), which features tuberculosis as a supporting plot device. In the course of this work, the research question “How does the portrayal of tuberculosis in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) reflect the metaphorized character of the disease in the 19th century?” ought to be answered.

In order to reach that aim, the paper begins with a general contextualization of the research topic in the US- American context. Further, the methodology, namely a narrative analysis of the film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) is introduced in the first chapter.

In the second part of the thesis the representation of tuberculosis will be investigated. To outline the disease, this thesis looks into its history and clinical depiction. The symptomatic appearance of tuberculosis has led to what is understood as romanticization and metaphorization of the disease. Thus, the metaphors linked to tuberculosis are also illustrated in this chapter.

The third chapter marks the analysis of tuberculosis in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). It starts with a general summary of the musical film’s plot. After that, a narrative analysis of metaphors associated with the disease in the film is presented. The findings are demonstrated and discussed in connection to the framework illustrated in the theoretical chapters.

## 2 Contextualization of the Topic and Methodology

*Moulin Rouge!* is a musical film that has been directed by Baz Luhrmann and was released in 2001. Since the movie is set in Paris, it seems surprising to thematize it in the US-American context. However, there are three aspects about *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) that enable a contextualization of the movie in connection to health in the United States.

The first aspect is linked to the production of the musical film. It was produced by two companies, namely the Australian Bazmark Films and Twentieth Century Fox based in the United States (IMDb 2025). The second aspect focuses on the themes portrayed in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). One supporting plot device is the disease tuberculosis. It is an illness that affected humanity all over the globe throughout history (see Chapter 3 for detailed description). Thus, the USA have not been spared the harm tuberculosis brought, especially during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. And even today its impact is greater than it would be imagined. On the one hand, receiving a visa to the USA is impossible without a tuberculosis test for visitors above the age of two (U.S. Department of State n.d., n.p.). On the other hand, the number of tuberculosis cases in the United States has increased in recent years according to CDC (2024, n.p). The role the disease plays in present day America is demonstrated by these circumstances. The third aspect is connected to the second one. *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) portrays sickness in an interesting manner, which is linked to the history of tuberculosis as a metaphorized disease. This characteristic of the film enables a connection to the topic of the representation of health and sickness in US-American cultural media. These three aspects – the American production of *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) as well as tuberculosis as a global disease and its portrayal in the fictional example – enable the thematization of the research topic in the context of health in the United States.

As the research aim is to analyze the metaphorized portrayal of tuberculosis in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), the chosen methodology is a narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a proven method in cultural studies (Sclater 2017, 2). The methodology suits the research aim due to one fundamental reason. “[S]tories [...] seem to have intimate and important connections with the nature of human experience” (ibid., 2). This argument suggests that by analyzing narratives, also fictional ones, one is analyzing human experience. Thus, by analyzing the use of metaphors in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) links to original metaphors of tuberculosis ought to be observed. Further, an analysis of the narrative enables to discover the variety of ways in which a metaphorization of the disease could be depicted in the film.

In more detail the approach for this research paper is a thematic analysis of the narrative. Therefore, the content of the film is analyzed in terms of metaphors associated with tuberculosis. The findings are coded in order to simplify the analysis

as McLeod (2024, 5) suggests. After codification, the findings are discussed in connection with the theoretical framework of the metaphorization of tuberculosis.

This framework ought to be described beforehand. As the narrative analysis of *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) focuses on the metaphorization of tuberculosis, it is necessary to present and describe the metaphors linked to it. The following chapter introduces the disease and its most important aspects for the analysis.

### 3 Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis has been a widespread disease for a long time. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that it has been thematized in literature and film. In order to clarify its importance for this work, the following chapters introduce tuberculosis in terms of its history and symptoms as well as its metaphorized character.

Tuberculosis “has plagued humankind throughout known history and human prehistory” (Daniel 2006, 1862). This quote by which Daniel initiates his historical review of the disease demonstrates tuberculosis’ influence on humanity. The author claims that throughout the course of time tuberculosis has been estimated to be the infectious microbe that has caused the most deaths. Therefore, an overview of the history of tuberculosis needs to be provided.

According to Daniel (ibid, 1863) the microbe occurs in various mutations all over the world as it has adapted effortlessly to changing surroundings and conditions. However, all variants stem from a common ancestor, which had been found in Africa and originated 35.000 – 15.000 years ago. As the pathogen changed further, it has been found that current stems originated not as long ago, namely between 250 and 1000 years in the past. When early humans left Africa and inhabited Europe and Asia, they brought tuberculosis with them. What has not been clarified yet is the arrival of tuberculosis in America. Even though a physical connection between Asia and America existed, tuberculosis did not reach America in the course of the Great Migration of early humans. Yet, it had neither been brought to the continent by European settlers. Examinations of archeological finds provided evidence that tuberculosis had occurred in America before its discovery by the Europeans. Gómez i Prat & Souza (2003, 151) argue that tuberculosis might have first occurred in North America approximately 8.000 years ago. The disease then broke out more intensely when Europeans arrived in America, but it might have already existed before that certain point in history.

During the Middle Ages tuberculosis was present all over Europe and it was attempted to be healed with dubious practices. Between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of Modern Times, the Renaissance period, new knowledge about tuberculosis emerged. Later, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the disease was prominent not only in Europe but also in North America where it led to high death rates. In 1882 the disease was medically confirmed by Robert Koch, who discovered the tubercle bacillus (Daniel 2006, 1863- 1864). Even today tuberculosis remains a widespread

disease all over the globe. Twenty-five years ago, over nine million cases were diagnosed all over the world, 20.000 of which were located in the United States (Miller et al. 2000, 293). Currently, the number of tuberculosis cases in the United States is not as high as in the year 2000, reaching only 9.615 cases in 2023 (Williams 2024, 266). However, CDC (2024, n.p). state that the number has been increasing recently.

### **3.1 Symptomatic Appearance**

While the historical background of the disease has been clarified, its pathology still ought to be presented. Saleem & Azher (2013, 21) explain that tuberculosis is caused by mycobacteria, which are inhaled through the air. However, not only do tubercle bacilli stay in the pulmonary region, which are the lungs, but it also reaches other organs as the disease spreads in the body. Infected patients then produce mycobacteria themselves by coughing and sneezing. These mycobacteria are released into the air again, which makes tuberculosis a highly contagious disease.

Tuberculosis, Miller et al. (2000) conclude in their survey, is typically associated with symptoms such as cough and fever in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Tuberculosis patients usually show signs of the disease in the form of cough, fever, fatigue, weight loss, sweating, spitting blood and chest pain (ibid, 296). Saleem & Azher (2013, 22-23) list the same symptoms for tuberculosis. Another study, which was published in the past, namely in 1963, also mentioned these symptoms as typical for the disease (Banerji & Andersen 1963, 678). Therefore, it can be summarized that these symptoms are representative of tuberculosis.

Moreover, even during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries symptoms of the disease were observed in order to understand its clinical picture. The typical patient suffering from tuberculosis was described showing:

“a clean fair skin, bright eyes, white teeth, delicate rosy complexion, sanguine temperament, great sensibility, thick lips, and large veins. Persons who are very small around the breast, that is, those of a narrow chest, and prominent shoulders, are also more liable to this disease than others” (Caplan 1995, para 3).

This description of the symptomatic appearance seems rather positive. It demonstrates the bizarre phenomenon that arose especially during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but even before. People initiated romanticizing tuberculosis by associating it with various metaphors (Daniel 2006, 1864).

Sontag (1978, 12) provides an explanation for this phenomenon. Tuberculosis “is understood as a disease of extreme contrasts” (ibid) accompanied by extreme suffering: “The sufferer is wracked by coughs, then sinks back, recovers breath, breathes normally; then coughs again” (ibid). That contrast might have influenced the metaphorization and romanticization of the disease. Further possible reasons as well as the exact metaphors associated with tuberculosis are presented in the following.

### 3.2 Metaphorization of Tuberculosis

Before going into detail about the metaphorization of tuberculosis, the general connection between diseases and metaphors ought to be explained. Tuberculosis is not the only disease associated with certain metaphors. Metaphors serve a variety of purposes, yet a specific one ought to be explained further and is fundamental for the metaphorization of tuberculosis. Nünning & Nünning (2007, 68) explain that “[t]he term ‘metaphor’ refers to ‘word pictures’ that are used to convey a figurative meaning”. Wohlmann (2022, 27) adds: “One major function of metaphor is to name, clarify and crystallise: metaphors help fill gaps in language”. Therefore, metaphors enable the pictorial description of terms by relating the word in question to a ‘picture’. The metaphor chosen then conveys the crucial characteristics of the term it describes (Nünning & Nünning 2007, 69). This is considered a particular advantage when discussing illness, especially as a layperson. The use of metaphors simplifies the complexity of diseases and their medical terminology as they are related to word pictures. Thus, metaphors increase a disease’s comprehensibility (Wohlmann 2022, 27). This is especially of importance considering that medical terms connected to diseases usually have not been and are still not known by the majority of the population. Metaphors have provided the possibility to discuss illnesses such as tuberculosis efficiently without knowing the clinical terms.

Sontag (1978) introduced two diseases associated with diverse metaphors, one of them being the illness thematized in this paper – tuberculosis – the other being a similarly widespread disease – namely cancer. Both have been metaphorized by humanity in diverse ways. While cancer is considered a disease of stable growth, tuberculosis is coined by contrasts, as mentioned. In general, Sontag describes the two illnesses as complete opposites on the basis of their historical perception. Tuberculosis has been considered a disease of passion, desire and liveliness, whereas cancer has been associated with negative terms, such as devitalization, repression or even demonization. This demonstrates the positive manner in which tuberculosis has been perceived. One of the main metaphors linked to tuberculosis is also mentioned by Sontag. It is the term *consumption* under which the disease has been known since the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (ibid, 10- 13).

Since consumption is the best-known metaphor for tuberculosis, it ought to be examined in more detail. Caplan (1995) provides great insight into this issue. The author explains that consumption has not only been a metaphor for the disease, but also the general term used for the illness before the medical term tuberculosis was introduced due to its pathology (the tubercles in the body) (Caplan 1995, n.p.). This links back to the reasons why metaphors are used when talking about medical issues. They fill the lack of lexical knowledge. As explained initially, metaphors ought to convey the typical characteristics of the term they describe. By referring to tuberculosis as consumption, people described its typical symptomatic appearance as well as the course of the disease. The tuberculosis symptoms slowly consumed and

wasted the body, Caplan describes (ibid., n.p.). The disease first introduced itself with milder symptoms, for instance a cough. Over the course of time, the first symptoms were accompanied by more severe ones slowly leading to death in many cases. Consumption was a suitable term to verbalize tuberculosis in its characteristic facets. Laypersons could name and discuss tuberculosis efficiently without knowing the clinical terms linked to it.

As such a metaphorized and romanticized disease, tuberculosis did not only coin history but also fiction. It inspired the Arts, and the metaphor consumption arises in a variety of literary works, for instance by William Shakespeare (Chalke 1962, 307). Moreover, tuberculosis found its way into stage plays and later even movies. Therefore, it can be analyzed in a great number of fictional works. An example of a narrative analysis of tuberculosis in a film is introduced in the next chapter.

#### **4 Analysis of Tuberculosis in the Film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001)**

*Moulin Rouge!* (2001) serves as an example of a fictional work featuring tuberculosis as a supporting plot device. The movie is set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Paris, the era of Bohemianism. Therefore, it explores typical bohemian themes such as art, love and friendship. A young man and writer named Christian falls in love with Satine, a courtesan at the Moulin Rouge, a famous night club. Their affair, however, is overshadowed by the duke, an investor of the club, who also desires to be with Satine. Over the course of the film, the group of young Bohemians intends to perform a stage play in the Moulin Rouge. Christian and Satine are part of the play, and their love story continues as the protagonists mirror their love experience. Yet, the duke is against their relationship and intends to change the course of the play. When the artists do not obey his wishes, he wants to murder Christian and have Satine for himself. However, on the day of the performance Christian returns to the Moulin Rouge and takes part in the play unintentionally. The duke's plan of murdering him fails and Christian and Satine confess their love for each other. The musical film would have a happy ending if there were not the disease weakening Satine. Early in the movie, it is portrayed that Satine suffers from tuberculosis. Heavy coughs, accompanied by spitting blood, fainting on stage and a pale complexion demonstrate the symptoms of disease. Towards the end of the film, Satine's state becomes more severe. She dies on stage at the end of the performance while lying in Christian's arms.

##### **4.1 Narrative Analysis of Tuberculosis in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001)**

As presented in chapter 2, the chosen methodology for this research is a thematic narrative analysis of *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) regarding the metaphorization of tuberculosis. The only issue that occurred during the narrative analysis was the lack

of verbal elements to categorize in the findings. Therefore, the analysis of the metaphor consumption is accompanied by a short description of its visual representation in the film. The analysis is organized into the presentation of findings and their evaluation in connection with the theoretical framework of tuberculosis and metaphors.

#### **4.1.1 Presentation of Findings**

During the narrative analysis, two aspects have been focused on – namely the metaphor of ‘consumption’ and the romanticization of tuberculosis in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). Several scenes occur in the musical film that demonstrate how tuberculosis shows in Satine, the courtesan. However, romanticization of the disease does not happen in an obvious manner. It is clearly stated that especially men are obsessed with Satine’s appearance and her body weakened from the disease contributes to this obsession. This can even be considered a sexualization of the character’s condition. There are not many scenes in which that aspect about her appearance is verbalized; however, the character’s depiction adds to the narrative description of the character as desirable and sexualized.

Two specific scenes in the movie are to be analyzed in more detail. They mark the verbal occurrence of the romanticization or sexualization of tuberculosis in one example and the metaphorization of the disease in the other example. Additionally, the way in which the metaphor consumption is visually represented in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) is discussed.

#### **4.1.2 Evaluation and Discussion of Findings**

The two examples found in the narrative analysis demonstrate how tuberculosis is portrayed in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). As mentioned, more verbalizations of tuberculosis as a romanticized and metaphorized disease could not be found in the film. That might underly the reason that the illness solely appears as a supporting and not a main plot device. Nevertheless, the two scenes deserve to be analyzed in more detail.

First, the romanticization of tuberculosis in scene 24:52-24:54 ought to be discussed. The exact wording by Satine, the courtesan, is “How do I look?” which is answered by Zidler, the owner of the night club: “Smoldering temptress.” The way he describes Satine’s appearance relates to the positive connotation of the disease, considering the sick woman sexually attractive and seductive despite her being in a critical condition. Even though she is visibly sick, she represents a seductive and beautiful woman who men are obsessed with. Due to that, the phrase *smoldering temptress* applies to the romanticized and even sexualized character of tuberculosis in terms of the positive attributes associated with it. Tuberculosis has been seen as a disease of passion and sexual desire as described by Sontag (1978, 13).

Second, consumption as a metaphor for tuberculosis is utilized in the musical film. The disease is only diagnosed and named relatively late in the narrative. However, it is clearly depicted from the beginning that Satine, the courtesan, suffers from the illness. When she is introduced, Satine is visualized with pale skin, fainting due to exhaustion and coughs. At 1:06:05-1:06:09, the doctor examining Satine delivers the diagnosis that the courtesan has consumption: “Mademoiselle Satine is dying. She has consumption”. As mentioned in chapter 3.3, consumption had been used as a general term for tuberculosis before the disease’s pathology was identified at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, it seems interesting that tuberculosis was finally established as the medical term by Robert Koch in 1882 (Daniel 2006, 1864) and *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) is set in 1899. The doctor ought to have known the term *tuberculosis*, but still chose to diagnose it as consumption, a metaphorical reference to the disease and its effect on the body. Rather than just being consumed by the disease in a metaphorical way, it affects the patient’s physical condition to such a degree that the body wastes away slowly, being ‘consumed’ by the disease as the metaphor suggests. That could be reasoned with similar arguments that explain why consumption has been used as a metaphor as well as a medical term for tuberculosis in general. The metaphorization of the disease simplified the verbalization of its symptoms. By knowing that the body is consumed by a disease, tuberculosis became more comprehensible for people (Wohlmann 2022, 27; Caplan 1995, n.p.). In the course of the movie, the symptomatic appearance of tuberculosis in Satine worsens. Her body is slowly being consumed by the disease. Satine becomes even weaker, and her coughs are suddenly accompanied by blood, which she spits out, and fever.

In summary, the two examples found in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) represent the romanticization and metaphorization of tuberculosis. Both findings can be linked back to the theoretical framework describing the history of tuberculosis. They apply to the bizarre positive connotation of the disease.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the initial research question “How does the portrayal of tuberculosis in *Moulin Rouge* (2001) reflect the metaphorized character of the disease in the 19<sup>th</sup> century?” can be answered by the findings of the narrative analysis. The way in which the disease is presented in the musical film applies to the history of the metaphorization of tuberculosis. Even though there were not many concrete cases to be found, two fundamental scenes served as examples for the narrative analysis. On the one hand, Satine’s disease is romanticized as she is portrayed as a seductive, beautiful courtesan, who is called a smoldering temptress. On the other hand, the doctor diagnoses her illness as consumption. Consumption is the best-known metaphor for tuberculosis, which has been used to verbalize the symptomatic appearance of the disease before the medical term was established. The visual representation of tuberculosis in Satine, the courtesan, reflects why consumption has



been used as a metaphor to describe it. In the course of the movie the body diseased with tuberculosis is slowly being consumed by it until death. Therefore, it can be summarized that the portrayal of tuberculosis in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) reflects the character of the disease as it was understood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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