



Research Paper

High Art to High School: Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* as Transposition of the Classical Shakespeare into American Postmodern Cinematic Tradition

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Abstract

It seems the breadth of Shakespeare's genius knows no bounds. In modern times Shakespeare has permeated into our popular culture through cinematic adaptations and homages in television shows and cartoons. Even though Shakespeare's presence in popular culture is all-pervasive, a distance has been formed between the actual texts of Shakespeare and the youth of our time. They have only encountered the text of Shakespeare's plays as a lesson in their English class and have therefore, no real connection with his works. Thus, Baz Luhrmann in his cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet sought to reintroduce the youth to Shakespeare through the use of elements of popular culture in his movie Romeo + Juliet (1996).

Luhrmann uses postmodern techniques to bridge the gap between the Shakespeare adored by academics and the Shakespeare who was an unapologetic mass entertainer. The introduction of the elements of popular culture into the adaptation injects the play with new life while the adherence to the original dialogues of the play keeps the movie authentic. In this paper, I will analyze the postmodern features of Luhrmann's Romeo + Juliet like intertextuality, bricolage and temporal distortion which are used in the adaptation to recontextualize Shakespeare for contemporary times.

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High Art to High School: Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* as Transposition of the Classical Shakespeare into American Postmodern Cinematic Tradition

William Shakespeare has remained relevant throughout the ages as his plays have universal appeal. The themes that his plays grappled with – ambition, love, jealousy, etc- are human traits that people have related with in all the different eras. He has been immortalized by academicians who have analyzed his plays through the lens of Marxism, Feminism, Gender Studies and now even Ecocriticism.

It seems the breadth of Shakespeare's genius knows no bounds. In modern times, Shakespeare has permeated into our popular culture through cinematic adaptations and homages in television shows and cartoons. Even though Shakespeare's presence in popular culture is all-pervasive, a distance has been formed between the actual texts of Shakespeare and the youth of our time. They have only encountered the text of Shakespeare's plays as a lesson in their English class and have therefore, no real connection with his works. Thus, Baz Luhrmann in his cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's play "Romeo and Juliet" sought to reintroduce the youth to Shakespeare through the use of postmodern techniques and elements of popular culture in his movie *Romeo + Juliet* (1996).

When the movie was released it was panned by critics for pandering to the lowest denomination. It has received much less academic attention compared with other famous adaptations of Shakespeare. I will argue in this paper that Buz Luhrmann by using various experimental cinematic techniques is actually able to recreate the classic Shakespearean play in the context of the postmodern era.

The critics taking umbrage over the classic play being reinterpreted for the masses fail to see the irony that Shakespeare was an entertainer for the masses himself. He liberally used violence on the stage to satisfy the blood thirst of the common people of Elizabethan times for whom public executions counted as entertainment. He riddled the dialogues of his comedies with sexual innuendoes and licentious remarks. In fact, his comedies would have more in common with the contemporary adult comedies rather than romantic comedies with all the references to male and female genitalia it contained.

It is the elitist critics who have placed Shakespeare in a rarified zone away from the clutches of the grubby hands of the masses. Baz Luhrmann is aware of Shakespeare's pandering to the audience and his crafting of plays for the purpose of mass entertainment:

We know about the Elizabethan stage and that he was playing for 3000 drunken punters, from the street sweeper to the Queen of England – and his competition was bear-baiting and prostitution. So he was a relentless entertainer and a user of incredible devices and theatrical tricks to ultimately create something of meaning and convey a story" (Luhrmann).

Luhrmann himself injected forms and references of popular culture into his adaptation and reappropriated Shakespeare for the masses. He used postmodern techniques to bring the adaptation to life and match the fervor and excitement of the original play.

The famous opening scene of the movie is filled with the glitz and glamour of the 20th century western world. The Montagues and the Capulets arrive on the scene in big colorful cars with pop music blaring on their radios. The Capulets are attired in the garb of western gunslingers while the Montagues wear beach clothes. The scene is shot like a contemporary music video which the youths would immediately relate with. Shakespeare's verses are reproduced verbatim through the style of hip hop performance which further connects Shakespeare with contemporary popular culture, while the preservation of the original dialogue of the play grants the movie authenticity.

In order to transpose the play's original Elizabethan dialogue in a postmodern movie, Luhrmann uses the technique of temporal distortion. He speeds up the action to balance the wordy dialogues and accomplishes the task with such finesse that it is nothing short of brilliant. The language of the bard flows through the movie so effortlessly it would seem that he wrote it for the script himself. This is, of course, proof of the genius of Shakespeare himself, but it takes Luhrmann's artistic vision here to bring it to light for the newer generation.

In this scene we also observe the use of intertextuality as some lines from Shakespeare's other plays appear when least expected. The gas station where the shooting takes place has a signboard which reads "Add more fuel to your fire" from *Henry VI* and a headline on a newspaper reads "Rash fierce blaze of riot" from *Richard II*. The use of intertextuality in the movie highlights the artifice behind the movie which is a feature of postmodern art. The movie exposes its construction as a fictional narrative just as Shakespeare himself does in the beginning of the play by writing in the prologue that the play is "two hours traffic of stage".

As Shehrazade Zafar-Arif writes in her article on "How Have Performances of Shakespeare Changed Over Time?", there were elements in Shakespeare's plays and their performances which exposed the artifice of the stage:

Shakespeare, like other playwrights, was aware of the mentality and expectations of his audiences and was constantly playing with and responding to them. This is seen most obviously in soliloquies and asides, where actors address the audiences directly, taking them into confidence, but also in the use of disguises that are painfully obvious to audiences but not to other characters. This created a sense that the audience were in on a private joke against the characters in the play, putting them simultaneously within and outside the world of the play. The plays frequently drew on language that referenced the theatre, acknowledging the physical dimensions of the playhouse, the audience and the actors. The Chorus in *Henry V* wonders, 'can this cockpit hold / the vast fields of France?' and asks audiences to 'imagine, think when we talk of horses, that you see them.' The famous 'all the world's a stage' speech in *As You Like It* is simultaneously a reflection on the theatre-world analogy so popular at the time, as well as a wink and nudge to the audience.

The movie "Romeo + Juliet" is self-reflexive by nature, which is an essential feature of postmodern cinema. The frantic display of images which constantly interrupt the narration of the movie reminds the audience that they are watching a carefully constructed film instead of reality. The exaggerated action of the movie keeps pace with the action in the plays of Shakespeare and comes across as artifice rather than a close representation of reality. The explosion of images on the screen along with powerful music in the background bombard the senses of the audience in the way in which the senses of people in a postmodern society are assaulted daily with images propagating a culture of consumerism.

Luhrmann infuses the movie with more contemporary issues like gender and drug abuse as well. By presenting Mercutio as a drag queen in the masque scene, he highlights gender confusion and anxiety. Luhrmann hints at the homosexuality of Mercutio when he interprets Tybalt's line, "Mercutio, thou consort'st with Romeo,—" as a taunt against Mercutio's masculinity. Mercutio's outburst at the barb further betrays his insecurity about his sexuality.

Luhrmann presents the scene of the feast as an exorbitant gala. He introduces drug use in the movie when Romeo takes a pill before going to the party. Thus, when an intoxicated Romeo enters the party, it gives Luhrmann an opportunity to experiment with the cinematography. He slows down or speeds up the tempo, and blurs the images together to visualize the drugged perspective of Romeo. The fantastic camera work along with the extravagant costumes and flashy fireworks merge to form a surreal scene which lingers in the mind of the

audience. The use of drugs and the rave-like party is also designed to relate to the party culture of the youth and their interest in recreational drugs.

Lurhmann's representation of the character of Friar Laurence caused quite a stir as well. He presents the friar wearing a Hawaiian shirt with a giant cross tattooed down his back. Even though the idea of a priest with a tattoo is hard to digest, it does lend credibility to his friendship with Romeo, because he comes across as a character a teenager would go to for counseling.

By infusing the play with elements of popular culture- like music videos, hip hop and rock and roll, Luhrmann successfully marries high and low culture in the film while at the same time introducing Shakespeare to a younger generation in a language they will comprehend. Instead of making a dumbed down version of Shakespeare- which the critics accused him of doing- Luhrmann actually managed to create a distinct and powerful adaptation of the immortal play using postmodern cinematic techniques like temporal distortion, intertextuality and self-reflexivity.

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