

Romeo and Juliet go to the Movies

Understanding Social and Textual Postmodernism
With the Use of Established Generic Conventions
And Iconography

Zachary Gildersleeve
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Media and Theatre Arts
University Honors Program
Undergraduate Scholars Program

Montana State University

Romeo and Juliet marks the beginning of an artistic turning point in the playwriting career of William Shakespeare. His works were well established in the Elizabethan theatre, but until 1594 his body of literature consisted of lighthearted comedies and historical fiction, two genres that, while remaining popular with audiences, could not arouse the attention of critics like a well-crafted tragedy. To a certain extent this has remained true today, a holdover from the survival of only the tragedy half of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The artistic and social nature of postmodernism complicates any traditional notion of style, combining genres or subverting inherent politics, and under postmodern viewer sensibilities we are forced to reexamine the continued adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. To understand the use and misuse of genre is to understand postmodernism.

Shakespeare's version of two lovers caught between feuding families was, like many of his plays, a rewrite and adaptation of earlier classics. In this case, *Romeo and Juliet* was most directly taken from a 1562 volume of English poetry by Arthur Brooke, inspired by Boiastuau (1559) and derived from a novella by Matteo Bandello (1554), but the story existed in many forms from nearly the fourth century A.D. Dante wrote of the Montagues and Capulets in his *Purgatorio* (vi.105); given his experience of the feuding Guelphs and Ghibellines, the current genesis of Juliet and Romeo may have actually occurred in Renaissance Italy.

The story concept continued to evolve beyond Shakespeare's version; in 1679 Thomas Otway wrote *The History and Fall of Caius Marius*, *Romeo and Juliet* in an Augustan Rome setting (Mabillard 2003). The daughter of senator Metellus speaks similar lines to Shakespeare's in the famous balcony scene:

*O Marius, Marius! wherefore art thou Marius?
Deny thy Family, renounce thy Name:
Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my Love,
And I'll no longer call Metellus Parent.* (Otway 20)

Truly, the stage was set before Shakespeare for the continued adaptation of "his" material, a tradition that continues to the present day. Only the canonization of Shakespeare in the mid to late 1800's, during a time when English as an academic subject was first being taught to pacify the masses and promote nationalism (Eagleton 2245),

solidified Shakespeare as a style at the expense of being the individual author. This movement removed focus from the common theme of lovers from feuding families that had previously superseded national boundaries and placed it wholly on Shakespeare's "star crossed lovers." "What was at stake in English studies was less English *literature* than *English literature*" (Eagleton 2248). With the further spread of English as a subject through an era of imperialism and colonialism, Shakespeare's position as genre became solidified across the globe – an important transition and catalysis to consider when understanding the modern relationship between Shakespeare's work and the subsequent adaptations.

Shakespeare shares a position in this *brotherhood* with Alfred Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, and a few others who became genres, a messy process where new rules are created and enforced. To consider the relationship between Shakespeare and genre today is to compare tragedy with comedy, romance with mystery. Luckily, we are empowered by the current state of critical theory that rests in postmodernism, and are given the appropriate means and desire to compare apples and oranges. A survey of the cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* should allow us to understand the historical and modern state of postmodernism as an aesthetic and critical device, as well as acting as proof of the collapse of rigid genre boundaries that allows just such an examination.

Shakespeare's plays were not divided into their current divisions (comedy, tragedy, history, etc.) until the publication of the First Folio in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death. This separation is done according to very classical definitions; the comedies vary from romantic-comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the very dark *Merchant of Venice*, the only similarity being that they are not tragedy. Likewise, histories like *Richard III* can be considered tragedies, and *Henry IV, Part 1* could be called a comedy. Here, genre is better defined by what *is not* than by what *is*, hardly relevant for the critic or audience member. It is important to understand the classical placing of *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of genre and style, because it is exactly these artificial stylistic conventions that postmodernism reworks.

The only groupings of Shakespeare's works that routinely makes sense are those that are, and always will be, tragedies. Here, *Romeo and Juliet* is unique in that it is the

only tragedy in which the victims are not kings, princes or thanes but average citizens. Where MacBeth and Lear are destroyed in the pursuit of power, Romeo and Juliet are destroyed by their lack of power. One of the qualifications for a classical tragedy is the fall of a great man; “tragedy is a representation of people who are better than we are” (Aristotle 103). It is a good bet that Aristotle would not have considered *Romeo and Juliet* a tragedy, however, this tragedy for the common man results in the continued popularity of *Romeo and Juliet*, having been filmed more than any other play, Shakespearean or otherwise.

We are thus left with a fairly unique tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet*, one that concerns the average rather than the great. Shakespeare allows for this by making the tragic flaw of the two lovers not an issue of power, but a product of their own intense “love” and the feudings of an older generation. A new element of romance and political commentary is introduced to the mix, with the required moments of light, dark, and bawdy humor. A romantic tragedy? Such a genre was new in Shakespeare’s canon at that point, and it continued to be unique until later, more complex relationships appeared in subsequent plays.

As we shall see, the nature of social and textual postmodernism has been an important aesthetic and thematic force in the evolution of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations. The use and misuse of the established *Romeo and Juliet* iconography allows adaptations to retell the story of the star-crossed lovers, in each relevant postmodern period the borders between classical meta-genres – comedy and tragedy – shrinking, blurring, and being reworked. What follows is the postmodern replacement of the icon, identified by parody and pastiche over strict imagery.

The Establishment of Iconography

Romeo and Juliet was one of the first films ever created, by Georges Melies in the nineteenth century dawn of film, but no trace of this film remains. There were over ten adaptations of the play in the first decades of the twentieth century, internationally produced from the United States, France, Italy, and Germany, but the first version of critical note did not appear until 1936.

Producer Irving Thalberg had been pushing for a *Romeo and Juliet* film throughout the Great Depression, and was finally given the green light by Louis B. Mayer to counter the upstart Warner Bros. and their controversial version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It seemed that the public was at last ready for a full-blown Hollywood production of the play, although it was unclear when Hollywood was going to tell this to the movie-going public. What followed was a \$2 million spectacle, the largest budget yet for M-G-M (prefiguring the lavish M-G-M musicals of the 1940's), that functionally established what critics and audiences would respond to in all future versions of *Romeo and Juliet*.

“Your job is to protect Shakespeare from us” was the alleged advice provided by Thalberg to one of many scholars hired to criticize any historical inaccuracies that the production might incur. Copying the lush visual style of Renaissance artwork – Botticelli most noticeably – the 1936 version was filled to the brim with poetic imagery, symbolism, and a deep respect for the poetry of the Bard himself. Director George Cukor then cast Hollywood stars as the players, a forty-five year old Leslie Howard as Romeo and Thalberg's wife Norma Shearer (arguably one of Thalberg's nepotistic reasons for wanting to produce *Romeo and Juliet*) as Juliet. Although there has been much positive acclaim of the “classic” acting abilities of the cast, including the excellent John Barrymore as the joking Mercutio, the cast's relative age has itself aged poorly.

Effectively, the production removes the sense of life that is potential in the playscript, or at least buries it beneath age-defying makeup and scholarly appeal. From the reworking of the opening scene to introduce the elder Capulet and Montague's feud through pomp and circumstance rather than the popularizing street battle between servants that opens Shakespeare's version, Cukor and Thalberg collaborated to create high art, Shakespeare style, whether anybody liked it or not. Of course, no one did. “Thalberg was the first (many would follow) to be criticized for ‘framing on old picture rather than executing a new one’... allowing the movie medium to service [Shakespeare], rather than actually devising a movie from the Bard's work” (Brode 45).

The 1936 *Romeo and Juliet* is important directly *because* of this intentional pompousness that the film created, a by-product of the academic Shakespeare film, a style this film shares with the Laurence Olivier *Hamlet* (1948), Orson Welles' *MacBeth*

(1948), and other esteemed company... the films that are shown in high school classes to get an idea of what Shakespeare *is really about*. This is Shakespeare as the pinnacle of high culture, the stuff that scares students away in droves. As easy as it may be to discount the 1936 version as “stuffy” under modern viewer sensibilities, Thalberg’s *Romeo and Juliet* helped to form the iconography of *Romeo and Juliet*, creating images that will stay with the story today and into the future. The Cukor/Thalberg iconography would form a foundation for which all future adaptations of the play would strive to reach, or use as a point to distance each progressive generation from the “original.”

From the largest acting and directing choices to the smallest detail, everything reads Shakespeare. The players are introduced with a quick montage of their faces with the character’s name, a convention that would follow in many films afterwards and becomes an important means by which future filmmakers could announce their alliances, just as the Montagues and Capulets announce theirs. The allowances created to explain Friar Laurence’s waylaid messenger, and the close encounter that he and Romeo almost never have, and that Romeo and Juliet almost have, are continually reintroduced, prefiguring each subsequent generations upping the stakes of each close call. Barrymore sets the standard for the joking playboy Mercutio, copied explicitly in future versions. The 1936 balcony scene became *the* balcony scene, most visual allusion in the subsequent years to this scene coming from *this* film, as well as the dance when Romeo and Juliet first meet, the Errol Flynn-esque fight sequences between Romeo, Mercutio, and Tybalt, and the final scene in the Capulet crypt. The necessary pauses and moments of dramatic tension that this film elicits from Shakespeare’s text forms the basis for all future adaptations – arguably, certain moments are inherent in the text, but the 1936 version was the first film to capitalize and enshrine the tragedy. And on and on.

In fact, it is hard for a modern viewer to determine what *Romeo and Juliet* iconography existed before Thalberg’s version, so deeply has it permeated our understanding of the story. However, the filmmaker’s use and misuse of this iconography will allow us to critically examine two breeds of postmodernism throughout the *Romeo and Juliet* filmography, and to trace the undergoing popularization of this play from version to version.

The 1960's: Social Postmodernism and *Romeo and Juliet*

Social postmodernism is the term used to literally describe the period after the fall of modernism in the aftermath of World War II. The resulting political and social disruption and upheaval, and the ever-present threat of nuclear war, created a world that was far more unstable than that present even for post-World War I modernism. This strife led to the questioning of the conventional mores of the status quo, including the establishment and strict rules of modernism. Clement Greenberg, the art critic whose theories defined modernism, elaborated:

It follows that a modernist work of art must try, in principle, to avoid communication with any order of experience not inherent in the most literally and essentially construed nature of its medium. Among other things, this means renouncing illusion and explicit subject matter. The arts are to achieve concreteness, “purity,” by dealing solely with their respective selves – that is, by becoming “abstract” or nonfigurative (Greenberg 22).

This “concreteness” and “purity” so undermined modernism that it simply burned itself out (Kleiner 1075); the formalism modernism required across all plains of life was what post-World War II individuals sought to rebel against via the creation of the counterculture and the accompanying periods of social liberation.

Likewise, so frightened were audiences of Shakespeare after these first major forays – the studios close on their heels – that it was over a decade before the Bard was attempted by Hollywood, though not *Romeo and Juliet* for another 25 years. Eight international versions of the story were produced during that period as more nations leapt into the film industry: Egypt, Mexico, Czechoslovakia. *Romeo and Juliet* resurface in the United States as Tony and Maria, two lovers caught between racially divided gangs in 1950's New York. *West Side Story*, adapted from the 1957 stage musical, went on to win ten Academy Awards, including the 1962 Best Picture.

Gone is the original dialogue, and with it most of the Cukor/Thalberg iconography, in favor of the stylistic conventions of the blockbuster musical. Thus this film is easier seen as a musical than Shakespeare: more singing than pentameter. The most important change in *West Side Story* of the Juliet and Romeo saga is the death of Romeo (Tony) at the hands of Paris (Chino), and the necessary “rescue” of Juliet from

her own impending death. Juliet's salvation does not come lightly; Romeo's death is prefigured by his incomplete characterization and the larger focus of the story on his former gang than on Romeo himself. Juliet's would have been the only suicide, and suicide was not an acceptable solution to problems occurring onscreen; even in 1961 the Hayes Production Code was still present and an important element to consider.

What is important about *West Side Story* is the attempt, albeit a relatively early one, to popularize Shakespeare. Although the dialog was abandoned, and thus the film can never be considered true "Shakespeare for the masses," it became clear that not only would the film-going population watch a "retelling" of Shakespeare, they would prefer it to Shakespeare straight-up – proving that the high culture gamble Irving Thalberg pushed through the studio system in 1936 was a poor one. After *West Side Story*, Shakespeare consequentially became something to retell rather than simply redo.

Echoed here is the social postmodern collapsing of high and low culture, joining Shakespeare with the very popular musical – a path that would be explored more fully by additional *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations during the 1960's. Modernism's elitism and heady avant-garde fueled the flames of postmodernism's beatification of pop culture; nothing speaks pop culture in the late 50's and early 60's more than the Hollywood musical. *West Side Story* did phenomenal business, both the film and the stage play, and Hollywood rediscovered the enormous appeal the stories that Shakespeare popularized held, setting the stage for further adaptations to come.

Viewers found parallels between the existing and coming social crises and *Romeo and Juliet*. As the 60's social movements progressed, the youth counterculture became more and more an important part of social postmodernism. The year 1968 proved to be a banner year for *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations, as well as the year many social revolutions came to a point. Fresh off his success with *Taming of the Shrew*, director Franco Zeffirelli turned his popularizing approach to the tragedy of love. "I have always been a popularizer" (Zeffirelli 341), he said, thus staking his claim to the described legacy of *West Side Story*. "I have always felt sure I could break the myth that Shakespeare on stage and screen is only an exercise for the intellectual" (Lucas 94).

Both the box office success of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* and its critical appeal justify his treatment of the Bard, at the expense of the more traditional Shakespearean

mainstays like Olivier, or, for our purposes, the 1936 *Romeo and Juliet*. Zeffirelli did use Laurence Olivier to speak the prologue, opening *Romeo and Juliet*, but this functions only to initiate a discourse between the old and the new rather than pay homage to the established iconography.

There has been so much critical praise of Zeffirelli that it is not necessary to repeat much of it, here we are more concerned with the adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* to a specific genre: the 60's youth counterculture film. The 1968 version fits this mold; the Cukor/Thalberg iconography was adapted to both create and comment on popular and sub-cultural elements of the late 60's. The ball and the Romeo/Mercutio/Tybalt fight loose the formalness created by Cukor, and instead both take on a lively celebration of youth and its excesses. The spectacle here, rather than intending to overwhelm the audience with culture, is "shamelessly milked for emotion... for the tenderness and lyricism of young love... for the raw excitement of seeing mockery and tests of skill" (Jorgens 82).

Zeffirelli also abandons the careful, exacting use of Shakespeare's language for a more visual style, choosing to show what, limited by the stage and Elizabethan conventions, Shakespeare could only tell. This expanded visual choice, above all else, creates the 60's counterculture film, "which glorifies the young and caricatures the old" (Jorgens 86). Repeated use of flowers and circular choreography, symbols of the 60's youth, replaces the Cukor/Thalberg imagery of opulent linear progression – the 1936 opening militaristic march into the piazza retold as the more free movement of long haired youths.

The film places all blame for the lover's deaths on the older generation, innocents of love and pacifism caught in the existing pointless conflicts of the establishment, a clear 1960's counterculture and Vietnam reference. Likewise, the film abandons the prudish erotic and sexual relationships portrayed in the 1936 *Romeo and Juliet* and even the 1961 *West Side Story*, and following the loosening production codes as well as the concurrent sexual liberation movement, participates fully in the love shared between Romeo and Juliet, and the emerging homosocial and homosexual relationship between Romeo and Mercutio. "The homoerotic side of the film seldom breaks the surface of the film... remaining as allusion, implication, subtext" (Donaldson 146); however, during the

wedding night scene, in which Romeo appears naked at the expense of the “traditional” female nudity, “the camera work creates a homoerotic connection even as it portrays heterosexual love... [evoking] earlier instances of male bonding in the film and can be read as a surfacing of the erotic potential of those moments” (Donaldson 170).

All these reworkings contribute to this film’s presentation of *Romeo and Juliet* as the youth counterculture film; however, the film also contains a critique of this same movement. By wholeheartedly blaming Juliet and Romeo’s deaths on the older generation, the two lovers are never afforded the chance to be held responsible for their own demise; they never progress and never mature in their love. “They never see what a corrupt and flawed world it is that they are leaving, never give any indication that they know how they contributed to their own downfall, and never understand that love of such intensity not only cannot last but is self-destructive” (Jorgens 91). The moral intention of the play is removed.

Likewise, a similar critique of the 60’s movements can be offered; the failure of the “love culture” prefigured by its passionate excesses. Shakespeare’s immortal warning to the overzealous lovers:

*These violent delights have violent end,
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
Which as they kiss consume. (II.vi.9-11)*

... is echoed in the words of Hunter S. Thompson when writing about the failure of the 60’s counterculture:

No more of the speed that fueled that 60's. That was the fatal flaw in Tim Leary's trip. He crashed around America selling "consciousness expansion" without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying in wait for all the people who took him seriously... All those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit.
(Thompson)

The other *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation to come out of the late 1960’s proved to be a film in decidedly a different vein than Zeffirelli’s version. *The Secret Sex Lives of Romeo and Juliet* (1968) also know as *Juliet’s Desire*, represents standard fare for exploitation director Peter Perry (aka A.P. Stootsberry and dozens more pseudonyms)

and one of the more entertaining figures in American exploitation cinema, producer Harry Novak.

Novak was a veteran of the RKO advertising department before he made the shift to producing exploitation – primarily sexploitation – films, and this partly accounts for the enormous commercial (read: advertising) success of his films. *Secret Sex Lives* allegedly “won” an award at Cannes in 1969, a persistent rumor that speaks to the lengths Novak was willing to reach to publicize his films. He and director Perry also had a much more practical marketing strategy: finding gorgeous young women who could also *act*. Eschewing the stars of the 60’s and 70’s adult cinema and their less than reputable acting abilities, Novak cast unknowns, creating his own star system. This strategy paid off big.

Like many exploitation films when watched under a modern consciousness, *Secret Sex Lives* is a weird film, made even stranger when understood with Novak’s rambling, incoherent and downright lecherous commentary track, where his motivation for entering into the sexploitation industry becomes painfully clear. The film intercuts extended soft-core sex scenes with Laugh-In style jokes (“If you were on a boat and a guy named Monty shut the captain in his quarters, could you say ‘Capt.-you-let Monty-glue-you-in?’”) and a jesting narrator, all supposedly performed before a rowdy “live studio audience,” standing in for the groundlings of Shakespeare’s Globe theatre. However, *Secret Sex Lives* makes a much more flagrant misuse of the Cukor/Thalberg iconography than Zeffirelli does, in doing so creating the first *Romeo and Juliet* parody as well as redefining how the iconography would be used in all later adaptations.

Secret Sex Lives begins with a narrator character baiting an audience of drunk men, creating the understanding that this production intends to highlight Shakespeare’s bawdy moments, crowd pleasing then as it is now, at the expense of every other traditional Shakespearean element. Thus, the film opens with a critical intention, and then perverts the *Romeo and Juliet* iconography to serve this aim. The players are introduced in subtitled montage, as in the 1936 version, but here the characters are presented in various states of undress or sexual activity; the cast itself is “broadened” (to paraphrase a Novak pun) to include five or six blonde “maids.” To this extent, the baiting between servants that establishes the feud here takes the form of “slut!” and “fag!” insults, speaking the subtext of “biting my thumb.” Each insult is greeted fresh by

the audience's jeers as we are led to expect Shakespeare's audience would react to bawdy puns. It is also important to note that the insults/jokes take the form of sexual insults; this sets the tone for the following sex comedy of one of irreverence to "high culture."

The plot loosely centers on trying to unite Juliet and Romeo before they completely wear themselves out with everyone else. Here, the almost "sacred" iconography of the balcony scene is twisted; the lovers speak their lines from afar while both receiving oral sex individually – Juliet from a dog! The choreography that defines the dance and fight scenes is played out here as an orgy, matching camera shots with some of those in Thalberg's *Romeo and Juliet*; likewise at the conclusion Juliet and Romeo finally consummate their love, trapped (by Mercutio and Tybalt no less, great drinking buddies throughout) together in a doublewide coffin. They don't die any more than "dying" as conceived as a Shakespearean bawdy pun.

Here then, the perverse reading of the *Romeo and Juliet* iconography schedules the perversity inherent to the exploitation film, however, the importance of exploitation films through the 70's cannot be neglected. They were among the first American "independent" films to emerge from almost forty years of heavy rule by the studio system and the Hayes Production Code, this tradition continues today, as we shall see shortly. Many of the sexual and ethical mores of modern times are prefigured in these films, reflecting a changing society as much as actually changing it. The presentation of Juliet's nurse as Juliet's lesbian lover in particular is approached today (in other *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations) as an important critical gesture, though in *Secret Sex Lives* the characterization has far different motives.

Thus, in the late sixties, a change took place in the representation and adaptation of Shakespeare to the screen. Zeffirelli's version sought and succeeded to popularize Shakespeare, to knock the Bard down a peg or two, and bring the audience up to meet him. This is exactly what *The Secret Sex Lives of Romeo and Juliet* did as well, taking a traditional "high culture" element and reworking it for the common man, here following in Shakespeare's own footsteps through his popularization of the historical and the tragic. These two *Romeo and Juliet* films thus stand as typical of the early postmodern movement, identified by popularizing touches and the removal of borders between high and low culture and art. Social postmodernism viewed the elitist formalism of

modernism with disdain, underscoring the combination of high and low culture with an overall positive attitude towards the current counterculture. Within the free spirit of a culture released from the oppression of modernism came an association with cheerful meaninglessness, an aspect of postmodernism that was to survive when the social revolutions themselves worked their way out of society.

The 1990's and Beyond: Textual Postmodernism

Textual postmodernism arose into its own in the generation following social postmodernism. Fredric Jameson, in his defining works, wrote that postmodernism during the 80's more reflected a new breed of capitalism that emerged from the revolutions of the 60's than it was a reaction against any one form of modernist art. "We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicated or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic" (Jameson 1974). To many social postmodern critics, this encapsulation of capitalism was the site of conflict; for many textual postmodern artists, there was no real problem.

This cheerful and acknowledged meaninglessness, commercialism and self-referentiality are all hallmarks of the new wave of textual postmodernism; nothing demonstrates this better than MTV and its artistic stepchild, the music video. For as much aesthetic quality music videos have in the abstract and somewhat pure unification of sound and image, they are essentially commercials designed to sell products. The adaptation of high art Shakespeare, already popularized by social postmodernism, was about to enter another transitional period: the MTV Generation.

The next important *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation came in 1996 (*William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*) after approximately eight more domestic and international versions (including several hard core porn films in the late 80's), it was to be a film steeped in postmodernism and elements from MTV and music videos. Working for the most part from Zeffirelli's carefully edited script, director Baz Luhrmann set out with the intention of making *Romeo and Juliet* even more relevant to youth without disemboweling the play (Travers 123). Critical comments tended to follow the typical two-pronged debate over postmodernism in general, "whether the impressionable young

audience witnessed an altered and diluted version... or whether the essence of Shakespeare shone through.... Though this might not be the stuff a purist's dreams are made of, it couldn't be denied that modern youth did turn out for Shakespeare, no mean feat in itself" (Brode 56).

This debate over the Bard, whether 'tis nobler to portray Shakespeare in all his historical accuracy or to recreate his audience's alleged reaction in modern viewers, is one that has raged since Thalberg's *Romeo and Juliet*, and before. Case in point: a typical season of Montana State University's Shakespeare in the Park stages one traditional play, and one play relocated in a different time or local.

In Luhrmann's version the continued recreation of the emotional affect that *Romeo and Juliet* holds plays out not only in the reworked and very tragic ending – where Romeo does not die until *after* Juliet wakes up – but also in the retention of the religious iconography throughout Verona Beach, realizing Shakespeare's argument “that wild youths act troublesome only when they have been denied sources of old-fashioned spirituality” (Brode 57), an element to the play that even the high cultural adaptations have been reluctant to touch. Clearly, the popularizing approach, beyond the first reactionary critics, has been the critical and commercial winner, but the debate continues.

William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet walks a fine line between the use of Cukor/Thalberg iconography and the Zeffirelli iconography, as well as importing images from Luhrmann's other films and music videos, including cartoonish action and sound effects, speed ramps and extreme close-ups, and rapid-fire flash cutting. One of the most important misreadings of *Romeo and Juliet* occurs during Mercutio's Queen Mab speech. Normally interpreted as the drunken improvisation of a jesting wit, here Mercutio is speaking about the drug extasy, which Romeo takes shortly before he and the others join the Capulet ball, a drug that creates an extreme sense of pleasure, euphoria, and love. Although Luhrmann, in his director's commentary, claims that Romeo symbolically washes away the drug before he sees Juliet, the implication that the relationship is founded on “artificial” feelings is still there.

Luhrmann leaps directly into the gang warfare of the opening scene, playing the typical montage introduction of the players through a series of zooms that isolate, in turn, the important characters in the scene. Subsequently we focus on the action itself rather

than the characters, continuing the removal of the stage direction that Shakespeare was forced to include in his scripts to substitute for action he could not present on stage. Likewise, the action is stimulated at the balcony scene, where Juliet and Romeo frolic in the Capulet swimming pool *before* returning to the traditional balcony setup, as even Luhrmann cannot escape completely from the Cukor/Thalberg iconography. Think of a Romeo and Juliet where the balcony scene is staged at the local fast food joint and you begin to understand the hold of the original iconography.

The fights are staged with oversized handguns appropriately titled “swords,” a typical postmodern gag. Mercutio and Benvolio mock-fight briefly, impersonating Capulets, characterized as flamboyant fighters very much in the Errol Flynn style. In this throwaway scene, as well as the gun brawl introduction, Luhrmann plays out the feud as a conflict between the traditional Capulets (read: Italian or Columbian Mafia) and the upstart Montagues (tradition-less street gangs).

Here we find an important redeeming value in postmodernism: within the seemingly mindless juxtaposition of diverse elements, self-referentiality emerges. Luhrmann uses the established *Romeo and Juliet* iconography to not only provide background and meaning for the feud – that of a gang/drug war of the landed versus the *nouveau riche* – but also draws parallels between this conflict and the earlier mentioned conflict over the portrayal and adaptation of Shakespeare. Such self-awareness is not possible in Zeffirelli’s version, which contains a buried critique of the very culture it champions.

In the end, Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* claims that both high and low culture should follow the feuding families, to reconcile their petty differences when faced with their mutual prospective destructions; the battle for the true or accurate Shakespeare coming to an end to save the Bard from wholesale extinction. Only in such a genre as the Luhrmann postmodern music video could such an argument take place.

Another *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation appeared in the same year as Luhrmann’s version, this as removed from *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* as *The Secret Sex Lives of Romeo and Juliet* was from Zeffirelli’s version, and just as much an exploitation film. Troma Entertainment was born from where independent cinema like that of Novak died off, and has survived to become *the* literal powerhouse of modern independent

cinema. Troma fare does not exist on a relatively higher scale aesthetically speaking than the exploitation films of the 60's, but with most modern exploitation films there exists a certain degree of postmodern self-awareness and humor, and this operating in *Tromeo and Juliet* in particular makes this a critically viable parody.

Troma mainstay director Lloyd Kaufman is able to attract reputable talent to his films by virtue of the enormous cult attraction Troma films experience; his casts set his films apart from other modern underground or punk inspired films. *Tromeo and Juliet* offers important bastardizations of the established *Romeo and Juliet* iconography. Clearly, as far as Shakespeare is concerned, Kaufman is no slouch – coming from a Yale liberal arts education where he studied Shakespeare he is familiar with both the history of Shakespeare and with *Romeo and Juliet* portrayed on film.

Kaufman mixes standard Troma dialogue with Shakespearean voice (mostly during the “love” scenes – the balcony scene, etc. – an important note of his refusal to give up the “traditional” language at these moments) to retell the story. The film opens with the Cukor/Thalberg montage introduction, done remarkably straight considering the rest of the film to follow, although the introduction is warped slightly by using lead singer Lemmy of the metal rock group Motorhead to speak the narrator's voice rather than a trained actor. Mercutio's portrayal here is a direct reference to John Barrymore's in the 1936 *Romeo and Juliet*; Kaufman confesses that he gave that original film to all his actors so that they could create a “traditional” character from which they could add Tromatic experiences. And add it does. Troma films are well known for their gore, and *Tromeo and Juliet* does not disappoint. During the Mercutio/Tybalt/Romeo fight, the injuries range from a tattoo needle shoved in an eye to Tybalt's loss of his arm and eventual decapitation.

Tromeo and Juliet also contains its share of surreal moments and dream sequences. The balcony scene takes place inside the Capulet residence, where Romeo approaches a chained Juliet, locked in a suspended glass box by her abuser father. Juliet is characterized as a vegan and lesbian with her lover and same-aged friend, the nurse; she undergoes several nightmares that center around either meat or males: “It's a little known fact that as Shakespeare lay dying on his deathbed he expressed the wish to... rewrite Romeo and Juliet and... add a three foot penis monster. Troma has fulfilled

Shakespeare's deathbed wish" (Kaufman 2002). Juliet's characterization does make it difficult to accept the Juliet/Romeo relationship given the otherwise irreverent Troma elements, only at the end when it is revealed that the two lovers are also brother and sister is the relationship perverted enough to accept. Romeo and Juliet decide that their love is strong enough to overcome *all* obstacles, and they accept this final plot twist, but not until after Juliet is turned into what she hates most: a monstrous and well-endowed cow.

These additions and subtractions successfully Tromatize *Romeo and Juliet*, functioning to bring out the more "popular" aspects of the play – the sex and violence. The punk underworld culture is treated with the same respect that Zeffirelli showed the 60's youth counterculture, however, beyond a perhaps appropriate critique of the cartoonish violence, *Tromeo and Juliet* does not contain the same critique of its respective culture. It is, after all, a comedy, but one that offers a severe critique of American mainstream cinema, from a studio that is blacklisted by Blockbuster (Phipps 1997). Operating outside Hollywood allows Troma films to contain a deeper level of politics – for example, the pro-vegetarian agenda of *Tromeo and Juliet* is echoed by the lifestyles of both cast and crew. Such a political unification would not be possible under Hollywood rule; in aesthetic and thematic creations such as those offered by Troma we find just how effective a political platform textual postmodernism can be – using all the benefits afforded by working *with* capitalism to spread political theory, rather than trying to critique capitalism and advance a message to the masses at the same time.

Not taking itself too seriously works wonders for this film, and allows us the freedom to both accept the film's liberal politics and to enjoy its successful popularization of Shakespeare. Lloyd Kaufman defines *Tromeo and Juliet* when he speaks about an upcoming project of his, in which:

Jane Austen and Shakespeare and Thomas Hardy and Mark Twain and others are up in heaven, and they look down and see the baby food that is being made of their revolutionary work... [This work] was very hot stuff in its day, and the stuff that's being made now is absolute pap. So, they're upset about it... and Jane Austen is sent down to earth... and she kicks cultural ass (Phipps 1997)

The unceasing adaptations of a master text such as *Romeo and Juliet* amounts to an overall critical misinterpretation of the original genre – a romantic tragedy is transformed into Shakespeare, musicals, music videos and exploitation films. Harold Bloom speaks of this misreading in his landmark work *The Anxiety of Influence* as a conscious effort on the part of the artist to distance a work from its historical forefathers. The patriarchal-concerned Bloom writes from his own “misreading” of Sigmund Freud and his gender biases may be difficult to swallow today, but his theories are useful in understanding the nature of postmodernism. He offers six means (Bloom 1803) by which the artist can separate works from the tradition, all of which can be found in the use of the Cukor/Thalberg iconography throughout the history of *Romeo and Juliet* film adaptations, all of which are marks of postmodernism structure. Postmodernism on all levels makes this misreading a viable creative option; what becomes important is not the successive works from each generation, but the misreadings themselves.

To successfully turn a Shakespeare play into a 60's counterculture film, as with Zeffirelli's film, does not require a large jump on the behalf of the audience. *Romeo and Juliet* contains inherent thematic and narrative structures – the moral conflict between the young lovers and the old generation, for example – which allows this transition to take place. Here, then, the adaptation is free to explore and create new images, content that the audience will understand the text without the repeated use of established iconography.

However, when the gap between the original and the attempted is larger than this – turning *Romeo and Juliet* into a sexploitation film, for example – the filmmakers must rely to a larger extent on the established generic conventions of *both* films to not risk losing the audience. This is evident in the two exploitation films examined, *The Secret Sex Lives of Romeo and Juliet* and *Tromeo and Juliet*. Here, the use of the Cukor/Thalberg iconography including the subtitled montage introducing the credits, the symbolism of the dance and fight scenes, and of the balcony scene, is actually much closer to the original. Where one would expect these far flung genres to be removed from the established status quo, the audience's understanding of these films is only possible by remaining in close contact with Cukor and Thalberg.

It is difficult to know precisely where the greater misreading of a film exists, in the adaptation that, while structurally not that unexpected, contains little use of the

known iconography and therefore braves new territory, or with the adaptation that comes out of nowhere in terms of its similarity to the original, but contains an almost conservative misreading of the same iconography.

Film critic David Bordwell famously identified *film noir* as not a genre but a critical concept used to understand a group of films (Bordwell 75). While it is clear today that he is mistaken when grappling with the postmodern use of genre and its ability to resurrect or create new categories of *film noir* in particular, his comments can be made useful. Indeed, as we have seen with the early detail of the First Folio, the history of Shakespeare's genre is one of critical imposition rather than artistic intent. To a certain extent all genre are critical constructions. What we think of as film genre – musical, western, sci-fi – has largely vanished in the melting pot of postmodernism, starting with the invention of the action-comedy in the early 80's. With modern viewing sensibilities, we think nothing of a film that contains comedy, drama, suspense and action, as well as one that combines these elements with those from television, music and the Internet to create a fully *multimedia* product in all sense of the word.

Given this, I think the best way to categorically sort *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations is by determining where in the spectrum of postmodernity the film falls; under the use and misuse of established iconography, each film can further be understood and viewed as a parody (or to use Jameson's term, pastiche, "parody without comedy," a mark of postmodernism) or as a "straight" film. Here, "straight" is used in the vaudevillian sense of the straight man and the clown; we identify with the straight man as the normal partner, but it is the clown who affects us emotionally or cognitively. This affectation is why we go to the movies (Eitzen 91). Anthropologists and sociologists, as well as Freud, note that jokes and joking behavior (pastiche and parody) enter into culture at points of social stress (Radcliffe-Brown). Suddenly the possibility of distinguishing genre between parody and straight has significant social payoffs.

This conceptualization unifies diverse adaptations such as *Secret Sex Lives* and *Tromeo and Juliet* with *West Side Story* and even Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* as parodies of the Romeo and Juliet saga, given their existence during postmodern periods and use of the Thalberg iconography. As is to be expected, a higher degree of alignment with the established iconography predicts a parody, and a distancing from the iconography

produces the opposite. Tracing another instance of a similar story being used across genres, either another Shakespeare play or the standard narrative structure in film noir, for example, would further prove this claim to be true.

The same division between the studied films above would appear if the film's intention to popularize *Romeo and Juliet* were understood. The more "popular" a film claims to be, the most likely it can be considered parody; inherent within the popularization approach we find the same "conservative" misreading of the iconography. The case history of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations functions to argue that the Aristotelian meta-genres of comedy and tragedy have emerged today as the parody and "straight" meta-genres, regarding the postmodern sensibilities instilled in the modern viewer. Postmodernism then open the door for new critical practices. Where modernism was concerned with distancing itself from past traditions, postmodernism forces us to look at the traditions and transitions rather than the individual work of art itself.

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