

A Neo-Kantian Bard Creating a Post-Modern Celluloid Montage:



**Baz Luhrmann's Version of The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet,
Elizabethan English, Automobiles, Pistols, Beach winds, Sand, Gas Stations and
Documentary Footage from an LA-Like future of Gang Thanatos and Eros or what
Historians will Study for a Complex Perspective on Late 20th Century Western
Culture**

Baz Luhrmann's celluloid version of the Bard's *Romeo and Juliet* creates the conditions for a new generation of interest in Elizabethan English, though some might argue that the visual richness, the non-representational use of film technique detract from language-in-history (e.g., Lady Capulet's unreal spin or the slow motion effects at the masquerade ball to viscerally convey sickness and nausea as Romeo, overdoses on the extravaganza and his drugs).

There is also a radical enjambment of language with a post-modern setting that explodes on the screen. Some might argue that the two are at odds, even on a collision course. I would argue it is Luhrmann's post-modernism, which is different way of seeing where we remain unfixed, ungrounded to create and to critique our world and the

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symbols that we live with, the emptiness and the fullness all around us, both meaninglessness and meaning. Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* wrote, “time is not something existing by itself, or inherent in things...” Luhrmann exploits this truth when his characters deploy the lexical and semantic form of Shakespeare's tragedy, the cadence and the trope of Middle English with the phonological varieties of American English—now somewhat influenced by a Hispanic variety, as when Juliet's nurse calls out her name, still at other times influenced by the upper-class English New York dialect of Juliet herself—Claire Danes, or mid-western Standard American English. And the purest from the pages—or from some who read the pages-- of the *Barnacle of Tired Education* (excuse me, I mean the *Chronicle of Higher Education*) have no doubt called Luhrmann on his infelicitous rearrangement of text—the sacred made profane. He has radically clipped Mercutio's lines, and changed their sexual innuendo—as when he insults Tybalt with a pirouette and uses “blow” to mean both gun-shot and fellatio. This kind of double entendre is common in Shakespeare, but is often lost on modern audiences, though not always. Another one of Luhrmann's changes with the original that is less obvious is how in some cases two characters split a line. One character starts the idea, and another finishes it. This adds a streetwise interruption style common in contemporary analysis of street discourse in everyday American vernacular. On the semiotic level, the reality is much like the very real mental alignment that happens to boys in gangs and the menstruation cycles of girls in dorms—a wedding of the *organic mental and physical* processes of humans working in proximity, with and through each other.

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Luhrmann's reality allows the urban, gentrified, educated global audience of the late 20th century to suspend its disbelief and experience the passions of the human condition in chic slices of action—post-music video style.

Like American rock and roll, the American automobile has a prominent place—Americans are their cars, as do expensive pistols with silver and gold crested gang insignias in black leather shoulder holsters. The Capulet gang dresses in black, is thin and reminiscent of Puerto Rican gangs as they have been portrayed. They drive expensive cars, wear pointed black leather boots with sterling silver heel adornment. The Montague gang has pink, blue, red, and blond white-boy hair dyed and Afro-Black hair. These street-wise rues dress in Hawaiian button down shirts with post-modern prints and a cacophony of colors, or silk-screened t-shirts with the icons of Christianity in sugar candy colors. Both gangs adorn themselves with sterling silver crucifix or cross—talisman of Christian mythology and heritage faith.

The police—all African American culture—seek appeasement between the gangs and their wealthy patriarchs. The pivotal Franciscan, a false *deus ex machinas*, who combines the ritual of religion with the science of horticulture and holistic medicine is a vision of dialectical materialism playing itself out—a synthesis of faith and science—two sacred cows of late 20th century middle class American *conservo-fundamentalism*.

Bible thumping fundamentalists stay away—this film is not for you. Better to read the Bard or watch Zeffereilli's 1968 film version and keep a 400 year distance—in that historically correct context the language sounds *quaint*—even when it is raw and sexual and full of pun and innuendo—as Shakespeare's often was.

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Luhrmann uses close-ups and multicultural urban gang war between Capulet and Montague in a Verona Beach—some futuristic LA jungle where *Thanatos* and *Eros* alternate like the footfalls on hot, dirty pavement, and the screams of lust burn holes between our young lovers in the smoke of family feud, Mafioso horrors. Squeamish stay away.

The story is timeless. It isn't even Bill's. He ripped it off from Brooke who wrote a long, dull poem. In Miller Analogy form: Shakespeare is to Brooke as Luhrmann is to Shakespeare—each took the genre of the other and changed it first from poem, then to stage drama for the Globe, and finally to film. Hence, the story is like a woman who has slept with many men, concubine though she is, her pudenda is rich and sensual because, not despite the troubling hostility that takes the lives of two innocents.

This is a story where love does not conquer all. Jesus fails. “A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life...And the continuance of their parents' rage, “Which, but their children's end, naught could remove...” Each artist—Brooke, Shakespeare and Luhrmann kept the story, injected it with the drugs of stage or box office, the constraints of late 16th century London, or late 20th century global cinema—each cast a spell on audiences germane to a particular time, a place, a visual landscape.

From the first scenes of a TV documentary—the role of choir smartly replaced by an African American broadcaster, originally a prologue to the first act, effectively summarize the tragedy. Luhrmann continues with the modern medium of documentary. But even here he uses a fast tunnel-like zoom into the city of pain and ends this music video effect with the black screen and white letters that read with cruel irony “In Fair Verona” much like early documentary footage where studio commentary and silent

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ethnographic footage might be affixed in order to give the audience the illusion of the non-interventionist observer—no Hawthorn effect here—the mythology of an innocent time made fun of by Luhrmann. Flashes of the cityscape, phallic skyscraping towers with Capulet and Montague in neon, and flashes of Jesus and Mary panned and flashed to establish the semiotics of the patriarch and the matriarch of modern Christianity blessing the good works of our fair Verona. Stone-like *Fair Christianity* remained silent, statuesque, during the holocaust or leading its own genocide during the *holy Christian crusades* comes to this reviewers mind as these statues in their cold angelic stillness remain impotent to the pulse of human hate and carnal lust. As they silently condone the flames. All flames. Those of the heart. Those, too, of the war. From the first battle at a gas station between the savage youthful ruffians from each family, Luhrmann unleashes the fierce strife that alternates throughout the film with the innocent carnal erotica between the pure, sweet cravings and luminous lush sexuality of Claire Danes as Juliet and Leonardo DiCaprio as Romeo. Water, stasis, romance, desire, lips and hands, touching, gently, sweetly in the luminous *oceanic human desires* that are sexual and pleasurable and eternally good. This film will be used by historians to explain late 20th century reality.

Ari, you far exceeded my expectations for this assignment for a “review” of the film. Yours is a richly descriptive yet straightforward statement about this story as this film by this director in these times. Your choices of colorful language and image to convey your thoughts befits the prompt I used.

What Some Reviewers Say

Plugged In <http://www.pluggedinonline.com/movies/movies/a0000494.cfm>

Takes the moral high ground concludes that Luhrmann's film "is a stylish, yet empty assault on the senses which, in the end, is more intrigued with cultural bedlam than with the doomed relationship of its namesakes." It argues that the PG-13 rating turns it over to potentially suggestible teen audiences who could imitate the suicide. It argues that the music score is banned in homes, the religious symbolism is garish and irreverent, the violence is too harsh and unseemly and the gentle love scenes too steamy and erotic. This review panders to squeaky-clean presentability, -to a middle class Protestant work ethic. Art forms are not free to explore these other sides of human nature. I hear Blanch Dubois saying, "Cover the naked light bulbs." Everyone places her/his faith somewhere.

Yale Daily News <http://www.yaledailynews.com/article.asp?AID=4987>

This review argues it was a good idea to give it a contemporary setting. One wonders why this is good. It certainly isn't original. Or did this reviewer miss Westside Story? Then the Yale Daily News calls the use of Shakespeare's original verse in a variety of American accents as a "stumbling block". The film work keeps the action

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exciting, this review argues and disguises “how poorly the dialogue is functioning”. No support is given for this position. It is simply asserted. Fact. Then the reviewer characterizes the lovers as “saccharine sweet” and the gang warfare as “extreme tragedy”—with no middle ground. Read the original; was there middle ground there? Is this an attack on Shakespeare, or Luhrmann? It is unclear. Finally it is that Luhrmann is trying to do too much: work with original verse, create a city, modernize a classic. If he had focused on one of the above 3 areas, the film would be stronger. Nonsense. It would have been a different film. To what extent should this critic criticizing this film for what it isn't? Why should Luhrmann pander to this view and not his own? He shouldn't and we hope he didn't. Is it the thought or the person?

John Murphy's review <http://www.bardolatry.com/romeo96.htm>

Here we are told that the “futuristic grunge setting” is in Florida. The focus of this review is on a short summary of the play and a positive review of DiCaprio and Danes—though DiCaprio is better with the lines than Danes, though she is a “charismatic talent”.

Interesting selections. Three distinct reviewers who remind us that a sense of someone's criteria can tell us much about evidence and the nature of knowledge.

Concluding Thoughts

Each of us looks at art quite differently. I see it as more flexible, less tied to a tired set of rules and regulations that ban sex and violence. Censorship by any morality is fascistic at worst; at best it supports the views of those who subscribe to it and helps a chosen flock to lead a carefully demarcated, ordered and pristine life. I would die a thousand deaths if

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we all had to toe the same line—it seems so banal, arbitrary, and limiting. It does, and perhaps only in retrospect. We may know it at the moment, but for a variety of reasons, anywhere from the personal to the public, we may not always commit.

Again, an excellent and thoughtful review. I found it engaging, informative and revealing a bit about how you come to know, and construct and pose arguments as well.

Important skills.