

ROMEO AND JULIET CINEMA ADAPTATIONS

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Abstract

The Shakespearean play Romeo and Juliet has always been an inspiration for the modern adapters. His story has proved its adaptability not only for the stage of theatre, but also for the cinema screen. The examples chosen for this paper are Romeo + Juliet, directed by Baz Luhrmann in 1996, West Side Story by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins in 1961 and Shakespeare in Love, an American - British film made by John Madden in 1998.

Key words: adaptation, screen, representation, play

The story of Romeo and Juliet created by Shakespeare developed in the history of literature a myth that influenced writers all over the world. This aspect was emphasized in the literature critique as a “romantic cult”[1] that became a source of inspiration for modern adaptations or representations. In this analysis, we are going to focus on screen transpositions of the Shakespearean play. We are going to sketch an analysis of the film *Romeo + Juliet* by Baz Luhrmann, a film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.

One of the most faithful adaptations to the work of Shakespeare is without any doubt *Romeo + Juliet* of the director Baz Luhrmann. The film remains faithful to the writing of William Shakespeare, although the two lovers are transported to the contemporary period. In this case we cannot talk about an intercultural adaptation, as this version just brings to the contemporary stage a popular story from the west, as W. B. Worthen comments in his book *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance*: “Although the dynamics of global/intercultural/postcolonial Shakespeare are given specific – and different – force in any individual production, Baz Luhrman’s 1996 film *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* brings these issues into a particularly useful focus. The film is not, let me be clear, “intercultural” in any significant sense. It does not produce Shakespeare through a performance practice “foreign” to Western theatre [...]; it uses the world’s dominant mode of entertainment production – the Hollywood film – to stage one of the West’s most familiar dramas.” [2] This is an American movie that transports Verona in the neighborhoods of New York by keeping a contemporary decor of the xxth century. This film has the particularity of having kept the dialogs of the Shakespearean play. However, the language of Shakespeare does not know the barriers of time, it is always contemporary with those who choose to meet his work and this is what makes its universality.

In this adaptation, the two families are related to the gangsters who are seeking to have the control over the city. Romeo, young and melancholic is driven by his friend Mercutio as well as his cousins to a ballroom where he is going to meet Juliet. They fall in love immediately and swear their love for always, a love that will kill them. The film was a

success and won many Oscars. The filmmaker Baz Luhrmann has put in scene two famous actors: Leonardo Di Caprio and Claire Danes.

Of course, the challenge of the adapter is to take a play that takes place in England at the end of the 16th century and to project it in the modernity while remaining faithful to the whole of the work. This transposition is simply impossible without the emergence of some alterations. The scene which undergoes the greatest influence of this modernity is probably that of the balcony. Since the terrace is under video surveillance, the reality of the scene changed somehow. So the two lovers are in the swimming pool, far from prying eyes, to kiss and whisper words of love. Luhrmann could have been able to ignore this situation and keep the tradition of the famous scene from the balcony. Yet he prefers to play with the modern technology and create a new original scene. Luhrmann wanted to emphasize in this way that the story does not develop in its original time, that he had the duty to adapt the play to the realities of the 20th century. Another important change that should be mentioned is that the protagonists do not travel more on horses but by car. They are not fighting more with swords but rather with firearms. Moreover, the director clearly refers to this change of weapon, as the firearms have the word "sword" engraved on the handle: "Benvolio's "sword" in the opening scene is a pistol engraved with the manufacturer's label, "Sword 9mm Series 5", a logo we see repeatedly on billboards throughout the film, accompanied by the slogan "I am thy Pistol and thy Friend" (ibid: 134).

Certain passages of the new version of the play have been retained while others have been modified. For instance the choir of the prologue has been kept. In the film it is a presenter of a television journal which tells it. From the beginning of the plot, we have a quarrel between the cousins Montague and the Capulets cousins. The scene of the ball is also conserved from the opening. At the end of this scene, the two lovers discover their identities. Finally, the role of the nanny has also been kept. She is always present for the couple and will help them.

On the other hand the scene from the balcony, the mythical scene does not happen on a balcony because Romeo and Juliet are face to face in a swimming pool. Then, there is the marriage between Juliet and Paris with a very detailed organization in the book whereas there is only a single reference in the film. Finally, in the book, at the time of the death of Romeo and Juliet, Paris, Balthazar and the pastor are present. Balthazar accompanied Romeo. The pastor talked to Romeo before he died and Paris was killed. Juliet woke up after that Romeo died. In the film, this scene is happening in a church in the center of the city, Paris and Balthazar are absent, and Juliet wakes up when Romeo wants to take the poison.

All these changes brought to the Shakespearean drama are due to the transposition of the plot into the allegorized world of globalization. This film is connected to the trend of a globalized contemporary landscape, in which advertising is the communication language. In Luhrmann's adaptation, time and place become essential mythic, as we are dealing with some sort of utopia, or atemporality, a tendency to dislocate any classical stability: "Luhrmann stages this disorienting geography, eliding the slick boundaries between geographies and ethnic positionalities, and between the advertised geographies of the global market, the mythic borderland, and the actual border" [3].

The references to the Elizabethan theater are very numerous throughout the film. For example, Mercutio, the best friend of Romeo, wears the costume of a woman at the ball of Capulet family. Of course this is a direct reference to the fact that women were excluded from the theater and that the men played the role of these women. In addition, the first time that one sees the character of Romeo to the screen, it is in the middle of an old theater. The reference is very clear. The Director provides a very important detail, recalling that the

movie industry has far exceeded that of the theater. He pointed out bluntly that his film is an adaptation of a theater play. For that the works still exist and that they have the same echo as before, they absolutely must make the transition from theater to the cinema. A play must be adapted and updated to the period where we live to survive. That is exactly what Baz Luhrmann does taking the work of Shakespeare and projecting it a giant screen. This transfer brings to light a beautiful image, because symbolically, the cinema takes the leftovers, the ruins of the theater and gives them a secondary, but a fresh breath. Despite everything, adapters want to keep the origin, one wants to be faithful to the original version of *Romeo and Juliet* and it is for this reason that in this case, the director keeps the text of the author identical. Even the prologue of the play, that announced the tragic death of Romeo and Juliet, is maintained, being integrated under the form of a newscast.

Also, we should not ignore the eccentricity of the game. This is not a game of a Hollywood actor that Luhrmann presents to the public but that of an actor of theater. The characters are "big" and the movements are detailed. Everything is exaggerated, the emotions, as well as the body game. The tragic is always more tragic and the comic is always more comical. The actor is not playing for the camera; he plays for the spectators who are gathered in the showroom. This means to keep the principle of the Elizabethan theater. What Luhrmann has done is to remain faithful to the creation of Shakespeare. The references to the English playwright and to his time are many. For example, when someone bit his thumb, it was a sign of derision toward another person. It is like this that the Director opens the conflict between the Capulet and the Montague families at the beginning of the film. Although this does not seem a relevant detail for a long time, the intention of the Director was to keep this aspect of the 16th century. Also, Romeo and the Montague are held at the beach of Verona. In front of the beach of sand, there is a message where we can read "Globe Theater". This is a direct link to William Shakespeare as it represents the space where he has evolved throughout his career. This explains why the inscription "Globe Theater" is presented in the film of Luhrmann.

The largest and probably the most popular film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* is *West Side Story* by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins in 1961. The two filmmakers have attempted to transpose the myth through a musical film with a story that develops in New-York. This was an international triumph and the film won ten Oscars (the best directors, best film, best actors). But before the realization of this film, a musical comedy of the same name had made its appearance on Broadway, the September 26, 1957 and had a huge success. That musical comedy was the source of inspiration of the film "West Side Story".

The film is happening in the heart of the Big Apple where the two lovers live on different sides of the city. They are named Tony and Maria. They are in love, but unfortunately their communities hate each other. These two families make the law in the district of West Side. Then the action develops with the tragic story of Tony and Maria who live a forbidden love. The aim of the producers was to modernize the play of Shakespeare. This is probably the first musical comedy which brought to stage the racism and the urban violence. This musical shows us the contemporary social realities in the frame of the Shakespearean drama. The distribution of roles has been assigned to Natalie Wood for Maria and to Richard Beymer for the role of Tony.

Shakespeare in Love is an American - British film made by John Madden in 1998. The story takes place in London during the summer of 1593. William Shakespeare is a young poet and playwright who got into debt. He absolutely must deliver a new play to his sponsor but he has no inspiration. He is looking for a new muse and will find it in Viola who is a young woman dreaming of becoming an actress and worshipping the drama of William. She then decided to play one of these parts, the role of a man (Romeo) but very quickly, Shakespeare discovers the truth and falls in love with her. Then they will act

together in this play and will be able to love each other only for this time. Of this impossible love will be born the most important and beautiful works of the playwright.

In fact, the essence of this story is the simple truth of human nature that lies on the basis of the most pure and almost barbarian feelings. This is the main reason why the value of the Shakespearean play develops in contemporary adaptations to the cinema stage, through the power of music and colour, which allow the characters to divulge their most hidden feelings and share them even beyond the limit of the screen.

References

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