

## Canonical Iconoclasm: Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* as postmodern interrogation of authority

---

In his seminal study of knowledge, *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) Jean-Francois Lyotard identified the challenge to traditional authority as the essence of the postmodern. Postmodern texts demonstrate this critique of authority in their composition or form, which often deploys a complex and relentless intertextuality<sup>i</sup>, referring to earlier texts in order to question their cultural role and value. These texts are sometimes criticised because their challenge to authority is seen as mainly aesthetic or formal, not substantive - and this may be the case with some texts. However, as most aesthetic theory now accepts, form and content are not separable - any more than our ideas are separable from our embodied experience of the world.

Baz Luhrmann's film, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) is a canonical example of iconoclastic postmodernism, which directly addresses the issue of authority - textual, social and cultural - in a way that also exemplifies changing attitudes to contemporary media and textual production. Some readings of the film claimed, rather superciliously, that Luhrmann was simply trying to make Shakespeare *relevant* to today's society. Their judgment is essentially about how the film compares with the more 'authentic' and 'valid' (from their point of view) stage productions of the play. For those readers the authority is Shakespeare, a Shakespeare whom, to borrow from e.e.cummings, '(bourgeois) man has made in his own image'. They compare the film with what they decide Shakespeare's play would have been like on stage and then make a judgment about it. This tells us a

lot about their attitudes to text and to 'culture' – but not much about either Shakespeare's text or Baz Luhrmann's film.

An alternative reading identifies the film as a meditation on the notion of canonicity, essentially a challenge to notions of 'the canon', of textual authority and of 'High Culture' exemplified in the work of William Shakespeare (or, more correctly, in contemporary attitudes to that work), which Luhrmann's exuberant imagery, generic play and complex intertextuality work to unpack. This paper exemplifies this reading through an analysis of the opening scenes of the film/video/DVD (since most viewings of the film are now as video or DVD), which include the prologue and Act 1, Scene 1 of the play.

### **The Prologue**

The Prologue of the verbal text of William Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet* is a meditation on the nature of authority in a changing social order; one in which the feudal state is still dominant but under challenge from the increasingly powerful bourgeoisie. The play itself presents this conflict as between two feudal families under the jurisdiction of a feudal superior, Escalus, Prince of Verona. The story of the star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet conveys the emotional impact of a social crisis that ultimately affects all citizens in every sphere of their lives.

Luhrmann's film deals with a similar crisis in civil authority - between the institutions of the democratic state and the oligarchic power of wealthy and powerful families. The bourgeois individualism that has formed the democratic state reaches

one kind of expression in the powerful individual who then stands in a kind of romantic opposition to the state, which is the product of that individualist ideology. With its profusion of intertext, imagery, repetition - the metatextual quality which characterises it and other postmodern texts - the film enacts that conflict.

**i. speaking the text**

In the opening sequence in which a female TV anchor speaks the Prologue in iambic pentameter but with a newsreader's intonation and phrasing, Luhrmann sets up the central problematic of the text - the nature of authority - and he does it via a reflection on the nature of canonicity. Luhrmann's opening recognises that the literacy of his audience is not the verbal/literary literacy of the modernist state, but a (tele-)visual literacy. In modernist, bourgeois state culture Shakespeare is High Culture; television is Low. This High/Low culture divide is not simply a matter of aesthetics, but encodes values and beliefs that are the basis of ideas about, among other things, authority.

For example, the (bourgeois) aesthetic that produces canonical Shakespeare maintains the distinction between classes by locating that Shakespeare in particular textual and social sites which are (often) inaccessible to members of the working classes - or, in an Anglo culture, to those from non-Anglo ethnicities. The clash or disruption that is constituted by the image of a Black female anchor reading and speaking perfect iambs with a newsreader's intonation - and (therefore) making the words clear and intelligible - is a challenge to that cultural positioning.

Note also that both the film and the video/DVD versions frame this opening sequence with broad black bands above and below, as when a wide-screen feature is seen on a conventional television. Again this draws the viewer's attention to the fact that this is a text - a strategy counter to conventional realism, which works to erase the distance between the viewer and the text. Luhrmann's postmodern strategy is to remind the viewer visually that this is a film and so confirm the viewer's (critical) distance from the text.

One of the dominant 'meanings' of this section of the film, then, is in this confrontation of High and Low, of the canonical and the popular, which problematises the official construction of 'William Shakespeare'. Luhrmann explicitly makes this point in the title of his film - which we see at the end of this sequence: *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. That is, the film is not William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, but Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*; Luhrmann's acknowledgment reflecting not only the metatextuality of this film, but the intertextual character of all the texts we encounter. We read these texts not just as stand-alone images (though we do that too) but also in (intertextual) relation to a semiotic history of texts. The meanings we make from them are drawn from both their immediate story, and also the sociocultural and political meanings derived from the texts to which they refer; in this case around the issue of authority, and the nature of the state.

## **ii. the promo**

Following this reading of the Prologue is a rapid sequence of images that summarises the text, the promo - a familiar television convention of the 1980s and 1990s, when it was used primarily for genres such as television drama (e.g. police procedurals, detective fiction) and 'real TV' (which then meant real life events captured or dramatised for television). These genres are concerned with the nature of the state, state authority and the relationship between the individual and the state - either a ratification of the powerlessness of the individual, or a celebration of individual endurance in the face of overwhelming state authority. So a story about a natural disaster such as a landslide can be read as an articulation of the relationship between the individuals involved in the disaster and the state and its institutions - for whom they act, or which failed to protect them. Luhrmann's use of the promo, therefore, refers the viewer intertextually to genres that address the major concerns of his film - the nature of social and cultural authority, the relationship between the individual and the state.

The appearance of main characters, the Capulet (Brian Dennehy, Christina Pickles) and Montague (Paul Sorvino and Diane Venora) parents and police chief, Prince (Vondie Curtis-Hall) articulates the nature of racial and ethnic conflict in U.S. society: the Latino Capulets versus the Anglo-coded Montagues - for whom writers, Pearce and Luhrmann provide the 'Kennedy' first names, Ted and Caroline. Of course, the Kennedys were/are ethnically Celtic but what is relevant here is that the conflict is figured as Anglo/White/European versus Latino, with the Kennedy-Montagues signifying the white establishment. Not only is this a Hollywood version of *West-Side Story*, Leonard Bernstein's earlier musical version of *Romeo and Juliet*, that evoked

the White/Hispanic conflict to dramatise the lovers' story; it also situates the conflict where it is most vigorously being enacted, the state of California with its huge Spanish-speaking population and simmering ethnic tensions.

This conflict is mediated by the Black police chief, Prince whose role is multiply significant in a society in which Black has been a signifier of powerlessness and lack of authority. On the one hand, it ironically recalls the racial conflict which was the basis of civil liberties demands in the sixties; on the other hand, it refers to the transference - or extension - of that racial tension to another broadly-defined cultural group within U.S. society, the Spanish-speaking constituency which has its roots in countries to the South of the U.S.

The Christian imagery relates to this conflict, because of the identification of Latino culture with Catholicism. And this is not the quietly decorous imagery of (bourgeois protestant) western Christianity, but icons that reflect and articulate the people and cultures they serve: statues and crucifixes, decoration on clothing, on skin (tattoos), as Madonna-inspired jewellery, and as kitsch Church decoration - the Madonna embedded in shells.

Also, the opening image sequence features a statue of Christ separating the domains of the Montagues and Capulets, in the city itself and in newspaper reports of the family feud. Whilst the contemporary U.S. may not be theocratic, its various authorities - civil and moral - constantly cite Christianity and Christ as the source and validation of their actions and policies. Luhrmann's evocation of Christ in this

context works to deconstruct this rhetorical construction of Christ as an 'authority' whose role is to validate U.S. political decisions and their social and cultural consequences.

The newspaper and TV images in the promo are equally interrogative. When we see a newspaper headline such as: 'Civil Blood Makes Civil Hands Unclean' we might be forgiven for wondering which media proprietor would allow such a literary headline. Formerly, we have seen the more plausible, snappy headlines: 'Ancient Grudge' and 'New Mutiny'. We can only conclude that the ponderous 'Civil Blood...' headline must be in a broadsheet paper. In other words, we are prompted to think about the literacy standards of different media outlets - what this means, how it creates disparate (class) cultures - which again contributes to a deconstruction of the technology of literacy and its production of bourgeois taste and values.

The repeated use of images of fire and of motor vehicles takes us into the first scene of the 'action'. Throughout the promo, 'fire' has signified civil disruption and chaos, loss of control by the state. It is no accident that scenes from the promo look exactly like TV footage of the LA riots which followed the Rodney King case, where fire played a major role in signifying and actualising its destructive character. And, of course, they reverberate with the fires that accompanied race rioting in the 1960s.

The car is multiply significant in this context; it is a means of moving through the space of the society - a literal kind of social mobility. The car signifies the quest for freedom in a rule-governed system, and it has contributed significantly to the

development of U.S. (and other) societies - because it allows (limited) access to an array of sites and experiences otherwise unavailable to those who are geographically confined. *Thelma and Louise* - and whole host of other road movies - have used the car in a similar way.

The other repetition which occurs in this promo sequence is the Prologue itself; it is presented another three times, wholly or in part. This repetition might be read as an attempt to familiarise a contemporary audience with Elizabethan prose, or at least to make it intelligible - but the important point here is the strategy used. Luhrmann employs the same strategy as people using computer and video games; they repeat the game until they discover the rules, rather than learning the rules and then attempting the game. The temporal sequencing of the images, therefore, serves a critical purpose in generating the literacy required for the film - metatextual, intertextual, and aware that textual and aesthetic practices have social and political consequences.

The soundtrack contributes another set of meanings to this text, also evoking the High/Low culture dichotomy of modernism and its aesthetic and political practice. The 'classical' chorus which provides the accompanying sound track to the teaser not only punctuates the promo imagery, providing a syntax for its reading; it also generates the counter-pointing of High and Low which constitutes one major set of meanings in this text - around the issue of authority.



The classical-style chorus suggests a High Culture text that, in the context of Shakespeare, means a Royal Shakespeare Company-type production. Which is why it's also used in many big budget films to generate a sense of solemnity or awe; the canonical (here classical music) signifies the good, the true, the valued, which creates solemnity. Here that solemnity accompanies what looks otherwise like a music video - and, in fact, is almost indistinguishable from at least one of the music videos which followed the release of the film.

So the meaning-potentials of the soundtrack can be assessed via an intertextual reading, which doesn't locate the specific meanings of this piece of 'classical' music scoring so much as position it in relation to the context in which it appears - as a counterpoint to the seriously unsolemn and non-canonical Shakespeare we see. So the soundtrack participates in the film's metatextual exploration of notions of authority.

### **Act 1, Scene 1**

The scene in the Petrol Station - Act 1, Scene 1 of the verbal text - works in a similar way to the Prologue and the table below summarises some of its images and generic references, along with their meanings.

| <b>Genre/Image</b> | <b>Meanings</b>  |
|--------------------|--|
| urban thriller     | individual vs. bad guys vs. state; nature of authority |
| police procedural  | state authority  |
| action/adventure   | individual vs. bad guys vs. state                      |

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| western         | nature of authority                                   |
| martial arts    | individual vs bad guys vs. state; nature of authority |
| religious icons | sacred authority                                      |
| fire            | social anarchy; loss of authority                     |
| cars            | social mobility; challenge to authority               |
| weapons         | challenge to state authority                          |
| boots           | western reference; interrogation of authority         |
| flamenco        | Latin culture; chaotic, passionate; loss of control   |

Once again we encounter a series of intertextual references, to other film and television genres (urban thriller, action/adventure, western, martial arts) to situate its story of institutional authority and individual responsibility - as well as repeated images such as religious icons (Christ and the Virgin), fire, cars, weapons and boots. The religious icons and the fire and car images provide continuity, bringing the concerns of the Prologue into the story part of the film; they also continue the film's challenge to the notion of a canonical Shakespeare who must be afforded a certain kind of bourgeois 'respect' and presented with a certain kind of refined taste. The weapons and boots are part of the intertextual referencing to action genres that deal centrally with the notion of authority, particularly via the relationship between the individual and the state. In this scene the music track also becomes complex, introducing heavy metal grunge that forms the musical counterpoint to the choral music used in other scenes. So the story of the film, the inter-family conflict between Capulets and Montagues, enacts (and is mobilized by) the complex address to authority begun in the Prologue.

## **Conclusion**

Luhrmann's film can be read as a challenge to mainstream, bourgeois ways of representing Shakespeare's work, which are conventionally used to reinforce mainstream attitudes. It interrogates the bourgeois, High Culture Shakespeare and the supposedly timeless, eternal values it/he represents. Instead the film challenges us to examine those values and whose interests they serve. And it does this by showing that each version of Shakespeare's text is characteristic of the period that produced it – and that it necessarily presents a political argument about the society and cultures of which it is part; in Luhrmann's Hollywood film the ethnically-complex and tension-driven U.S. state.

## **References**

Anne Cranny-Francis, *MultiMedia: Texts and Contexts*, London, Sage, 2005.

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans.

Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984.

## **By-line**

Anne Cranny-Francis is Associate Professor in English and Cultural Studies and Associate Dean for Research in the Division of Society, Culture, Media and Philosophy at Macquarie University, Sydney.

---

<sup>i</sup> On the practice of intertextuality, see Cranny-Francis 2005: 2, 43-44.