Cultural Capital and the Canon in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet*: Shakespeare vs. $hakespeare

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In their revolutionary 1967 album, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, The Beatles introduced a character who asked us to "lend [him our] ears while [he sang us] a song."[1] His name was Billy Shears, and while John Lennon denied any 350-year connection to William Shakespeare, it seems difficult to dismiss the coincidence altogether.[2] Lennon's intentions aside, the fact that a book exists, as well as multiple theories, about the influence of Shakespeare's plays on the premier rock and roll band of the twentieth century says a great deal about the pervasive popularity of the playwright who lived to see commercial success in his own day and who has enjoyed an astronomically greater posthumous devotion through the place he occupies in the Western canon.

In 1996, Australian director Baz Luhrmann repackaged Shakespeare's best known tragedy and sold it to yet another generation. As had been done for centuries before him, Luhrmann adapted Shakespeare's work to suit his social requirements. The film stylistically blends our contemporary world with Shakespeare's original dialogue (though heavily cut). *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* created a box office tumult. The film depicts our globalized society's obsession with cultural capital and the loss of innocence that accompanies such a fixation. Additionally, critical and popular reactions to the film demonstrated our peculiar two-fold desire to make the Bard a sort of golden calf—Garrick's "god of our idolatry"[3]—as both savior of linguistic humanity and friend of the common man. In short, the film keenly demonstrates how "Shakespeare," with all that the word entails, has become a commodity.

As we are living literally and literarily post-death-of-the-author, according to post-modernist Roland Barthes, there seems little purpose behind speculating on what William Shakespeare's specific

intentions were when he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*.[4] Each reader of the play and each audience member who has seen it performed has had a unique experience. We have no ability to quantify the significance of these experiences. However, the passage of time aids us as we attempt to qualify Shakespeare's work in general; today we have several centuries of adulation proving, for whatever reason**,** that his work is not faddish or insincere. We may speculate, then, that guaranteeing audience appeal was high on Shakespeare's list of priorities in the writing and producing of his works. With language and staging designed to engage every audience member, his plays were crafted expressly to supersede social classification. These malleable qualities, combined with the timelessness of his plot structures and characters, make his plays the abiding staples of the modern literary diet.

The text and plot of *Romeo and Juliet* make it an excellent choice for a contemporary film adaptation. Popular western media has molded itself to the individualized mindset of our Western culture. Hollywood and popular fiction have distanced themselves from works that chronicle the journeys of civilizations (variously set down in films like *Gone with the Wind* or *American Graffiti*) in favor of stories primarily concerned with one man or one family. These stories are considered to be more accessible and serve as representations of the social masses. Unlike many of Shakespeare's other famous tragedies, whose tales of kings and political maneuvering figure more fully in critic Jean-François Lyotard's Grand Narrative ideals,[5] *Romeo and Juliet's* scope is narrow, specifically dealing with the saga of the young lovers. It is what could be termed a *local narrative*.

Luhrmann augments this individualized focus by cropping characters, shifting dialogue, and even adding and deleting scenes. The intimate focus on the local narrative is most clearly seen in Luhrmann's depiction of the double suicide, during which Juliet wakes just in time to see Romeo drink the fatal poison. Their final moments together are devastating to the audience because Luhrmann has created a stark contrast of imagery throughout the world of the film. Romeo and Juliet have become the quintessential examples of true love, held up against a world polluted with what Boudrillard termed *hypereal copies* of love.[6] When the audience first encounters Romeo, he is a poet/lover awash in a world of violence and filth. Dressed in the vestiges of a Versace suit, Romeo smokes a cigarette while writing paradoxical poetry to a beach-front sunrise, broken repetitions of the guitar music reflecting his aimless existence. Similarly, Juliet's "bright angel"[7] costume at the

ball and bedroom cluttered with votive candles and statues of the Virgin depict her as an innocent child cloistered within the confines of her family home.

As the story progresses, attempts are made to force both youths into conformity with their corrupt society. Luhrmann brings their conflict to its most brutal in Juliet's scene with the priest. The audience watches horrified as the utterly abandoned child/bride, for the first time dressed in black rather than white, threatens her own life and then the priest's with a handgun. Juliet's demise begins with the physical and verbal abuse she suffers at the hands of her Vito Corleone-like father. Next, she is emotionally rejected by her hardened Southern-belle mother, whose erotic and self-obsessed mannerisms are in turn reminiscent of Madonna, Monroe, and Maggie The Cat. With no one left to turn to, Juliet finally flees her home. She is forced to seek answers from a priest who wears a Hawaiian shirt and practices herbology. His ideas seem as foolish as his dress code, but Juliet is desperate. As the plot complications and cinematography pick up speed, the audience becomes increasingly aware that these lovers are doomed, not so much by the imprudence of their passion as by the malicious world into which they have been born. Their purity of love is irreconcilable with that world, and so they are violently driven out of it.

The fallen world of Verona Beach is rampant with imagery cleverly designed to enhance the feeling of capitalistic cynicism. Luhrmann displays a quirky simulacra which plays upon perhaps the most famous advertisement of the twentieth century: The white on red script of "Enjoy Coca-Cola" morphs into a wholesale representation of commodified love through an enormous billboard reading, "Wherefore, L'amour," thus indicating to the audience that in the world of Verona Beach, the value of love is equivalent to a bottle of Coke.

The simulacrum of love is not limited to billboards. In fact, Baudrillard's theory is exemplified by progressive images throughout the movie. From the first moments of the film, the audience is introduced into a world of prostitution, cross-dressing, porn, and general sexual debris. These are whorish copies of real love. However, from the second the lovers' eyes meet through a fish tank, everything—camera work, color, and sound—takes on a less frenzied, more refined tone. The cool tones and repeated visual use of water features, such as pools and bathtubs that dominate the actual love scenes, give the audience a "new baptized" (2.2.50) feeling to contrast with the warm color schemes of the Verona Beach setting, which are intentionally placed in locations

such as a highly flammable gas station, in order to get "the mad blood stirring" (3.1.4). As we approach Romeo's and Juliet's pure love, we are increasingly able to identify and be revolted by the *for sale* copy.

Indeed, the overarching structure of the film is created as a commercial exposé. Shakespeare's tidy prologue and epilogue are delivered to the audience via a floating TV screen. As critic Elise Walker pointed out, "The kind of comic, self-conscious detachment invoked by the newscaster's delivery of the prologue becomes a poignant reflection on the media's ability to trivialize and, through glib sensationalism, to empty a tragic event of meaning. Shakespeare's epilogue, in its rhythmic neatness, may seem to trivialize the tragic action but, in Luhrmann's film, the epilogue ironically heightens our sense of the story's grandeur: the discrepancy between the newscaster's summary and the passion we have witnessed is marked."[8]

This metatheatrical staging, along with the barrage of self-referencing images, such as the Globe Theatre/pool hall where Romeo and his mob hung out and the varied cinemagraphic styling throughout the film, worked together to create something new for the general cinematic audience of the mid-1990's. The film encapsulates what has been labeled *destructive fragmentation* by architectural scholar David Harvey, a process through which "fragmentation serves not to liberate the viewer by presenting conflicting elements that eventually coalesce, but to keep the elements in conflict in order to leave the resolution on hands of the individual viewer."[9]

Walker's article was written in response to the lack of critical analysis of the film by the year 2000, four years after its release. The film itself was largely disregarded by critics. Luhrmann admitted that he was nervous when pitching the film to producers, having been warned by friends that Hollywood plus Elizabethan equaled "financial suicide" for a young director. Yet in the end, the film grossed nearly $150 million world-wide and was one of the top forty money-makers of the year.[10] In an award acceptance speech, Luhrmann explained that he believed Hollywood and Shakespeare have at least one important goal in common: the need to please a large and varied audience.[11]

Luhrmann and Shakespeare made a successful team because they both employed a wide range of tactics to seduce their audiences. Shakespeare's work is still popular for its fantastical, often gruesome plots, daring special effects, and stunning language. These elements form an amalgamation of high and low culture

that is reflected fittingly in a modern setting where the same mixed audience can be reached in a movie theatre with the application of the same formula. Throw in two young Hollywood stars, and you may have just bested the Bard. This formula for a commercial triumph is best examined under the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's definition of *cultural capital* as it exists in his three defined forms: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state.[12] When we understand Luhrmann's ability to utilize the powerful image of Shakespeare within our cultural mindset, we begin to comprehend the revolutionary importance of the film. From here on the idea of Shakespeare and not the author Shakespeare will be referenced as $hakepeare (note the dollar sign).

The embodied state of $hakespeare is the cultural belief that he is simply The Best. From childhood, we are immersed in social references to him and his works. We are trained to accept that $hakespeare is the personification of Western thought and refinement. This is clearly seen when we look at what Barbara Hodgdon of Duke University calls, "The Shakespeare Trade." The bustling town of Stratford-upon-Avon has one well-developed skill: tourism. In my own pilgrimage to this land of Shakespeare's nativity, I paid upwards of twenty quid to stand in a room that may be very near the place where Shakespeare may have been born. I, and hundreds of others that day, ooh-ed and aah-ed over old desks that he may have written on and facsimile beds on which he certainly never slept. If the man Shakespeare is the embodiment of Western literary power and integrity, then my purchase of a ballpoint version of $hakespeare's feathered quill ought to ensure that some of his power will rub off on me.

A smaller portion of this form of cultural capital falls under the study of linguistic theory. Linguistic capital is the value we place on the words in and around $hakespeare. At least part of our method of assigning him value stems from the difficulty of his language. The fact that we can't understand his verbiage one hundred percent of the time only adds to his mystery and our feeling of unworthiness as we cower before his genius. It is easy to understand why Luhrmann's severely cut script for *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* was met so unfavorably by critics and traditionalists alike. Rearranging scenes and cutting time-honored lines—like Juliet's final "O happy dagger!" (5.3.69)—combined with the often uncomfortably paced action, did not sit well with a portion of the movie-going audience, who may have expected the film to reflect the official Stratford-upon-Avon Visitors Center incantation of $hakespeare: a refined and successful bourgeois

gentleman. Luhrmann instead produced a film that captured Shakespeare's revolutionary and crowd-pleasing qualities.[13]

The question of how we value $hakespeare is deepened by the objectified state. In this form, cultural capital is just what it seems: capital or cash. How much do we pay for the pleasure of being able to own $hakespeare? Today on eBay, I could buy a used copy of *Measure for Measure* for one cent,[14] while a little over a year ago a mint condition 1623 Folio sold at Southeby's Auction house for $5.2 million dollars.[15] No one can say which buyer will truly get his money's worth. Can either of these prices, or any price, truly allow customers to *own* $hakespeare? Every member of Luhrmann's audience possessed a unique set of expectations about $hakespeare and $hakespeare on film. No matter whether they were a worshiper or a despiser, no matter whether they loved it or hated it, they paid for it just the same. In this world we are able to put a dollar amount next to $hakespeare—$6.00 for a matinee, $7.50 for a regular showing. At last box-office count, the world values *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* at about $150,000,000.

Finally, we have the institutionalized state of cultural capital. More than being a commercial object or the embodiment of something greater, American society has institutionalized $hakespeare, especially his *Romeo and Juliet*. Considering my life to be of typical middle-class, publicly educated, American upbringing, this play has been the proverbial bad penny. *Romeo and Juliet* was the first Shakespeare play I read in school at the tender age of eleven. In that same seventh grade class, Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* became the first Shakespeare movie I viewed. It was the only Shakespeare play that my high school drama class ever performed, and a few years later (too brief to have recovered from the former experiences), it was the first play I helped produce at university level. Now I find myself confronted with it once again. There is no escape.

Romeo and Juiet also constituted two of the worst performances I saw during my study-abroad trip to England, first at the Old Globe and second in Stratford-upon-Avon. Perhaps the British have lost their touch when it comes to producing this, now popularly relegated to Hollywood, classic. Many may take exception to my reference to Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* as any kind of classic. The movie has been often passed off as a crude bastardization, while others agreed with Luhrmann that the film was truer to Shakespeare's intentions than history's legacy of "rounded vowels and tights."[16] However, more important than the critical reception of the film is the quantitative effect it has had on society. The film

brought an awareness of $hakespeare's canon to the next generation. The film is textually faithful to Shakespeare's words, with much of the same thematic exploration. Questions of fate, hate, love, and social expectation are as poignant as ever in this film. Craig Pearce, the co-screen writer, explained the film's motivations this way: "We wanted to knock Shakespeare off his pedestal and put him back . . .where he belonged, which was on a billboard in Times Square and on the walls of adolescents all around the world."[17]

Even the film's production team reflects the commercialism and globalization that dominates our Western society and global entertainment. Luhrmann's production team and cast were a multinational, multi-ethnic conglomeration who worked together to create a piece of art that speaks to a universal audience. The layers of people and locations involved in the process also reflect Baudrillardian simulacra. This Hollywood movie, directed by an Australian in 1996, based on a play set in Renaissance Italy, written in England, and adapted to "a futuristic Miami-like" city in the United States was performed with American accents, while actually being filmed in Veracruz, Mexico.[18] These copies within copies have become so thoroughly mixed that they, according to Baudrillard, "no longer [have] to be rational, since [the film] is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary [sense of reality], it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal."[19]

If the film is bastardized, it is designed to serve a purpose. Luhrmann claimed that his intention in the film was to create a new living entity separate from any former commercial incarnation: "What we were doing was absolutely disregarding the accumulation of what I call club Shakespeare . . . . We just wanted to . . . get it back to the kind of violent, direct, passionate, musical, free, energetic, bawdy, savage, rambunctious, story telling that it was when this author brought it to the stage."[20]

After purchasing his fatal doom from the poverty-stricken apothecary, Romeo asserts that between the liquid death and the money, "gold [is] worse poison to men's souls, / Doing more murder in this loathsome world / Than these poor compounds" (5.1.80-82). If we attempted to calculate the commercial value given to action figures, advertisements, tee-shirts, and general staging costs of Shakespeare's work, or last year's productions of *Romeo and Juliet* alone, we would discover that the cultural price we have put on $hakespeare as a commodity is in fact as incalculable

as his intellectual value to our society. It is impossible to know if the true value of William Shakespeare's intellectual impact on our world (as if such a thing could be measured) will be lost behind a façade of commercialism. The only thing that can be predicted to any degree of certainty is that Shakespeare's work will continue to attract and fascinate audiences for years, if not centuries, to come. Audiences and producers have an obligation to one another in regard to purchase and production of $hakespeare. Shakespeare should never be produced for the number of tickets that $hakespeare can sell rather than for his exquisite ability to awaken the human heart. But it is unclear if this ideal can be maintained in a society obsessed with his deification/commodification. I purchased a button at a Utah Shakespearean Festival gift shop that sums up this problem quite succinctly: "Will Power."

Notes

1. John Lennon and Paul McCartney, "With a Little Help from My Friends," March 29, 1967, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, EMI Records CDP 7 46442 2.

2. Stephen Bretzius, *Shakespeare in Theory: The Postmodern Academy and the Early Modern Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 124.

3. David Garrick, *The Poetical Works of David Garrick* (1785; repr., Salem, NH: Ayer Publishing, 1972), 57.

4. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 144-48.

5. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii.

6. Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, trans. Jacques Mourrain, et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 166-84.

7. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 2.2.26. Subsequent in-text line references are to this edition.

8. Elise Walker, "Pop Goes the Shakespeare: Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+ Juliet," Literature Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2000): 32-138.

9. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 44, 64.

10. Movies.com, "Top Movies of 1996," http://movies.go.com/boxoffice?cat=1996 (accessed September 24, 2007).

11. Baz Luhrmann, "Why Shakespeare? Directors Gallery, Special Feature," *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, DVD, directed by Baz Luhrmann (1996; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1997).

12. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage Publications, Ltd, 1990), 73-76. Though this reference is the earliest containing Bourdieu's thoughts on Cultural Capitol, his ideas were extensively developed in later writings, including *The Forms of Capital* (1986) and *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991).

13. Barbara Hodgdon, *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 200.

14. E-bay Auction Item Number: 230173122082 *Measure for Measure*, http://cgi.ebay.com/Measure-for-Measure-by-S-Nagarajan-William-shakesp_W0QQitemZ230173122082QQihZ013QQcategoryZ377QQssPageNameZWDVWQQrdZ1QQcmdZViewItem (accessed September 25, 2007).

15. "Ten Most Expensive Books of 2006," *Fine Books and Collections Magazine*, http://www.finebooksmagazine.com /issue/ 0502/expensive-1.phtml (accessed September 25, 2007).

16. Luhrmann, "Why Shakespeare?"

17. *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, dir. Baz Luhrmann, writ. Craig Pearce, *Interview Gallery: The Co-writer Special Feature*, DVD, 20th Century Fox, 1997.

18. Luhrmann, "Why Shakespeare?"

19. Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," 167.

20. Luhrmann, "Why Shakespeare?"