

O, by the by, the very lang of justice, I might be lo
 cally commended to some other such like you
 better had have stay a quarter. But I will not
 do the for my sake. I'll be a
 the King and Princes like of 'em. I'll be
 better to Lady Juliet the of
 saying of the time more of
 Elizabeth (Catherine) and me
 (Lionel) (Catherine) how 't the U.S. and
 that girl for want of the time of
 (Lionel) (Catherine) of me? money to be
 of TV need to me, and I wish to be
 and would be happy. (Lionel) (Catherine)
 making the connection. (Lionel) (Catherine)
 Princes like. I'll be a
 comment that she is
 national heroine. about, and when he might
 the more important. And he would, with some
 and movement how. (Lionel) (Catherine)
 home. How you? (Lionel) (Catherine)
 hour of day, you? (Lionel) (Catherine)
 making me. (Lionel) (Catherine)
 and when right at making right at making's peak
 and after the fact. (Lionel) (Catherine)

(Un)-Doing the Book «by the book:»

Notes from the receiving end of Baz Luhrmann's

William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet

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« ... I wonder who

Will be the last, the very last, to seek

This place for what it was ... »

Philip Larkin. *Church Going*

A dark movie screen. A frame within a frame moves towards us: it is another screen, a TV screen inside the cinema screen. An anchorwoman delivers the opening sonnet of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in the received monotone of the Evening News or Tonight's Special Report on the recent turmoil in Verona Beach and its tragic consequences. When she is almost finished, we plunge wildly through the TV screen, until we stop at the face of a statue of Christ while thunderous music fills the air to display a black wide-screen length of white lettering that reads «Verona Beach.» Then there is quick zooming back and forth, we see once again the face of Christ, and then move back into a wide shot of a busy urban landscape presided by the monumental statue, which stands at the top of a column at the center of a circus with tall buildings and heavy traffic all around. Now we see aspect after aspect of this place in a schizotimic clicking of images until we return to the face, which immediately becomes a photograph on the front page of a tabloid while a male voice-over recites the «Prologue» anew. Thus, we have listened to both the book-in-the-making and the book-as-is versions of The

Prologue to our story in the midst of a rough visual ride. The shot of the urban scenery, perfectly symmetrical, has taken us to the vortex of the composition, which is not unlike that of a renaissance painting with a foreshortened «scientific» perspective, in turn resembling a book 60° open to either side of our view. We have entered a book entitled *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, a film by Baz Lurhmann (1996).

Later we will see a collection of cinematic images resembling the images on the pages of a comic-book. At a gas station, a car stops; violently, emphatically, its front plate invades our view. The way we experience what follows—a drastically cut re-elaboration of Act I, scene 1 from Shakespeare's «precious book of love»—is not as a sequence of filmed actions, but as a sequence of rapidly scanned frames showing us one aspect after another of the participants and their doings.¹ Some of these images are strategically shot in slow motion where emphasis calls: e.g., an extreme close up showing only chin, mouth, and nose of a young man who lights up a black cigarette to whistling music that 'resembles a spaghetti-western character's leit-motif; or another extreme close up of the metal heels on a pair of boots framed within a blank aural atmosphere where we can hear, so distinctly, the sound of the match falling, or of the boots crunching it. This filmic framing, both visual and aural, is read as a comic-book frame is read, the actual **sound** from the screen interacting as/with a[n implied] printed onomatopoeia: *swishh, crrrshh*. Item more: an extreme close up, with a slightly upward tilt, of Abra's face, an unmistakably Latin-American young man clad in the obligatory black vest on no shirt, carrying a large gun in a chest-holster. To get to see him, and his gun, and his metal-biting teeth, there have been quick cuts, and the camera has panned schizoidly, as if running across frames separating one comic-book picture from the next, or as if we had looked for these things by quickly moving the pointer across an interactive screen. Angles shift rapidly while we see close-ups and extreme close-ups of faces and eyes that resemble drawn faces and eyes. And so on. Until we reach The Fight, underscored by more spaghetti-western music and coreographed in a mix of classic and formulaic action films. The entire sequence is a disruptive interpretation, a printed-filmed-digitalized-popular form of visual-textual construction: a **post-modern «book.»** After all, the comic *book* remains a «**book,**» though clearly not the «kind of glorified comic.**book**» denounced by Kenneth Rothwell (1994, 217).

A dark computer screen. The sound of a door opening; a quick flash of red light—a comic-book flashing of red light—hits our eyes, and then a voice says «*shhh*, somebody is coming» from the still dark frame. Two shots—an implied *bang bang* lettering. On the screen now appears a distinctly comic-bookish close-up drawing of a gun pointing at us, held by a hand in pastel color with the partially superimposed lettering «Circum-Stance.» Then, vaguely visible under

slowly roaming lights, the coats of arms of the Capulets and the Montagues—drawings, not film-images or stills of the «actual» ones—appear on the screen as a voice, the same as in the picture, delivers the opening lines of the Prologue, surrounded by thunderous music, as loud as that which accompanied the wide shot of the city presided by Christ. We have entered the «book» entitled *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet: An Interactive Trip To Verona Beach*, a CD-ROM production by Fox Interactive and Circumstance Design, made in collaboration with the film's team at the time of shooting. Music and images begin to saturate the screen. Now we may leaf (click and drag) through the «pages» of this «Interactive Trip.» The implications and complications of these strategies of artistic design and realization are large: Yet, the «book»—pages, texts, images, frames and framing devices, actions, circumstances, and whatnot—remains a «book,» howbeit [comic]-ly bracketed.

Of course, the release of an interactive CD concomitant to Luhrmann's movie deserves more than this passing note, which is intended merely to call attention to the consistency with which both products are designed in connection to the aesthetics of comic-books. What really matters here is that Luhrmann's film is an extreme example of the historical depletion of Shakespeare's books,² thereby inviting conversation on the interaction of «book» and cinema within the conditions of reception in our frame-and-screen-wise post-modern world. Practically no reviewer I have read, nor any colleague with whom I have discussed it, have failed to label Luhrmann's film post-modern. And for very good reasons, among which the assimilation of the term to everyday chat-at-the-cafe lingo is not least. Every readily recognizable feature of the now comfortably numb category may be invoked while examining this movie: furious juxtaposition; re- and de-contextualization; rejection of representation; seemingly random self- and cross-reference and allusion; media- and genre-jumbling; undermining of plot and character (and of conventions in general); and, o yes, the quintessential denial of totalizing and totalized meaning. In short, we are talking about the disruption and depletion of the concept of the Work of Art, and of the Work; that is, of the Book.

I do not intend to either question or validate this assessment of Luhrmann's movie. My approach presumes «post-modern» as a label already presumed for and in Luhrmann's film, which therefore does not call for nor welcomes elucidation. Rather, I would like to make some notes about the recent film and trace them back to Shakespeare's «precious book of love» through an earlier version—Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*—at once speculating on some issues or acts of reception involved in looking at Shakespeare-as-book-and-film. The simple premise is that Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* foregrounds the historical depletion of Shakespeare's «precious book of love»

both as a written text and as a previously filmed «book,» thereby constituting a palimpsest in varying degrees of oscillation.



The best way to describe my initial response to Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* is as an example of unrepentant professional bias. The first things that came to my mind were: a. that, this 'version' of the Bard's «precious book of love» posed some interesting problems in sub-titling which had simply gone unnoticed to whoever had been in charge of the job for the Spanish-speaking market, (something which is neither here nor there); and b. that it would be interesting to find out just into which category the film would be placed by compilers of shakespearean filmographies.

At first it seemed to me that Luhrmann's film could be comfortably inscribed in, say, Holderness and McCullough's «Selective Filmography»-which is defined as a «reference list of 'complete', straightforward versions of Shakespeare's plays in film, television and videotape form» (1994, 18)-especially because, if roughly, it complies with their explanation that by «'complete'» they mean «a full though possibly abridged version of the play's action,» as opposed to «an uncut version of the received texts» (1: 19), a criterion that protects their list from considerable shrinking. On second thought, however, I found it difficult to deal with the vagueness of the term «straightforward.» Turning to pages 46 and 47, I confirmed something which I found noteworthy when I first scanned this filmography: yes, Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) was pointedly not included in it, although Derek Jarman's version of *The Tempest* (1980) was. Perhaps the «straightforward» part has to do with it, I thought; and then, their list also «specifically excludes free adaptations» (18). So there you are. But then again, whatever its liberties in terms of «adaptation,» Greenaway's picture contains a version of the text which is not as radically cut as, for example, Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990), nor does it fail to offer «a full though possibly abridged [certainly problematized] version of the play's action.» And what about the exception they make for films «as is the case of Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood,*» that have been «placed at the centre of critical debate? (19: 2)» Did this mean that roughly three years after release *Prospero's Books* had not yet received enough attention from the shakespearean establishment? Maybe so; but controversial it is, and worthy of debate, and rich in implications for the reassessment of much Shakespeare film criticism, as Douglas Lanier (1996) brightly demonstrates.

I do not mean to bore anyone with my little schizoid spell any more than I probably will henceforth. My only wish is to raise the issue that, just as Greenaway's film has caused some uneasiness as to its classification, so Luhrmann's movie may, despite its overt self-definition as *William Shakespeare's Romeo*

+&] *Juliet*,) and nothing less-or more. The first problem derives from this very fact: i.e., that the film actually goes by the name of «Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*,» instead of «*William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, a film by Baz Luhrmann» or some such. Of course, this choice could be easily explained away as an anonymous article in *The Economist* does. After a quick but a devastating comment on *Tromeo and Juliet* (1995), the reviewer concludes that since Kaufman's film was so unmercifully bad, «to avoid confusion, Baz Luhrmann (perhaps inspired by «Bram Stoker's *Dracula*») chose to call the rival film he had directed «*William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*» (Anon. 1997,81). However, even if this actually were the sole reason behind such choice, that would not prevent it from adding an interesting twist to the controversies that the title and the film can invite.

The terms «complete» and «straightforward» notwithstanding, a classification like Holderness and McCullough's depends primarily on the criterion that the items on their list are «versions of Shakespeare's plays in film, television and videotape form.» The phrase stresses the authorial presence of Shakespeare and, at best, remains neutral with regard to the authorship of the film-maker. However, film-makers do exercise authorial control, if not authorship. For example, «In *Prospero's Books* Greenaway recasts *The Tempest* within a filmic vocabulary that constantly acknowledges its competition with Shakespearean textuality while remaining faithful (or, perhaps more accurately, «faithful» to the play's received text» (Lanier 1996,194). Greenaway's choice of title is, of course, only one of the many resources that point to his authorial approach, but it is also a crucial one, and Lanier's discussion is splendidly clear on this point.

In the case of Luhrmann's movie, the title is rendered ambiguous by the cumulative possessives. Shakespeare appears as writer, no doubt, but as a writer who is also part of the text, of the fiction's name, at once claiming and disclaiming authorship for/from him and the film-maker. The problem is further complicated if we reconsider that many of Shakespeare's plays do not bear titles in a modern sense, and that therefore the ones that are given them open doors to speculate upon authorial issues from the giving as well as from the receiving end. Such plays have traditionally been identified—rather, historically named-by others than the author, mostly after the characters that appear on their title-pages, the complete texts of which are longer and/or variable: «*The Most Lamentable Tragedy of . . .*» etc. Since such is not the case with *The Tempest*, Greenaway's version makes the game of title and book even more relevant to his overt «competition with Shakespeare's textuality,» and Luhrmann's choice may be approached as one of the many disruptive items which point to the post-modern concept informing his film.

In this respect, Luhrmann's picture seems to move the opposite way from Greenaway's. In his prefatory «Note» to the published screenplay, the Australian director plays a similar palimpsestic hand, but in a covert fashion:

I've always wanted to do Romeo and Juliet.⁴ Shakespeare's plays touched everyone, from the street sweeper to the Queen of England. He was a rambunctious, sexy, violent, entertaining storyteller. We're trying to make this movie rambunctious, sexy, violent, and entertaining the way Shakespeare might have if he had been a filmmaker. We have not shied away from clashing low comedy with high tragedy, which is the style of the play, for it's the low comedy that allows you to embrace the very high emotions of the tragedy . . .

Everything that's in the movie is drawn from Shakespeare's play. Violence, murder, lust, love, poison, drugs that mimic death, it's all there. (Luhrmann 1996, N.p.)

«It's all there,» indeed. That is, what «is drawn.» The authorial game is played to the point of making Us wonder whether «We» signifies «collaborative art» or Majestic Plural-«collaborative» begging the additional questions: Luhrmann & Co.?, or Luhrmann and Shakespeare? *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* is not unlike other productions which have both proceeded and diverged from the conventional delivery, performance or representation of the shakespearean text-conspicuously, yes, *Prospera's Books*. Yet, and more importantly, it is unlike them in that they have been released and received as products of «avant-garde» artists pointedly assuming a differing stand, while Luhrmann's movie is an avowedly industrial product essaying an ambiguous formal approach which does not escape the constraints of what constitutes a «complete version.» In the end, the assimilation of the playwright's name to the title makes it hard to sustain the view that a «complete version» is not, at once, a «depleted» one. Hence, how could a version, even a «complete» one, avoid being a palimpsest, even of a previous version, for instance, of a previous film?

Judging from the title and the «Note,» Luhrmann appears to make no claim that his film is an adaptation, a term which, in Pilkington's view, «put[s] film-makers at risk;» nor does he characterize it so that we may feel free to label it «an obvious re-writing,» the kind of product over which «few critics worry» (1994, 164). Rather, despite his apparent off-handedness in identifying what stuff his film is made on, Luhrmann seems to mean what he says above: that he has «done» Shakespeare's book as Shakespeare would have «had he been a filmmaker»-those things are «all there.» What is missing, to be sure, is a whole lot of text, as some observant (though somewhat colloquial) scholar would say. On the basis of Pilkington's careful calculations-which show that Zeffirelli's

Romeo and Juliet includes only about thirty-five percent of a standard Shakespeare text (1994, 165)-Luhrmann's pruning probably outdoes the former scissor-hands champion. The Australian director has opted for a radical approach to what may be «done» to/with a shakespearean text for the production of a movie, without even suggesting that his work is not Shakespeare's. Deliberately or not, the longer and certainly bolder history of adapting, cutting, re-assigning, re-writing, and what you will, for the stage (translations included) seems to have interacted with the director's imagination in order to make a «certain text» be «all there.»⁵ At least «all» that Luhrmann mentions, especially «the very high emotions ... »

This stress on emotion and the concomitant popularity and commercial success of Luhrmann's movie⁶ are part of a schizotomic connection between the post-modern film and the early-modern book, with a necessary stop at the late-modern 1968 film. A useful index to this is David Gates's commonplace but accurate conclusion to his quick remarks on Luhrmann's movie: «This is the play that's always made young people feel that Shakespeare was their secret ally; if Luhrmann has done nothing else, he's saved that bond for one more generation» (1997, 46). The moral of the tale seems to be that, unaware of theoretical implications, at the receiving end of the *Romeo and Juliet*⁷ industrial-artistic chain there is not a montaignesque *suffisant lecteur* but a marketing target: the adolescent who is, at once, material source and consumer of this film. The problem of authorship with respect to the «precious book of love» has an industrial angle.

* * *

In the brief period of three years since the publication of Davies and Wells's *Shakespeare and the Moving Image* (1994), two other controversial films made from Shakespeare's plays were released: Kaufman's *Tromeo and Juliet* and Loncraine's *Richard III* (1996)-as well as all the other well-known items in the impressively long list, of course. Those two movies, variously and rapidly received as «post-modern cinema» together with Luhrmann's and Peter Greenaway's palimpsests, seem to confirm Davies and Wells's argument that one of the reasons why «television had displaced cinema as the photographic medium for bringing Shakespeare to the modern audience» was that «Cinema had arrived at an artistic self-consciousness.» The same cannot be said, however, of the explanation they immediately offer as a sort of natural *sequitur*: «In responding to the rival attractions of domestic television, cinema strove to cultivate or to target more limited audiences, and Shakespearean film was no exception» (xi).

Although it is true that Kaufman's creature is not exactly an audience-oriented «feature» film, the rest of the industrial productions, particularly Loncraine's and Luhrmann's, and, more conspicuously, Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996)-a

«full-text,» «straightforward,» big-budget, star-crammed enterprise-have reached the level of success that the industry requires to keep the cash flowing. The «renaissance of Shakesperian cinema» that Davies and Wells suggested we could be witnessing after 1994 (xii). seems to have taken place much faster than expected, and with an unprophesied financial **promise**. This success is partly due, no doubt, to the fact that these three films are based on plays very adaptable to the ticket-buyer's needs; but a good part is due to the boom **itself**, and another to careful marketing, which in the case of Lurhmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* has much to do with targeting the teenager moviegoers and their fickle hearts.⁵

The problem of how much an author must bend to the demands and whims of Master/Mistress Revenue is not new, nor was it irrelevant in early modern times. Throughout the history of artistic production, sound finances have never been to the detriment of prolific careers. Doubtless, it is a bold-and successful-artistic move to cast Billy **Crystal** and Robin Williams in a film of *Hamlet* which also strongly advertises the fact that it is a four-hour-long picture including «Shakespeare's full text.» As artistic risk, the casting of these actors in an «immortal **play**» is counterbalanced, however, by the **fact** that it is also a financially smart move if construed, instead, as the inclusion of *popular comedians* (a venerable stage tradition, by the by). Crystal and Williams's appeal-nay, their mere presence, since one is tempted to see just what they are doing there-may have contributed to attract a good number of spectators. Also, in this particular case artistic risk is likewise counterbalanced by what might be tenned a calculated exploitation of some **coiummers'** seasonal need for a whiff of «high culture:» many ticket-buyers are actually attracted by the promise of hearing «**all**» those «words, words, **words.**» **Indeed**, no one should miss the opportunity to know Shakespeare in the very flesh of his Art, and what is best, played, not re-played, mind you, by the foremost shakespearean actor of our day. So there is also much of a bold market-wise move here, **the kind that justifies the use of the word «creative»** on the door to the «Creative **dept.**» of an advertising firm.

Much of what is done withto Shakespeare's «precious books» when re-played as films, as well as much of what is debated around the same, depends increasingly on strictly practical problems pertaining to the hybrid status of the medium into which they are translated, as much as on the decreasing **acesibility** of their verbal matter and on the commercial demands which must be met. Thus, even though that Branagh's move to use a «complete text» may be to the liking of some seekers of the lost Bard, one is forced to wonder if it can actually be to the satisfaction of whoever seriously objects to excessive editing, adapting or re-writing of Shakespeare for the stage and screen-«excessive»being yet another cue for debate, of course. Branagh's choice could very well be construed as a

strategy of saturation also foregrounding the historical depletion of the Bard's books, a positive proof of the growing inaccessibility of his words as words by negative implication. This Hamlet-unabridged-on-screen could be a funereal piece: a sort of swansong exhumation of, and wake for, the bodies historically strewn across the shakespearean stage, more than appropriately summarized in this the best known-all knowledge being relative-and most popular, yet awe-inspiring, Book by The Bard.

Moreover, such a feat takes the respectable form of a «complete» *recording* in a medium capable of surviving for all times. But surely no Shakespeare scholar will fail to see that such a *coup de-movie-théâtre* entails a lot more than merely «playing Shakespeare as should be;» otherwise, why the re-setting, etc.? If it looks like Branagh is «doing» Shakespeare, more interestingly, Branagh is «doing» Branagh «doing» Shakespeare. Branagh's Hamlet cannot be regarded-and it will not be so among perceptive critics-simply as an attempt at totalizing preservation. The «complete text» is interrogated, not sacralized, from the performing end of the XXth century's most characteristic *art/medium*, through the fabrication of a neutral zone for the performance/negotiation that the contemporary medium itself enables to exist. If Branagh's *Hamlet* is (which it is not, nor could be) «the complete» book, it is so only inasmuch as it plays the fiction of being a book including, as if by default, all the books ever made, performed, written and yet unborn bearing the title *Hamlet*. Partly, the fiction of Branagh's «complete book» is that it could only be a dead repetition of *whichever Hamlet*: the serial of all serials on the Sad Prince of Denmark.

È il caso, nei mass media, del film commerciale, delle comic strips, della musica da baUo e -appunto- del cosiddetto serial televisivo, dove se ha l'impressione di leggere, vedere, ascoltare sempre qualcosa di nuovo mentre, in parole povere, ci viene sempre raccontata la stessa storia.
(Eco 1985, 126)

Shakespeare «complete» is Shakespeare without author, without Branagh or someone else-without Shakespeare, too.

Hence, it might be more profitable to think about Branagh's latest film-or Lührmann's, for that matter-along the lines of Lanier's lucid exploration of *Prospero's Books* -that is, with the view that «In many ways, the cinema has more readily taken up the challenge of textual authority ... »(1996, 191). To be sure, *Prospero's Books* was not released as a «season» movie, nor was it intended to cater to any audience, but offered to viewers primarily interested in Greenaway's work-and not so much in Shakespeare's. Thus it cannot be accused of, nor perversely praised for, doing Shakespeare «wrong»—or of un-doing him—for the audience-pleasing motives that allegedly drive Zeffirelli's works, or that may

be sunmsed behind the all-out marketing strategies applied to Luhrmann's film. One enjoyable feature of Lanier's discussion is the way in which he underscores the complications and consequent de-complications of the Shakespeare-film affair implicit in the very cinematic notion of the film-director as *auteur*. At the beginning of the central body of his essay, Lanier makes a passing but meaningful reference to Jean-Luc Godard (193), thus opening his solid assessment of Greenaway's film with a reminder that the English artist's work may be richly historicized within the frame of the meaningfully mid-century French contribution.

Within this unspoken frame, the exchange between post-modern *auteur* and early-modern author⁹ becomes a site for the interplay of unstable Chinese-box-like acts of art and critical discourse:

Taking Prospero's books as his point of departure, Greenaway uses The Tempest to meditate upon the status of Shakespeare in an age of electronic performance. By problematizing the oppositions among text, performance, and film, that meditation produces a self-consciously hybrid form for Shakespearean performance and draws our attention to many of the unarticulated premises and practices of contemporary performance criticism. (195)

In the scenario of *auteur vis-à-vis* author, then, some of the major issues raised as Shakespeare-done-wrong-in-film lose a good deal of their articulating grounds. *Prospero's Books*, for instance, may not be approached primordially as Greenaway «doing» Shakespeare, but as Greenaway doing Greenaway. The film is nowhere inscribed as a «straightforward» performance of the Shakespeare text. Instead, Greenaway «puts before us Prospero's act of reciting and writing down what will eventually become the text of *The Tempest*» (Lanier 1996, 195). Greenaway's cinematic *oeuvre* works as both dissection and reading-to-be-done.

The question of «Who's Doing Whom?» is relevant to any attempt that may be called post-modern, since one of the issues is precisely that film-makers «doing») Shakespeare are often accused of doing themselves too much, perhaps without consideration of the fact that the medium—a mass-medium no doubt—of itself entails a problem in terms of authorship, both because it always uses/resorts to other media to build its own, and because, though collaborative—a melting pot of The Arts, this most American of arts—it nonetheless promotes *auteur-ism*. This «caught-in-the-middle»-frankly comic-status of cinema allows for the ebb-and-flow of Shakespeare film criticism which demands a sort of chimerical sameness with book without noting that such demand condemns the book to the looping hell of *répétition [sans] difference*, and condemns the medium to a passive role. As if to supplement this from the receiving end, before entering the movie-theatre, the spectators of *Prospero's Books* were given handouts where

the already existing content-in-the-shaping of Greenaway's film, *The Tempest*, was summarized. There was in this an assumption that spectators probably familiar **with** the Greenaway canon were unfamiliar with the Shakespeare book to the point of requiring a quick briefing on it. These handouts were thus similar to programs-say, to the RSC programs-which for the benefit of the audience include a synopsis of the play, and other materials relevant to it.¹⁰

Such handing out of textual information in preparation for the film-maker's «meditat[ion] upon the status of Shakespeare in an age of electronic performance,» constitutes another acknowledgement of the historical depletion of Shakespeare's books. In the case of Greenaway's film, however, the inaccessibility of the book was stressed-or at least the fact that Shakespeare's plays are «**known**» to spectators mostly as oscillating encyclopaedic entries was-as a part of the artistic process and of its critical interaction with authorship. Branagh's *Hamlet*, instead, as far as its claim of representing a «**full**» text is concerned, plays the authorial hand to the limit of re-inscribing what can only be a historical conflation as an all-binding and legitimizing principle, something far from being an issue where the *film-maker* is assumed as *auteur*; e.g., *Glengarry Glenn Ross*, *Six Degrees of Separation*, or *The Crucible*. In every one of these, where the author of the «**book**» served as screenwriter in close collaboration with the director, the cinema performance retains a prevalent status, and re-confirms something that translators (Wyatt included) have known for a long time: that performance needs not be anything but its unavoidably unstable self.

The emphasis on serving the text makes Branagh's film a self-aware exercise and comment on the depletion of authorial power-a **two-sided** one. In their particular approaches, both Greenaway's palimpsest and Branagh's overdone re-inscription are intellectually challenging tokens of dissidence which address depletion and promote critical debate, the life of the «**book**.» How should one look back to the «**book**» if not through the «**books**» in and around it, the books «**in the series**»? Or as Bco puts it, much more to the point, «**In che misura la serialità dei mass media è diversa da quella di molte forme artistiche del passato**'] In che misura non **ci** sta proponendo delle forme d'arte che, rifiutate da B'estetica 'moderna', inducono a diverse conclusioni una estetica detta 'posmoderna'!» (1985. 126-127). Lurhmann's «**book**» claims to be William Shakespeare's, title and «**Note**» once more being blatant documents of indeterminacy with respect to authorship. Maybe it is because Author, as in the case of Greenaway's film, is a notion that can only mean from within the Book. If Greenaway makes of *Prospero's Books* a film on the writing of *The Tempest*, Lurhmann, in the palimpsestic mode as well, makes one about «**nothing but dreams**» that someday this «**lamentable tragedy**» may get written. And since for the moment there really isn't time for that, at least it must be filmed: movies take a predictable time to

happen, something which reading cannot guarantee to the screen-wise, time-saving audiences in the post-modern world.

In a brief discussion of Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*, Roger Manvell noted that the Italian director, «careless of the lines, gave the parts to two attractive newcomers, Leonard Whiting (aged sixteen) and Olivia Hussey (aged fifteen) with little thought as to whether they could compass the poetry or not.» Of course, Manvell was re-playing the ace of traditional objections; and his verdict was severe: in Zeffirelli's film «everything is done to beautify the appearance and enliven the action at the expense of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry» (1979, 99). It is not difficult to imagine what Manvell considered to be the point in «Shakespeare's dramatic poetry,» since his complaint rests on considering that a «naturalistic» approach to Shakespeare can only be to the detriment of what makes the bard The Bard, and possibly, as a matter of course, with an implicit supporting quarrel against Zeffirelli's restricted use of the «original» text. Perhaps instead of *seeing what he saw*-an «emphasis on youth, on first love, on the tribulation of adolescent innocence sacrificed to the evil rivalries of maturity»: things easily perceived from *experiencing* Zeffirelli's film (*cf* Pilkington and Levenson *apud* Pilkington 1994, 172)—Manvell was expecting to hear what he had often heard-«the romantic essence of poetry which characterizes this comparatively early work by Shakespeare»(Manvell 1979, 99): things pertaining to a more mediated, scholarly, pre-conception of what the experience of Shakespeare's «book» in Zeffirelli's or anyone else's hands *should be*.

Despite Judi Dench's reminder that «Many of the critics were rather stuffy about [Zeffirelli's 1960 production]» (Anon. 1996. 45)-where he first essayed the strategies which would be applied in his movie-the Italian director's treatment of the lines was not in all cases so negatively received. Again in Dench's report, Zeffirelli told his cast that «The verse doesn't really matter. Chuck the verse out ... » Nonetheless, Kenneth Tynan, for instance, saw and heard, and then said, the following:

Franco Zeffirelli's production of Romeo and Juliet is a revelation, even perhaps a revolution. Nobody on stage seems to be aware that he is appearing in an immortal tragedy. or indeed in a tragedy of any kind; instead, the actors behave like any ordinary human beings, trapped in a quandary whose outcome they cannot foretell. Handled thus realistically, it is sometimes said. Shakespeare's essential quality gets lost. I passionately demur. What gets lost is not Shakespeare but the formal, dehumanized stereotype that we have so often made of him. It is likewise urged that Signor Zeffirelli robs Shakespeare of his poetry;

but this argument is valid only if one agrees with those bUnkered zealots who insist that poetry is an arrangement of sounds, instead of an arrangement of words. Last Tuesday I heard every syllable,' meaning and character were wedded, and out of their interaction poetry arose. (1976,305)

«Handled thus realistically, it is sometimes said, Shakespeare's essential quality gets lost. I passionately demur.» Coming from the man who gave us both *O Calcutta!* and the script for Polansky's *Macbeth*, Tynan's praise of the naturalistic approach, and his definition of poetry, sound debatable enough. But coupled with Manvell's views these opinions reveal how much the conflicts around the «proper way» to translate the Book into performance of any kind depend on what may be termed the critic's «agenda of expectations,»¹¹ necessarily conversant with the director's agenda-albeit that, as seems to be the case with Manvell, the conversation is less dialogical than one-sidedly pre-scripted. Manvell's assessment (and the like) can be thus described as the kind where Shakespeare, unlike the overwhelming majority of writers whose works become sources for films, is not merely an authority but a canonized supremacy in command of performative realization. What it cannot be, however, is contested, since it subscribes a univocal-which amounts to say modern, linearly, tectonic-stand allowing no room for alternative approaches. Such stand, then, likewise constitutes a case of depletion of Shakespeare's «book,» for it constrains productivity to a prescribed minimum.

The issue has been tackled so often, that it may be more profitable to observe that, for all the stability of his views, in the same paragraph Manvell considers it «the gain» that the teenager title-players «looked the parts in the eyes of contemporary youth in the audience.» There is some irony in this, to be sure, but it is noteworthy because it foregrounds another point to consider every time the «precious book of love» gets re-played as a «major motion picture»: its appeal to massive audiences, mainly young. The passion in Tynan's «passionately» is the same as in the missing second part of Zeffirelli's words to the cast half-quoted above: «The verse doesn't really matter. Chuck the verse out, and do it with an incredible passion.» Zeffirelli's film, notwithstanding its alleged flaws-among which reelaborations of Manvell's opinion abound-was and remains a popular movie. Such popularity hinges mainly on the «passion» he aims at, a passion that almost thirty years later finds a rival and a complement, an alternative «bond-saver.» A year after its release, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* seems to have challenged the earlier version for the title of youth-caterer #1. If Zeffirelli, until now, has been regarded as «popularizer-in-chief» (Pilkington 1994, 164), maybe the time has come for him to hand the sceptre over to-

Luhrmann.¹² Not only **has** the Australian director managed to score big both in the box-office as in the «war between scholars and directors» (164), but he has done so without claiming to have tried for anything less or other than filming *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, as witness his title and his «**Note.**»

Luhrmann chose the right play to succeed in business. In the long run, is there anyone who actually thinks that the «precious book of love» would be better as a stage or screen product without some serious editing, pruning, re-writing, adapting, or even axplay? This also **begs** the question: is there anyone who actually thinks that *Romeo and Juliet* will be a *Romeo and Juliet* without some or much authorial trespassing? The play by Shakespeare (i.e., anyone of the possible confections thus conventionally labeled) is long and at times frankly tedious or, at least, repetitious and of an irregular quality (e.g. II. iv; III. ii; IV. v, etc.).¹³ To my knowledge, even by traditional **standards**, *Romeo and Juliet* has never really made it to the scholars' top shelf, notwithstanding its solid status as a favorite object of performance, as opposed to its relatively low interest as an object of study.¹⁴ I wonder if one of the reasons for this is not precisely **that** it is closer to depletion as text than it is to depletion as film: being a fixture in western tradition, its basic anecdote is «**well**» known to everybody, even to those have never read it, nor ever will. The «**story**» of the two adolescents who died because their parents' strife made their love impossible-however wrong this summary may be-is thus «**complete**» in the minds of **all**. In terms of reception, the text is curiously depleted *before and after* performance of any kind, except, maybe, a radically dissident one. Is Luhrmann's one such?

The productivity of any **shakespearean** book(text)-also **well** depleted by the history of criticism-far outdoes its possibilities of particular representation, thereby necessitating selectivity and interpretive commitment from directors. The case of *Romeo and Juliet* is most interesting in that, as a series of indices to performance, its textual complexities are either too abstruse to bother with, too unpropitious for translation into the visual-performative language, or overwhelmed by its topicalities, the same that Luhrmann overtly identifies as what he has «**drawn** all there.)) Granted, one of the merits of his film is the emphasis placed, with a post-modernistically prescribed grand-gignol-kitsch touch, on several interesting features of the play sometimes **ignored**, repressed or only subtly brought to life in modern productions: e.g., Mercutio as Drag Queen (Porter 1988); Juliet freed from fatal coyness and helplessness by admitting for her a stature closer, say, to Alice Arden's (as approached by Belsey 1990), or a status consistent with Ryan's discussion of «**virtual** entombment made fearful reality») (1995, 85). But once some of these features are acknowledged-and they all are so «**by the book**»—either the «**bond-saver**» is itself saved, or lukewarm attempts at socially charged irony fall into naivete (as in the last scene

of Bogdanov's 1987 RSC production),¹⁵ or you end up watching *Tromeo and Juliet*, a case of depletion by laxative. The question is, then, whether Luhrmann's film can be said to «rise above a common bound:» that of subservience to the Bard and the Book.

* * *

One conspicuously post-modern **detail** in the opening sequence of *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* went undescribed at the beginning of these random notes. While the voice-over recites the Prologue in the thunder of music, we continue to see aspects of the city, more tabloid front pages, riots, and, eventually, some characters who will play major parts in this book-film. These characters are introduced to us—as others will be—by means of hold-and-freeze shots bearing a name and role tag: «Fulgencio Capulet,» captioned «**Juliet's Father;**» «Gloria Capulet,» captioned «**Juliet's Mother;**» «**Ted Montague,**» captioned... etc. Now we realize that the voice is not only reciting the Prologue but also declaiming it in the received «dramatic» style of the anonymous voice in the rushes—for the sequence plays as a quick promotional built into the actual film. We finally arrive at the slow opening of the door to Juliet's tomb, but only vaguely: surely we do not want to see much of the Big Scene which we nonetheless already «**know.**» As the eyes of a half-seen Romeo look inside, and we are allowed a peep at the Grand Finale, an explosion of fireworks in the dark sky (how appropriate) takes us to a quick shot after quick shot preview of other highlights, ending in a black screen bearing the iconic title in white. Prior to the film «**proper,**» we have seen the short «Corning Attractions» version of *The Movie*, which is the re-enactment of *The Book*, which has been presented as *The News ...* which is really *The Old and Great No-News*, for, don't we «**know it all**»?

The most important implication, however, is still behind. The characters will be playing characters: hold-and-freeze on clear **view** of Fulgencio Capulet as . . . hold-and-freeze on clear view of Gloria Capulet as . . . the roles are playing roles. The same happens later at the gas station, where we realize that these are also cornie-book characters. But the impression that the opening sequence is a preview of the film may be complicated further. The style is likewise that of a quick TV «**promo,**» announcing the two-hours special or the week-long series on the «**Star-Crossed Lovers**» who Live and Die a Life of Love and Hate during the two-minute warning **break** on Channel 11. To the virtual TV fiend herein implied, Fulgencio and Gloria and Ted are well-known stars from other soap-operas and similar «**dramatic**» TV features who will bring us the **Movie-of-the-Week** re-enactment of this tragic story. An additional observation by Umberto Eco can play the role of Fitting Footnote, then:

... con il fenomeno dei serials televisivi troviamo un nuovo concetto di «infinità del testo»; il testo assume i ritmi e i tempi di quella stessa quotidianità entro a la quale (e finalizzato a la quale) si muove. Il problema non è di riconoscere che il testo seriale varia indefinitamente sullo schema di base (e in questo senso può essere giudicato dal punto di vista dell'estetica «moderna»). Il vero problema è che ciò che interessa non è tanto la variabilità quanto il fatto che sullo schema si possa variare all'infinito. E una variabilità infinita ha tutte le caratteristiche della ripetizione, e pochissime dell'innovazione. Quello che qui viene celebrato è una sorta di vittoria della vita sull'arte, con il risultato paradossale che l'era dell'elettronica, invece d'accentuare il fenomeno della choc, dell'interruzione, della novità e della frustrazione delle attese, «produrrebbe un ritorno del continuum, di ciò che è ciclico, periodico, regolare.» (1985, 140-141)16

As suggested above, post-modernism points to the disruption and depletion of the Book but also of reception; in Eco's words, to «the paradoxical consequence» that «instead of stressing shock and disruption, the era of electronics produces a return of continuum.» The disruptive effect is itself obliterated as soon as it is received: the «book» repeats itself even as it is being disrupted.

This characteristic is at the heart of the reception of Luhrmann's film, the new *Crush*. For my classroom audiences, for instance, Luhrmann's version was an explosive eye-opener to the existence of a Shakespeare which they could afterwards enjoy and follow from/«by the book» better than usual, however not in a strictly intellectual sense: the film offered links to the text but promoted no productivity beyond topicality. In the process, however, I was re-educated to appreciate the aesthetics of the 90's very young. Although my academically empowered position apparently implied an intellectual advantage with regard to the reading of the new film as, say, Post-Modern Item, in the end I had to adjust to the fact that what to me was Item, to them was IT: i.e. what I could perceive from informed re-play and re-direction, my students received as experience and re-enactment. This difference in reception may be examined through comparison between Luhrmann's post-modern movie and Zeffirelli's modern film. Although both ultimately look back to the «book of love» and signify «by the book,» Luhrmann's film reads as if written on top of Zeffirelli's, and, to a point, it disrupts some assumptions clearly made by the Italian director while trying to «document» his personal construction of «Shakespeare's Italy» even to the point of using *cinéma-vérité* techniques. On the other hand, however, Luhrmann seems to move away from his predecessor more in terms of formal dissent than in a decisively critical fashion: his «doing» barely un-does.

In the last sequence of *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, for example, we see the dead lovers not taken *into* the church but *out* of it, and *down*, not *up*, the steps—the architecture of which makes it hard to regard Luhrmann's choice of a church with an entrance similar to Zeffirelli's just as a coincidence. Then the bodies are placed inside an ambulance that will take them away from the square. Moreover, in Luhrmann's film the church and «Capel's monument» are shown to be one and the same place, a fact that un-dissociates the site for the sacred <<incorporation of two in one» from the «detestable maw» of death. Instead, Zeffirelli emphasizes this distinction by stressing opposite directions and different places: down to the tomb, up to the church. In Luhrmann's view, the order of motion is inverted, and so is the space in which we might, but not necessarily will, «have more talk of these sad things:» his characters remain outside the church, in the open square before it, while Zeffirelli's march in pairs into the church, up the steps from the square. Apparently, Luhrmann's film makes a point against Zeffirelli's. While the 1996 ending leaves the people of Verona Beach in confusion and helpless separation, locked out of the place of spiritual comfort and mourning, and detached from the audience, the 1968 one makes the people of Verona join us inside the movie-house. The silent procession into the church first takes the bodies towards us, and then *away* from our view, to reveal contrite enemies who two by two enter a place that *compells* contrition: if the movie-house is inside the church, then *we* are *in* the domain of *prescribed mourning*, the same place which we ordinarily enter in orderly fashion for ordinary acts of usually pointless repetition. In a morning deprived of sunlight Zeffirelli opens the doors looking for meaningful closure. In Verona Beach, meanwhile, the enemies stand in silence, in the midst of chaos and helplessness as the smoggy day breaks, apart from the audience: they (and we) have left behind the illusion of closure.

In the latter case, the suggestion is of continuing separation, an atmosphere in which «talk of things» is hardly possible; in the former, the apparent conclusion is of reunion to mourn the dead lovers inside the church. But a possible interpretation is that the «talk of sad things» inside the church cannot be but an institutionally sanctioned one: if the bodies go inside, and the «Talk,» too, we are equally moving towards a depleted text inside an ideologized context. Luhrmann's scene yells disruption but upholds an equally fragile and equally simple emotional conclusion. Specifically allusive is the fact that Captain Prince says the line «All are punished» twice, like the «Italian Prince» before him—the second time just as loud and clear. In the new film, however, he moves away from the church, its steps distinctly filled with reporters. What we see are impersonal shots, footage for the evening news; and then the frame within a frame within the frame where the anchorwoman delivers the closing lines in the same monotone with which we started until the screen turns black again—maybe we are ready to

see the new chapter, which will be the same chapter. In method, the scenes diverge. But there is a son of **concurrency-as-continuity** on top of divergence in terms of statement-the reconciliation of the enemies being then and now way beyond effective belief, the bookish golden statues too far an issue for our reception ... and even for **Zeffirelli** ... and long before. .

This concurrency-continuity takes place in spite that Lührmann seems to have made it a point in his agenda to remove his work from the earlier version. In a scene from Act I, the «Italian» Romeo takes his gaunt Mercutio close and appeases his finally inarticulate *confusion* at the end of the Queen Mab speech; in a very similar way, the post-modern Romeo approaches his post-modern drag-queen friend and confronts his finally inarticulate *rage*. In both, the cue back to (momentary) calm is the «talk of dreams, children of an idle brain,» which is to say, a reflection «by the book»'s characters upon themselves, Shakespeare's «vain fantasies.» But Zeffirelli places his Boys at the ubiquitous yard of his church, while Lührmann dis-places his to his ubiquitous Nowhere, the ruinous stage-proscenium of the abandoned movie-theatre: he takes them away from the space where they were placed «by the book» of the former director, and leaves them to an enactment of raw emotions where no film can come to the rescue, or to save any bonds.

Emotion is **crust** and core in both films. The conspicuously «dramatic» or character-underscoring use of music should suffice to support this: at least at first hearing, Nino Rota's score, as well as the multiple-sourced soundtrack of the newer film, play to heighten or to punctuate according to the particular feeling at hand (or heart). Furthermore, suspense, the always dependable emotional booster, thrives on musical craftiness in each case. But while suspense is operational in Zeffirelli's, it is ironically overdramatized in Lührmann's, and contributes to the obliteration of shock and to the prevalence of repetition. The music in Lührmann's film is leit-motif, yes, but post-modernly so-poundingly repetitious, as current pop, rave and dance music is. The most recurrent phrase is the ugly and unsurprisingly «**meaningful**» «I am, I am a pretty piece of flesh, I am . . . » which is closely followed in the chans by «I will die for you, I will kill for you, I will etc, for you,» « . . . we do what we want, we do what we want,» and «Love me, love me, say that you love me.»¹⁷ If anything the performers of these lyrics transmit, it is a numbness only matched by their look of permanent and inexplicably exhausted distraction.^{H!}

Zeffirelli's quaint inclusion of the quaint«What is a Youth?» song is thereby rendered even more trite after visiting the powerful dance-club that Lührmann fabricates for his work. In other words, the inscription of a trite modern song in the context of renaissance imagery, an act of counterfeit by Zeffirelli, is rendered superfluous and disrupted by the exhibition of the essential depletion of its lyrics

by Luhrmann, who confronts them with an obsessively reiterative set of equally trite-and overtly so—«sound and fury.» «È il caso di espressioni che «fingo-no»di essere sempre diverse per trasmettere invece sempre lo stesso contenuto fondamentale» (Eco 1985, 126). In tum, this contrast-continuity points to a larger one, imbedded in setting.

* * *

The choice of Mexico City and other parts of the Mexican Republic—namely, the town of Boca del Rfo, next to the port of Veracruz, on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico—for the shooting of *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* has caused some speculation as to its bearing on the cinematic text. The first thing to consider, perhaps, is that Mexico was not the site originally planned for shooting, but became an alternative to Miami or Los Angeles mainly because of budget constraints. Once that happened, however, our monstrous capital and the iconography of Mexican life and religiousness seem to have taken a strong hold on the director's and on the art director's imagination. There is much of our urban, small-town, church, and home imagery in this film, to be sure, but it foregrounds otherness and foreignness even to a Mexican. Such imagery is mainly used in seemingly random and highly derivative combinations—surely to a great extent as a consequence of fascination leading to effective improvisation—towards the achievement of a rarified atmosphere, instead of being significantly specified as Mexican.¹⁹

Luhrmann's strategy here remains what it is with the music: disruption and depletion through saturation. The Mexican element is only present as an overelaborate display of signs that inundate our visual field to ultimately actualize non-signifiers; such signs act as vehicles for un-documentation. In the sequence at the gas station, for instance, Tybalt delivers the Book's meaningfully ironic line «Turn ... and look upon thy death,» as he opens his jacket to reveal his guns. But what he pointedly reveals is a splendid vest bearing the image of the Sacred Heart of Christ almost *wearing* the guns: such is the disrupted image of «death» Benvolio and the spectators look at. A strategy of fragmentation is at work. While the «precious book» subscribes the Elizabethan capitalized Death—and while Zeffirelli, in tum, lets it pass by quite casually—Luhrmann's emphasis on this fascinating icon makes for a fragmented reception: ambiguous shock turned admirable comic-book art-work. A reverberation of this ambiguity runs through the specifically Mexican religious iconography, of course, but not without an additional twist that establishes an unspecific connection with a context of actual and irrational violence (a street-gang LA.-com-Miami type), seasoned with a cinematic-depleting overdramatized gesture of gun-worshipping by Tybalt as he falls on his knees to kiss the gun before demonstrating his deadly kitsch Tarantino-



Figure 1 Photograph by Felipe en (1927)

meets-Rodríguez marksmanship. The image of the Sacred Heart of Christ, therefore, though legitimately Mexican (and essentially Italian, by the way) acts as a saturated icon which is better approached in cross-cultural terms. The vest is actually the hand-made product of a fine Mexican designer, but it may be better described as a derivative elaboration of basic Mexican religious iconography with a powerful Chicano overdrive. The same may be said, with a modern-post-modern twist, of course, of the low-rider interpretation of the Capulet Boys' blue car, as well as of their clothing and footwear. Chicano style, in this sense, seeks affirmation of cultural identity through the preservation by magnification of popular traditions. The boots, thus, are a sort of overwrought, because overframed, version of kitsch in the Mexico-U.S. border taste. Tattoos and hairstyles, as well as eye-wear, should be more profitably referred to that amazing and intriguing area of cultural clash and redefinition yet to be reckoned with.

Additionally, the Mexican interpretation of the effusively dramatic Catholic imagery is the result of a long and complex conversation with Counter-Reformation Italian and Spanish styles, as witness the work of Francisco Albert, a Spanish-Mexican artist who designed and made the monumental figure of the Sacred Heart of Mary that presides the film from the top of the church.²⁰ Other instances relate more closely to the strictly Mexican urban and provincial imagery and landscape. At the ball

of the Capulets, the skeleton disguise for Abra²¹ is a curious adaptation of a rather common Halloween piece to the historical tradition—and myth—of the Mexican humorous disregard for death, and to one of its conspicuous icons, the naked skull. Originally intended to appear as «a demon» in the screenplay (Pearce and Luhrmann 1996, 50), Abra wears the full body disguise of the skeleton with a Mexico-U.S.-border cowboy hat and boots, as well as skull-like make-up, thus alluding to our traditions concerning the commemoration of the *Día de muertos* (All Saints), and to a million different possibilities of visual reference; one example, to cite perhaps the most obvious, would be the work of the superb engraver José Guadalupe Posada, whose *calaveras* or *calacas* have been reinterpreted a thousand times, either directly by the people who participate in such celebrations (Figure 1), or by other artists (Figure 2).

The substitution of *Abra* «the demon» by *Abra la calaca* o *la hieslida* (a feminine icon of Death, a gendered concept in our language and culture) in an overtly male *flor/dio* outfit is a token of the impact of the location and its «crazy» implications in the already kitsch imagination of the film-maker, as well as of the influence of his able and creative Mexican crew. The tradition of All Saints, with its profuse offerings, is also re-elaborated in the decoration of the church as "Capel's monument" with the bonus of the strictly *fill-de-siecle* touch of the neon light crosses, a somewhat recent addition to our religious paraphernalia. The flower carpet therein also used is not only a fine Mexican artisanal tradition, but it extends to Guatemala and El Salvador. The actual, more conservative, decorations of cemeteries (Figure 3) provide an idea of the more common, though equally gorgeous, visual display during this religious celebration, which also involves complex pre-hispanic connotations beyond grasp for and from the film.



Figure 2: Dolores Guerrero-Cruil. «The Bride.» 1985. print

A seemingly particular but truly unspecific reference is the wild and ruthless drug-lord-like figure of Capulet, with his newly-rich ornate palace²³ and his cash-unlimited style of partying. Less identifiable to the foreigner's eye, instead- and clearly more interesting- is the presence of the Mexican (and also generally Caribbean, perhaps Cuban in origin) subculture of low-life night-clubs or "joints." Tybalt- disguise, for example, is extraordinarily close to the outfit of the Devil dancing with the tripper in Figure 4, which is a still from *Tivoli*, a 70's film by Alberto Isaac, documenting a famous mid-century vaudeville theatre in Mexico City. The provincial Gulf coast streets, billiards and *callillas* may be traced back to the numerous 1940-1960 films of *rumberas* (dancers of Afro-Caribbean music); or referred to more stylized, expressionistic, treatments, such as José Clemente Orozco's portraits of the clientele of such places, or the more recent work of Loren Elder (Figure 5), which captures the essential imagery of «joints» at the border between Mexico and the U.S.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Verona Beach should be so much of a no-land inhabited by no-people, complete with a Capulet who speaks with a



Figure 3: Decoration of a tomb on Día de los Muertos. photograph by Rubén Pax (1987)



Figure 4: *The Devil and the Stripper*, from *Tivoli* (1975) by Alberto Isaac

distinct Latin-though not necessarily Spanish- accell, and a Nurse who bears a more than passing resemblance to a Mexican «Nana» turned unspecified illegal alien- her dwelling-place included, a fine kits h rendering of a lower middle-class one-room apartment. The same may be said of the ruined movie-house of Sycamore Grove. The most distinctive feature of this «Forest of Love ickness» is a perfect correlative for what the film seeks and does with respect to its Mexican materials; it is depleted. The Mexican element, then, is wildly displayed (images of misery included), more than commented upon, thereby leaving untouched- a gesture to be appreciated- problems that could otherwise arise from an offhand meddling with a place and a culture that compell serious critical consideration. The presence of Mexican iconography is dovetailed to purposes of ironic mythologizing, and demands a series of metacinematic cross-cultural operations beyond the cope of the film. Both things render the Mexican element ultimately unspecific. And the profusion of multi-referential icons serves a very post-modern purpose: totalization becomes engulfed and ultimately obliterated in the obsessive reiteration of signs.

The variety of definitions of Verona Beach testifies to this. The CD-ROM version of *William Shakespeare's Rallio + Juliet* defines Verona Beach as a «mythical city» similar to Los Angeles or other contemporary cities in the world. Gates say, not inaccurately but at once debatably, that «while it evokes Rio, Mexico City, L.A. and Miami, it's absolutely Elizabethan» (1996, 46). An abstract from the 1997 SAA seminar on «Shakespeare and Film» sees it as an «imaginary South American Verona, a place of magical realism» (Lennox 1997). apparently overplaying a commonplace card pertaining to Latin American literature. H.R. Coursen's entry in anticipation of the film's release does mention that it is «set in

Mexico» (1996, 22), and in his additional brief note he derives from a report in a Mexico City newspaper that the picture «may incorporate a cross-cultural, instead of merely a cross-town, love affair. We will wait to see» (23). But Coursen's wait may have been in vain, for we cannot really «see» or tell: if Capulet is decidedly Latin, his wife is non-descript, and his daughter is definitely not Latin, among so many other things. And finally, the anonymous article in *The Ecologist* talks of «an imaginary American resort— 'Verona Beach' (1997, 81). This last definition, of course, distills a frankly European confusion. Yet all of these «hit it right» in that no one can pin setting or atmosphere down to other than an «imaginary place.» Luhrmann counteracts the conspicuous efforts of Zeffirelli to document the «Italian» element in Shakespeare's play by un-documenting his setting, by overplaying its fiction.

Still, both directors abide «by the book» in the textual deployment of architecture-as-book. The theme of imprisonment pervades Shakespeare's works: Hamlet's nutshell. Hermione's delivery of Perdita while in a dungeon, Richard II's descent to labyrinth and death-cell, etc., are actual and symbolic poetic-mates of Juliet's imprisonment. She will not be allowed to leave her father's house except to go to her other father' house or to Her Father's House. Walls and balconies to climb or to descend from testify to the central role of architecture in the «book of love.» As Ryan well puts it, this Book is a prison-book (1995, 78ft), and the architecture in Zeffirelli's film is carefully photographed to reflect this.

The tOwII seems to crowd and compress the characters so that the individual violence all the riots look like attempts to escape from a maze, and the briefly desened squares and streets provide a chance to breathe before the tension builds again to critical mass. Even the crane shots do not give a feeling of openness so much as the dwarfing of the characters in their monumental prisons. (Pilkington 1994, 172)



Figure 5: Loren Elder. *Untitled*, 1994. graphile on paper

Monumental is also the key with Luhmann; but in his case, again, disruption leading to continuity and repetition are the points.

The supersonic zooming to and from the face of the humongous statue of Christ at the circus in the opening sequence is the key to his treatment of the «monumental prisons;»²³ we are rapidly constrained by-nay, sucked into-the threatening urban landscape. In the post-modern world, one of the most conspicuous signs of the failure of the modern world to achieve its ideal of «progress» is precisely the depleted architecture of the un-cosmic city. The modern world tried to come up with places of perfect modern living: *Broadacre City*, *Prospective City*, *Turmstadt*, *Weltraumstadt*, *Cité Totale*, *Ville Solaire*, *Ciudad Jardín*, *Ciudad Satélite*, etc. But what emerged was the *New Babylon* (Schabert 1984, 1991. 23-24).

In Luhmann's film we see several important aspects of this quasi-cornie-book narrative of failure from the top of Christ's statue, or towards it, in full tilt or plunging foreshortened views, too. The arms of this solid-rock God are open to embrace his children-only they are also stressed as solid-rock and actually, not symbolically, incapable of any such thing. The same may be said of the statue of the Sacred Heart of Mary, which is even more materially determined, more indifferent, if possible: indifferently angular, almost bi-dimensionally cut against the sky, and absurdly/naturally unmoved in the middle of all this chaos, Her open arms are repeatedly alluded to, particularly in foreshortened shots of characters who either look up or go down with open arms-the gesture being seldom, if ever, corresponded. The emphatic use of helicopter shots makes the elevation of the Lady more noticeable, and the distance consequently bigger. The open arms, and even the openness of many vistas of the city, act more to dishearten than to foster hopes of freedom. During the chase, the helicopters and helicopter shots reiterate what the 90's urban dweller knows well: a chopper's scan light locates and isolates and makes you small and helpless. Just as in Zeffirelli's movie. But Luhmann, typically, goes further. The recurrence of billboards and dilapidated sites adds to the sense of unredeemable urban decay: Luhmann's Babylon is the undoing of City, Erewhon reverted to Nowhere. Out there there is violence and buildings destroyed beyond purpose; or, as is the case with Mantua, a wasteland where trailer-houses indicate that permanence is hopeless, and maybe unwanted-no venerable quaint and history-resilient renaissance small-towns for the post-modern director, thank you.

Inside, at The Ball, where there is no real, private, inside but crowd and tumult, The Kiss-that venerable sign that Shakespeare so well read and then re-inscribed in his Book from his copy of Castiglione's Book-is enclosed in the impersonally hurriedly improvised as private space of an elevator! The Ball, only naturally, is where the «interior decorator» Zeffirelli (pilkington 1994, 164) and the

«video-clip maker» Luhrmann express their visions of cinematic construction more frankly. Pearce and Lurhman call their «Capulet Mansion, an Italianate wonder of Florentine architecture» (1996, 30). Built on top of Shakespeare's Elizabethan-fictional Verona, Zeffirelli's carefully selected locations, all «genuinely» Italian, once more seem to transpire behind such description. The renaissance beauty of the Capulet Mansion in the «Italian» film is reinforced by fastidious lighting and geometrically coreographed dancing and grouping. Still, perhaps the most notable characteristic of Zeffirelli's *Ball* is that as he films the search of Romeo by Juliet, following her around the hall while the singer performs «What is a Youth?» we are made to visit a series of renaissance portraits of Verona's Best, a collection of serenely expressive Italian characters finely, at times luxuriously, and never tastelessly, dressed, who now and then play a visual pun on us. We see them as the tourist who calmly but continually moves from one painting to another in a museum, not really looking at them as much as at the beautiful Italian maid or lad there, too. Though some are masked, no one disrupts the homogeneity of this Hall of Taste. Zeffirelli's gallery is a reminder of the burden of artistic history that supports his claims on the play.

Luhrmann's reply is to cram his «Florentine» hall with: ghouls of all kinds; low-quality alcohol and other consumers of party-time-enhancing consumables; a satirically symmetrical renaissance composition and a cheesy coreography for a drag-queen act which is not even legitimately performed but lip-synched; a brutal confirmation of the incest between Lady (Gloria) Capulet and Tybalt which in Zeffirelli's version is merely, though interestingly, «a suggestion» (Pilkington 1994, 173); and so on. Everything yells out kitsch and carnival. And artistic inconsistency is stressed, both within-that is, in this costume party anybody is anything-and without-that is, here things happen, but not History, the ironized frame for this non-gallery.²⁴ The most important detail, however, is that, instead of being and remaining spectators of the exhibition, as with Zeffirelli, we perceive this wild party of Luhrmann as Romeo does: this is his point of view, trapped in the idle dream. No particular face is individuated, except for the ones we already know, and the only conspicuously XVI-xvIIth century character we see is a blur in black period outfit urinating in the men's room—a fitting comment. Here, where body is depleted of shame, Romeo perceives the presence of someone on the other side of the glass, someone who perceives him on this side. [Non]Architecture and [non]atmosphere, [non]setting, have taken us from the outside to the shaken inside of our Lover, who in a moment will meet The Lady—provided that he shakes off the effect of Queen Mab, The Drug. This he does, by submerging his face in water, just as Juliet did before. Now we may know the lovers, the stars of this show: indeed, the star-cross'd lovers of Luhrmann's zooming film.

* * *

Luhrmann has expressly rejected traditional shakespearean delivery: «I wanted to do it in a non-precious manner. What's called RP-received pronunciation-that round-voweled execution of Shakespeare, is a fashion of the 30's» (Gates 1996,46). But his move goes further, counterpointing Zeffirelli's much criticized «naturalism» with overdramatization, comic-book style. To Luhrmann's statement about the pronunciation of the «immortal words» from the book, Gates replies that «This sounds convincing until you see and hear how bad most of Luhrmann's actors are» (a remark which God knows how Sorvino, Dennehy, Postlethwaite, Di Caprio, Danes, and Leguizamo may have taken). But if we only listen to the soundtrack without seeing the picture, we may realize that the advertised non-precious pronunciation serves as foil to inaccessibility and places additional stress on the fact that the book is being re-enacted. The «badness» of the acting is a function of disruptive effect. If unintended, it is nonetheless kitschy-campy-ly *ad hoc*. If Zeffirelli came «closest to the essence of the Shakespeare play ... because the beauty of [his] actors and camerawork echoes (even as it replaces) the formal ornamentation of Shakespeare's verse» (Pilkington 1994, 173), then Luhrmann's version depletes verse by overdramatizing and overemphasizing it-e.g., the few lines that he pointedly keeps in some severely cut scenes are couplets, an overtly «artistic» device that calls attention to its being precisely that, a device, verse. Luhrmann seems to enjoy making couplets sound like rhyming slogans. Meanwhile, in the world of reception, Shakespeare's verse grows increasingly harder to decode.

In fact, the soundtrack without visual input reminds one of the way in which lines are usually delivered by adolescents eager to play these immortal parts: without training, without self-consciousness, the words come «halting forth, wanting Invention's stay.» No one, to my knowledge, has played the clumsy Astrophel-to-Romeo connection in a more literal manner, whether deliberately or not ... except for high-school teenagers doing the play «straightforward and complete.» It would not be too much to assume, actually, that many teenagers will find in this continuum of [non]preciousness the sole cue to activate «talk of these sad things,» literary memory being disrupted and dislocated for the benefit of a white-noise kind of memory, the same that derives from the soundtrack. Which brings Eco back to the field. There is here «... una sorte di vittoria della vita sull'arte:» a sort of victory of KitschLife over SupremeArt, indeed. The acting is «bad,» I presume, as bad the acting is in high-school productions. But it is also as bad as may be in professional stagings that do not «chuck» the verse but deplete the Book in pursuit of a faithfulness which is so often trivial. In Luhrmann's wild gignol there is a bonus of [un]interpretive medium-to-medium

depletion. A great deal of verse is said in a vacuum of linguistic performance that overlaps with silent movie/comic-book gesticulation and gesture—once more, the gas station sequence bears witness. Similarly, where Zeffirelli substitutes shot for text, as in his «equating of male sexuality with the weapons of the film» (Pilkington 1994, 173), Luhrmann does nothing of the sort. Some objects, as annotated earlier, are raised to the level of [i..m]speaking parts and expected to become ephemeral virtual worshipping merchandise, tokens that are materially themselves. In the specific case of the guns, which are overemphatically shown to stand for the swords, an allusion to sexuality may be surmised, but such a modern interpretation would have to be reconciled with the presence of overt crotch-grabbing and sexual harassment, post-modern in-your-face stuff that disrupts the psychological explanation and hence depletes interpretation.

The most important instances of link-and-clash between these films, however, relate to the central characters-performers. Leonard Whiting and Leonardo Di Caprio, as well as Olivia Hussey and Claire Danes, are united by their beauty and separated by their prettiness. Zeffirelli's Romeo goes from clean-shaven childish-hairdo to manly stubble and unruly hair—«development» being the point, I assume: pretty child to handsome young man. Di Caprio surfs in and out of the Boy-man who pointedly opposes the Boys-will-be-boys in Gulf-coast open shirts, yet is continually forced down and away from his diary and towards them, which is to say forced from the his writing of himself-[un]development being the point, I guess: pretty/handsome/macho/90's sensitive male overlapping. The physical contrast between Olivia Hussey and Claire Danes is even greater. The former is young Italian Madonna-like, the latter is 90's athletic and square-featured. Also, despite her very young age, the Italian Juliet was frankly voluptuous—or pointedly made to look so even under cumbersome robes—and semi-nudity in the balcony scene was stressed—her breasts and cleavage made a focal point—as an index to the otherness of ideologically gendered bodies. On the other hand, Claire Danes's chest, which looks almost forced to flatness, and her subtle resemblance to her Romeo seem to direct our attention not to difference but to similarity, to gendered ambiguity, perhaps even to narcissism: they have features in common, and see each other for the first time through a [distorting] glass.

The lovers' scenes in Zeffirelli are carefully staged; in Luhrmann, they are carefully filled with accident. Some angles in Luhrmann's farewell scene briefly remind us of the 68-bald nudity in Zeffirelli's early morning bed-chamber. In Luhrmann's movie the arrival of Romeo in the night is shown, love-making is initiated in a tentative manner—which makes nudity strictly incidental—and the morning after is demure. The playfulness under the sheets and the allusive overhead shot of the lovers in bed play a de-mystifying game with Zeffirelli's famous scene, a scene which was not even meant to be a scene, not «by the book,»

for sure. And where the act of putting-an-breeches in Zeffirelli takes a calculated slow rhythm to tum his protagonist from free nakedness into gendered over-determination, the putting-an-pants of Di Caprio is a farcical affair. The adolescents seeing adolescents who play adolescents from one film to the other see re-enactment even without the Book. The meeting of Romeo and Juliet as Romeo + Juliet hangs on a thread of haste, confusion, fascination and fantasy that carries on to the rest of their scenes, underscored by the recurrent accidents and hints at tentativeness. Zeffirelli's lovers, on the other hand, are made the other for the each since look one, the Petrarchan lightning made Master of Fate even through a visor. In his film, the commonplace of lovers as magnets is actualized in the run-and-embrace approach during the wedding scene. Luhrmann's wedding is clumsily socially appropriate, ironically placed in the cold vacuum of overwhelming though non-descript modern architecture, and uncoreographed to the voices of a chorus outnumbering the guest-list and singing a schizotimic pop-hit-made-sacred song. The same counterpoint aided by music may be perceived in the contrast between the «motivated» tum of Zeffirelli's Friar Laurence's mind to be the assistant of Romeo-prompted by his looking up at Christ-and the puzzling and hilarious tum of Luhrmann's [un]Holy [un]Man's mind, cued to the sublime arrangement of Prince's «Baby you're just like my mother» to church-child-choral-angelic singing. A terrific, if/for depleted, *coup d'auteur*.

The connection between Zeffirelli's documentary of «Shakespeare's Italy» and Luhrmann's de-centering of text unto every possible experience of its content as alienation points to the frequently «swallowed bait» of the illusionistic style. After all, the-dubious-contribution of Zeffirelli to shakespearean cinema has been .

- • an «eliven[ing] of [the] action» (ManveII1979, 99). His careful staging of the lovers' scenes is not alone in supplementing the text with all kinds of gimmicks foregrounding «motivation, *sottile*» and «inevitability, *piano*.» The brawl scene, played against the boisterous background of an Italian Sunday street-market (this is Sunday, mind you, straight «by the book») is a fine sampler. His only too visibly bufoon-like dressed Sampson and Gregory meet his only too visibly soberly dressed Abraham and an only too visibly Old Man from the House of Montague. After thumb biting and «Sir» exchanging, Abraham moves to leave, having, in the approving eyes of the Old Man, outwitted the belligerent clowns. There is now no other choice but to «motivate» a brawl, which thereby ceases to be *The Brawl* and becomes *this* brawl. The bigger clown trips the Old Man down (later we will catch a glimpse of the severe damage caused to this reverend Sir) and manly Abraham responds to the provocation, which was not a provocation but an act of pointless leave-taking by classless fools. «Motivation, *sottile*» has met «inevitability, *piano*.» Zeffirelli's Benvolio is a «good-will» boy «<rosy cheeks and lips») drawn to draw indeed «accidentally,)) to the satisfaction of a cutely cat-eared Tybalt who,

well in cue-motivated character doth so-finds an outlet for his frustrated hate.

The contrast between Leguizamo's Tybalt and York's may be enough to perceive the deleuzian *répétition différente* that runs from Shakespeare through Zeffirelli to Luhrmann. The Prince of Cats is introduced in the comic-book fashion already described, making him a prescribed spirit of hate well embodied into evil creature. His nickname-role tag is foregrounded in freeze-shot and caption, eliminating the modern subtlety in favour of a depleted no-joke on the the book's complicated history of speculation as to the origin of such tag. Moreover, while York's Tybalt plays to the received perfection of the «can't be liked» villain, Leguizamo's (unironically) Bad Boy is overdramatized to the imperfection of the fascinating thug. He hates peace as York's does not, well over the hate individuated as «thee,» «Montagues,» and, above all, «hell.» Abra has already shown his contempt for all things right by playing an overstressed «Sir» with a mock-bow, a[n un]subtle allusion to the *Cortegiano's* Book of Manners. Although Zeffirelli may be accurately said to «increase the tension» (Pilkington 1994, 172) by «emphasiz[ing] ... early the depth and terror of the feud» (Hatío 1977, 323), his tension and terror remain under the condescending restraint of playing violence and death to the tune of the adolescent-as-foolish-jokester, *scherzando, vivace. ma non troppo*, and then, *largo e umbria*, Zeffirelli's music of terror is illusionistically monotone though colorful.

Luhrmann, however, does not remain metacinematically monotone in his approach to young rage. Zeffirelli repeats his formula in the catastrophe scene, by making the death of Mercutio an unexpected yet «inevitable» consequence of his playful mediation between Tybalt's half-hearted «villain» and Romeo's peace-and-love «villain am I none.» Much cavorting takes place before the fatal scratch, including a missed-opportunity-at-stopping-this-nonsense joining of Mercutio and Tybalt against Romeo's uninvited intrusion in the gentle young men's exercise of civil gentlemen's art. Instead, Luhrmann's fatal scene plays to a tempo of rage, really devoid of either under- or overdramatization, even if Tybalt's provocation is introduced with a theatrical gesture: the discharging of his magazine. It is Mercutio who brings a lapse of realism into this film. Not only is Luhrmann's Mercutio the same who raged against his own inarticulateness after seemingly forgetting his Queen Mab lines, but here self-destructiveness is not elegantly disguised as nonchalance, nor wasted to patronizingly regarding adolescence as an intellectual sin. Guns aside, the weapon that causes Mercutio's death is materially raw. In both film-books, catastrophe is itself «by the book,» either subdued to commonplace *imbroglio* or made particular to a devastating fin-de-siècle sickness. The «depth and terror of the feud» depleted to gignol at the gas station finds a substantial refill in Luhrmann's vision of the character who, always «by the book,» takes the «pretty piece of flesh» to where «worms are thy chambermaids.»

More than tension, Zeffirelli writes suspense. More than suspense, Luhmann write"s mocking depletion of resource and of source-book[s]. Originally, in the tomb scene his risky and fragile magnification of suspense to make Juliet see Romeo drink the poison was to be even further emphasized (and made worse) by the presence of Friar Laurence, a third party to this show of startled eyes. The «Holy Man» was finally cut from the scene-thank holiness-but that does not make it less of a risk nor less of a finally compromising dead-end. Still, the pervasive disruption and depletion of the books upon which Luhmann scribes his palimpsest are as visible as always. in the midst of a fascinating if flawed cinema show. For his book is here proven cinematic even by the tokens of its failure. Its apparently inevitable post-modern self-immersion in formal overstress sans *innuendo* is film, in the sense in which Zeffirelli's waste of the suicide scene' is illustration of text. Zeffirelli's staginess is denounced by its own soundtrack. If played without picture, the superbly savvy score of Rota needs no support-not even from the text-to convey the grand operatic style of the musical scene, and the egg-cold lameness of the filmed one: the words play background to the music, the images backdrop to both. On the other hand, Luhmann shoots an overhead of the lovers lying on each other in the middle of cinematic ambiguity: the blast of the gun is heard and its consequences known from visual imagination in a vast nowhere of tomb-church replete with clashing icons which distract us to call our attention upon their own absurdity-and the scene's. Zeffirelli's Juliet, for all her beauty, is reduced to play the poorly illusionistic teenager above whom she is not allowed-perhaps neither histrionically capable-to rise, before not falling on her Romeo but carefully-and so obviously-finding the right spot to rest cheek-to-cheek.

* * *

Somewhere above I said that all the characters in the new film are treated as players of a role in a movie of the week, soap opera, or mini-series. Now, please add: «except for Romeo and Juliet.» From the start, the lovers are two fully fleshed moving pictures cut and pasted against this background of active-yet-still repetition. Romeo is seen first, but not seen, for the light at his back prevents us from clearly looking at his face, and the first glance we catch of Juliet is of her **distorted** face submerged in water. The point is obvious: the clashing «fearful elements» frame our «unbound lovers» in media and style altogether different from their co-[un]stars. They are framed «by the book,» too. And the **framing** game is enhanced when we meet Romeo. At a distance, his figure stands against the ruined **movie-house** at the Grove of Sycamore; exactly where there used to be a screen and now there is only a great hole through which the sun glares. This hole in the abandoned movie-theatre where now we meet Romeo is equivalent to the hole

made on the movie screen on which we have seen the film at the end, when the TV screen recedes until it is merely a sucking point-and then nothing: a black screen to run the credits on, so that we «Go hence to have more talk of these sad things.» Or not. For the shock is not stressed beyond itself with any critical tum: it has been repeated to depletion in the present-now-past action, and beyond recognition by memory. Emotion leaves no trace but as report, as text, and for that we need more than disruption and depletion.

In the end, the *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* couple, and the emotional spectator, relate ambiguously to the «book of love.» Looking for consummation, they are left to perform a predetermined script for which few acting tips are provided: their resources stem mainly from the book depleted, and therefore their actions are made to look spontaneously aimed at each other as much as they are pre-established in lines. To them, such lines sound familiar as vague memories but either too distant in time or frankly inaccessible in meaning. The first act that we perceive from Romeo is a conspicuously *scripted* one: in the middle of the abandoned stage-screen his voice, off, *reads* the strangely detached verses which we will soon notice are in his own *hand-writing*. Similarly, from the published script we learn that originally Romeo was to see Juliet first, yes, through the fish-tank, but as «a beautiful girl in an angel costume perched on an ornate chair reading a slim leather-bound book» (Pearce and Luhrmann 1997, 47, my emphasis). The third act of this reading tragedy comes before Romeo learns of Juliet's mock-death from Balthasar: Romeo *reads* as he *writes* the dream of Romeo, punctuating a climax necessarily anticipated. The book writes itself from its depleted state to imprison anew the «unbound lovers.»

Romeo + Juliet find themselves enclosed in the pages of the shakespearean fiction being played-historically played-around their puzzling lives. At the ball, disguise serves as a mediator to fiction. Romeo literally is the «artificial [K]night»-«by art as well as nature»-: an amused «boy King Arthur» (Pearce and Luhrmann 1996, 37). With just a smile, Romeo stands the charge of the astronaut Paris, who, in turn, lamely attempts to disco-dance to the mellifluous music of a soul-singer (not the best way to impress the Angel-Babe). Juliet literally is the «bright angel» who later speaks lines that have been written somewhere. She hesitates before recalling that the sun must not allow her (K]night-cloaked lover swear by the moon, although she does not quite know why. In his first-and only-half-conversation with Benvolio-a thick-headed good guy who simply cannot concentrate for the awful long time it takes his cousin to say whatever-Romeo delivers the famous oxymorons as if straight from the dictionary of famous quotes, the Book of Junk Knowledge. The lovers are playing themselves without rehearsal, and feedback is not deemed necessary.

Only Mercutio, a.k.a Reality Checker, provides a momentary window to dreaming, and the pillbox opens as door to door, fiction to fiction. In the wake of itself, fiction confines the protagonists.

Romeo is delighted to have the chance to deliver a sonnet about saints and hands, even if «Grant thou» does not seem to make sense, as it does not in his delivery: it looks as a tag-phrase, and as such comes out.²⁵ She picks up where he must leave off, not so rapidly as a trained Juliet would, but as intelligently as her namesake before her has. The ritual is ritual for it is re-enactment, and it is re-enactment «by the book.» Depleted of received meaning, the lovers turned palimpsest of themselves, the ritual at the core of the book disruptedly becomes its own—as far as it may be its own—tentative self. Their «memory of the sad things» is as incomplete as may be expected from their possibilities of relating to it: all acts of writing or reading, of pausing to know what it is all about, are rendered deferrable by the book that urgently presses on them. Memory, the construction of the book, is merely a past standing between the present (desire) and themselves, on their way to finally «kiss by the book»—inside the elevator which is their not so appropriate but sole option, real choice being so hard to come by these days. Romeo + Juliet are *also* re-enacting the «precious book of love» as a palimpsest—as well as whoever subscribes their plight re-enacts the Book, if only for «the two-hours' traffic of our stage.» To many spectators, the most important thing is precisely this: films usually take about two hours before you can *really* go somewhere and *really* do something. But neither R + J nor the spectators were pre-scribed as players, and their names are not announced in a frozen frame nor bear a label that may help them know if the book will allow a different incarnation. Once they start to play it, the book takes over the depleted imagination. The Book, after all, remains «this [precious] book [of love].»

Luhrmann's movie, for all its flashing post-modernistic allure, is not really a dissident product; although it makes overt claims to differ from earlier versions, specifically Zeffirelli's, it still plays «by the book» and constitutes «a certain text» that indeed foregrounds depletion while contributing points which are mostly, say, attractive. Its strengths surface mainly in terms of method, and the film stays well within bounds where greater critical drive is desired. Search and rephrase, then: if *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* does nothing else, it stresses the improbability of its rising «above a common bound» either as a critical undermining of the grand mechanism of received authority which informs its sources—both Shakespeare's «book» and the burden of canonization that shapes it all the way to Zeffirelli's version—or as a palimpsest of such previous «books of love.» Perhaps because of this, its provocative force resides more in its periphery and blank spots, in how depletion of text foregrounds depletion of reception in the post-modern scenario.

Notes

¹ For an illustrative description of the various ways in which comic books organize the presentation of narrative materials (Scott MacCloud 1993). Luhrmann's comic-book [dis]organization of images, particularly in the gas station segment, seems to adhere primarily to an «aspect-aspect» concept, favoured by the Japanese comic-book artists.

² In referring to Shakespeare's texts as «books» I am trying to adhere to Douglas Lanier's elaboration on the term (1996).

³ The signs «+[&]» seek to indicate here what should be assumed everywhere else: the title is actually written thus in (almost) all textual materials pertaining to the film, i.e. "with a small «&» sign inside the cross. The cross, in turn, is a conspicuous feature on the ring that the lovers exchange at crucial points. The title of Luhrmann's film transfers to text an object, a cinematic item, materialized as an essential part of the textual fabric in and surrounding the film. By the way, in the Spanish-language posters and the like, the title read «Romeo +[y] Julieta de William Shakespeare,» all within quotation marks.

⁴ The unstable title involves problems of industrial inconsistency; for although almost everywhere in the printed material pertaining to «the contemporary film» (credits, posters, press-kit, internet pages, CD-ROM version, etc.) the title reads as indicated: *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, yet, in the case of the published script herein cited the title sometimes reads *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet* and, more often, simply *Romeo & Juliet*. In the «Note» from which I am quoting, however, it reads *Romeo and Juliet* (my underlining). In the same edition, the text of «the classic play» is entitled *Romeo and Juliet*, and undersigned «by William Shakespeare.»

⁵ In fact, productions of *Romeo and Juliet* re-set against a modern urban background are not wanting. The 1987 Michael Bogdanov's production for the RSC was an example—a rather hollow one, unfortunately. In the early 1990's, a small group in Uruguay staged their own, which actually followed Bogdanov's in using a tabloid's front-page format for its publicity, an idea in turn re-cycled in Luhrmann's film. There are as well Brazilian versions, like Grisolli's (1980) which shakespeareans had a chance to see during the 1996 L.A. World Congress. As I write this, two «alternative» productions of *Romeo y Julieta* by regional theatre groups are being rehearsed in Mexico: one is a chili-western concoction, the other, an adaptation to life-in-the Mexico-U.S. border.

A good illustration of the bolder shakespearean show that may be seen on stage is the following account of a French production by Faisant (1985): «... un grand jeu onirique dans une immense bibliothèque à échafaudage tubulaire ou des colonnes de livres partent à l'infini. Dans ce palais en bois qui fait aussi penser à un théâtre par ses petits balcons et ses rideaux rouges, circulent sans cesse d'un niveau à l'autre des personnages rajoutés en costumes defraîchis des amants célèbres, passant en silence comme de blancs fantômes au disant des textes connus en un jeu subtil de correspondances: au bal, Pâris-Richard III séduit Rosalinde-Lady Anne, Gregoire-Hamlet conduit aux aveux Lady Capulet-Gertrude . . . L'ultime enlacement des amants . . . sur un champ de pétales roses sang ne conduit pas à la réconciliation des survivants autour du prince mais au passage des spectres blancs de Mercutio et Tybalt emmenant Roméo et Juliette avec Pâris et laissant un Benvolio au comportement de Gavroche dresser une rose pâle du souvenir parmi les roses vives de

L'amour jonchant le lieu de mort des amants, Tout est sacrifié aux effets plastiques souvent splendides, comme lorsque l'admirable nourrice noire berce dans ses bras Juliette en lethargie et sa mère échevelée au son d'un negro spiritual» (Boquet 1993, 13).

Indeed, the medium makes a difference; e.g.: « . . . until the Second World War the most lively debate about Shakesperian film centered upon issues that were in fact extensions of that conflict which had erupted within the realm of theatre some thirty years before» (Davies 1994,3). One begins to wonder how distant is the criticism of shakespearean films from theatrical performance criticism today, the latter being clearly better used to the sort of interpretation of the text that sometimes shocks the more conservative and less selective or sophisticated cinema audiences.

6 Already in January 1997 Luhnmann's movie had «respectable gross box-office takings of \$65m worldwide» (anon. 1997,81).

7 My underlining seeks to indicate the abstraction *Romeo and Juliet* which underlies all **versions, mentioned or unmentioned.**

9 Perhaps the best example of this is the possibility of construing the CD-ROM version as a sort of substitute for the merchandising of «action-figures,» a now regular part of the overall marketing of movies more overtly aimed at the same or younger consumers. In fact, the «pages» of the *R+J* CD feature a very attractive combination of stills from the film; audio and video clips; animation; the text of both the play and the screenplay for the fragments featured; explanations on several items that the film treats as icons for future generations' worshipping (the ring, the necklace, the guns, the cars, Verona Beach-«a mythical place»); etc. Also, it serves as a kind of modified substitute for «study-aids» (such as the infamous *Cliffs Notes*): one of the «pages» offers a complete summary of who's who and what's what in the film, which someone may find ideal for quick-learning.

9 Of course, a necessary reminder is the notion of the «collaborative» nature of Elizabethan authorship, as presented in Orgel (1988).

10 For instance: notes on the play's sources; critical assessments by scholars; or even, as in the case of the 1997 RSC *Troilus and Cressida*, a succinct guide to the Greek and Trojan heroes in the play.

1) The tenn is meant to evoke the German *Erwartungshorizon* (Jauss 1970).

12 Zeffirelli's latest attempt at reconfirming his status (the Mel Gibson *Hamlet*) failed in this sense; and so did the lukewarm and tame *Othello* by Oliver Parker (1995), intended to reach the massive public through a cast combining the champion of Shakespeare-weU-done-in-film of our day with a much advertised but wasted Laurence Fishburne as (not really) the first man of African descent to play the title role in a film.

13. References to Shakespeare's play are to the New Arden edition by Brian Gibbons (1980).

14 For instance, in the 1993 World Shakespeare Bibliography-that is, among the entries for a single year (totaling about 5,425)-the number of entries on *Hamlet* more than doubles the amount of entries on *Romeo and Juliet*: 525 vs. 237 (a difference of 288, or a ratio of 2.25 to 1, approximately). But the proportion decreases radically when considering the amount of entries referring to performances of various sorts: 213 for *Hamlet*. 155 for *Romeo and Juliet* (a difference of only 58, or a ratio of 1.3 to 1). The significant fact, however, is that there are many more entries on texts about *Hamlet* (312) than on

performances of it (213, a 1.5 to 1 ratio); while in the case of *Romeo and Juliet* it is exactly the opposite: 82 texts about it, and 155! performances of it (nearly a 1 to 2 proportion).

15 Bogdanov's last scene was split in two, the second part showing the inauguration of the golden statues by a busy Prince, who delivered the closing lines as hypocritical political speech. Capulet and Montague were made to embrace in the prescribed fashion of the photo-op. A somewhat lame attempt at «meaningful» irony: the cold-hearted society that has turned tragedy into an occasion for business-like self-aggrandizing. Touching.
16 Eco is in turn quoting from Costa and Quaresima (1983) «Il racconto elettronico: veicolo, programma, durata.» *Cinema & Cinema* 35-36: 20-24.

¹⁷ The first volume of the *R+J* soundtrack was quick to reach the top of the charts (Feb. 1997).

18 Well known-and shown-is the fact that Luhrmann has directed video-clips. MTV

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19 A curious case to point out in this respect is the image of Shakespeare on the cover of the program and in one of the posters for the 1996 LA. World Shakespeare Congress. Here was a Congress in the second largest Spanish-speaking and Mexican-populated city in the world (Mexico City being #1, of course), and there was a Shakespeare who looked quite Chicano, perhaps even «cholo,» as far as the only Mexican attending the Congress could tell. The Mexican-American as Shakespeare. Well, all in all, it really looked a bit incongruous.

20 The Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary stands in the middle of the Colonia del Valle, mostly a «modern» area (late 40's, 50's and early 60's). Its architecture is Mexican interpretation of French and American modernism, with Colonial pastiche. The church itself was inaugurated in 1954, the project started in 1950, the same year in which Albert finished the statue. The area was used to advantage by Luhrmann. The gas station, for example, stands at a corner from which you can easily see the Virgin. What Luhrmann does not show is the reality of badly solved urban problems in Mexico City. Here cars and streets prevail over people. The church is now located on an absolutely absurd semi-freeway, semi-street that severs the place of worship from the neighbourhood. Moreover, this church is widely regarded as an icon of ugliness. It is a sort of monstrous though practical landmark: it may be seen from a long distance and rapidly identified for quick traffic reference. For want of a better one, among its notable features is the fact that it is made entirely of concrete. All this has led to the funny loss of its identity as the Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary. Most people now refer to it precisely as «The Church of Concrete,» or, more interestingly, call the statue «Our Lady of Traffic.» Those open arms ...

21 Although he does not appear in the published screenplay, the other «man-Death» of Tybalt's is named Petruccio in the credits. This is one of the many noticeable cross-references to other Shakespeare's plays in the movie: e.g. Abra says «Double, double, toil and trouble» to the nuns at the gas station; a billboard announcing some product advertised by «Don Prospero,» etc. In the end, this is all a little boring,

²² Actually, this is the Castillo de Chapultepec, former Imperial and Presidential Residence, and currently the site of the National Museum of History (a good private joke!).

23 Another(?) private, but lame. joke is that the -statue of Christ is digitalized over the Monument to independence, on Paseo de la Reforma.

24 There seems to be room for a twisted point here: remember that this palace houses the National Museum of History.

²⁵ It is really hard to tell whether Lurhmann had-or wanted?-scholarly support with the text. So much of the sense is so lost. Like here, or, quite noticeably, in the case of the interpretation of «a pair of star-cross'd lovers *take their life;*» etcetera.

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