

## Parting “totally sucks”: Filming *Romeo and Juliet* for Generation X

*Xenia Georgopoulou*

---

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is a play about a pair of young lovers, yet it hasn't always been popular among young people. In 1996 two film-makers created modern versions of the play, obviously aiming at the young generation of their time. Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* and Lloyd Kaufman's *Tromeo and Juliet* share a lot; however, it has been argued that the philosophy behind the two movies is diametrically opposite: if Luhrmann attempts to prove the compatibility of Shakespeare's high culture with the youth culture of the nineties, Kaufman seems to insist upon the Bard's mismatch with an assumed low teen culture. But how close do the two directors approach what we call “youth culture”? Does Luhrmann provide a full account of modern youth? And how lowly does Kaufman's youth stand after all? Also, which of the two films is closer to a young audience and, finally, what audiences do the two directors address? This essay will attempt to answer these questions by examining the two directors' use of youth culture elements and by taking into consideration the place of the two films in the film industry.

---

JULIET: Parting is such sweet sorrow.

TROMEIO: Yeah, totally sucks!”

From Lloyd Kaufman's *Tromeo and Juliet*

**A**lthough *Romeo and Juliet* is about a pair of young lovers, it hasn't always been popular among youngsters. This may have to do with the fact that pupils were often required to study the play at school and were discouraged by its “difficult” or “strange” language (Castaldo 194); however, this dissatisfaction with Shakespeare's famed play could also be related to “traditional,” uninspired stage or film productions, which young-

sters may find boring. Kenneth S. Rothwell points out that *Romeo and Juliet* “has always been a tale *about* but not necessarily *for* young people” (134). The first to observe and subvert this status quo in the film industry was apparently Franco Zeffirelli, who filmed his *Romeo and Juliet*, with Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey in the title roles, in 1968. The Italian director wanted his movie to be “a young people’s *Romeo and Juliet*” (qtd. in Rothwell 134).<sup>1</sup> Rothwell argues that Zeffirelli’s admiration of Leonard Bernstein’s musical *West Side Story* (an adaptation of the story of *Romeo and Juliet* turned into film in 1961) made him want to “make the movie palatable to the rebellious university students of the late sixties, who never doubted for a moment that the guilt was all on the parents” (134-35). Douglas Brode agrees that the film was “drawing on the generation-gap mentality that developed during the mid-sixties revolutionary fervor” (51).<sup>2</sup>

Zeffirelli believed that the play’s teenagers should be a lot like those of his time. That is why he chose inexperienced actors, in order to let them use their own experience (Brode 51). However, the play itself was not adapted to modern youth culture, since the director’s decisions included no modern setting. Such an appropriation had actually been attempted on stage before Zeffirelli made his film, with Bernstein’s aforementioned musical adaptation of the play: in 1957 *West Side Story* located the story of *Romeo and Juliet* in modern New York. In 1996 Baz Luhrmann with his *William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet* and Lloyd Kaufman with his *Tromeo and Juliet*, both modern film versions of Shakespeare’s play, addressed the new young generation,<sup>3</sup> the children of Zeffirelli’s or Bernstein’s young audience, commonly labeled “Generation X.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Rothwell, Zeffirelli’s film looks “stodgy” compared to *William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet* (241)<sup>5</sup>—and even stodgier compared

- 
1. On the same matter also see Hapgood 83; Tatspaugh 140.
  2. On the same matter also see Brode 52; Cartmell, *Interpreting Shakespeare* 44, 46 and “Zeffirelli” 214; Hapgood 83; Tatspaugh 140.
  3. Both films can be listed among the “teensploitation” films, as Richard Burt calls them (“Afterword”, *passim*), marketed to pre-teen and teen-age audiences. On Luhrmann’s film and the teen audiences see Anderegg 61; Boose and Burt 12, 17; Lanier 182; Lehmann and Starks 12.
  4. Or “Gen-X”. “Generation X” followed the sixties generation; the Generation Xers were born during the 1960s and 1970s. Gen-X has also been called “the missing generation” due to its passivity and lack of a defining social identity, which explains the use of “X”, the symbol for the unknown factor (Edmunds and Turner ix, 34). On Luhrmann and Generation X see Brode 55, 56; Hodgdon 106; Lehmann and Starks 12; Rothwell 241.
  5. Brode argues that Luhrmann “hoped to outdo even Zeffirelli in making *Romeo and Juliet* ‘relevant’ to youth” (55).

to *Tromeo and Juliet*. Although modernizing *Romeo and Juliet* was not new in the film industry (O'Connor 21, 31; Rothwell 241), "dressing [Shakespeare] in the jeans and T-shirts and pierced bodies of the MTV generation ratchets the transgressiveness up a notch" (Rothwell 241).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, we could still trace similarities between the 1996 movies and earlier films.

Of all modernizations, *West Side Story* apparently inspired not only Zeffirelli but also Luhrmann with its "powerful linkage of Shakespeare's play with modern youth culture" (Rothwell 225). But if "[c]ompared to today's hip-hop street thugs and punks, the gang members in *West Side Story* look like choir boys" (Rothwell 225), the more recent *Romeu e Julieta*, filmed for television by the Brazilian Paulo Afonso Grisolli in 1980, could be considered the precursor of more of Luhrmann's ideas, including disco music, masquerading in drag and Prince Escalus as a police commissioner (Rothwell 170-71). *Romeu e Julieta* has also an important element in common with *Tromeo and Juliet*, apart from the Prince as police officer: the Brazilian director included dialogues in the vernacular, quite remote from Shakespeare's text (Rothwell 171).

Luhrmann and Kaufman may have been influenced by older films, but they still have their own way of approaching modern youth culture. Douglas Lanier observes that the two films share a lot: "teenaged lovers, a contemporary urban setting emphasizing alienated youth culture, a rock and pop soundtrack, an exaggerated cinematic style that violates conventions of filmic realism, use of Shakespearean dialogue (although *Tromeo* reserves that dialogue only for special moments), and a self-consciously hip sensibility" (188); however, the two movies' common features prove rather superficial. A closer examination of the two films reveals crucial and deeper differences regarding the depiction of youth culture.

Before we rush to any conclusions regarding the two film-makers' approach of youth culture, it is necessary to make clear what is meant by this term. The word "culture" has acquired at least two meanings: the sense of "a distinct 'whole way of life'" and "the more specialized if also more common sense of culture as 'artistic and intellectual activities'" (Williams, *Culture* 13).<sup>7</sup> In this essay, references to "culture" will rather assume the former; it is of note, however, that, as Raymond Williams has observed, "there is some practical

---

6. Here Rothwell refers to Luhrmann's film, but this statement equally fits *Tromeo*. The term "MTV generation" is also used by Patricia Tatspaugh with reference to Luhrmann's target group (140).

7. On the word "culture" also see Williams, *Keywords* 87-93. On the two different meanings of the word also see Brake 1; Garratt 144.

convergence” between the two meanings, since a “whole way of life” includes “*all* forms of social activity” and the “artistic and intellectual activities” are now “much more broadly defined” (*Culture* 13). Similarly, “youth culture” will be considered as a particular subculture mirroring the young generation’s way of life, with the word “subculture” denoting not a lesser form of culture,<sup>8</sup> but rather a subdivision of culture at large.<sup>9</sup> As Michael Brake remarks, a subculture—and, in the same way, youth culture—is expressed by its “style,” which consists of three basic elements: “image” (i.e. appearance—clothing, accessories, hairstyle etc.), “demeanour” (expression, posture etc.)<sup>10</sup> and “argot” (a special vocabulary and way of delivering it)<sup>11</sup> (11-12).<sup>12</sup> In what follows I will attempt to outline the extent to which the two 1996 films incorporate youth style.

Regarding image—the first element of style mentioned by Brake – one may say that in Luhrmann’s film the youngsters’ appearance, consisting, among other things, of Bermuda shorts and colorful printed shirts but also of stylish suits, alludes to a more typical, rather than youthful, American fashion. Certain accessories (such as the large chains around some young Montagues’ necks) or hairstyles (such as Benvolio’s red hair) may refer to a more youthful style, but, on the whole, there is hardly anything that would not be regarded as mainstream. Moreover, the expensive clothes of both gangs are in line with their members’ high class<sup>13</sup> and do not allude to a deviant youth fashion, which is mainly related to lower classes.

Unlike Luhrmann’s youngsters, Kaufman’s reflect a more particular youth style. Their clothing, accessories and hairstyles allude to a punk subculture, as in the figure of Debbie Rochon’s black-dressed, tattooed and body-pierced Ness, the Capulets’ cook and Juliet’s lesbian girlfriend, who replaces the Nurse of the original. Kaufman’s choice of this particular youth subculture is not, I believe, a random one. Through his young heroes the American director transgresses, as will be shown, several social conventions; and punk style, though not contemporary with Generation X,<sup>14</sup> is connected with subversive behavior, which brings us to demeanor, Brake’s second element of style.

---

8. On this meaning see Garratt 147.

9. On this meaning see Brake 2.

10. Daren Garratt talks about “gestures” (143).

11. Rex Stainton Rogers talks about the “idiom” in which youth culture is expressed (180).

12. On style also see Garratt 143-47.

13. As Lanier remarks, Luhrmann’s Romeo and Juliet are “children of upper-class privilege” (190).

14. Punk became popular in Britain in 1976 (Brake 76); on punk in the USA see Rudick 345-56.

In *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* the violent “demeanor” of the young Montagues and Capulets refers to nothing but the two families’ “ancient grudge.” In *Tromeo and Juliet* Kaufman complicates the old feud by raising class issues as well. The punk culture has been regarded as a reaction to a lower/problematic social status (Garratt 144-45),<sup>15</sup> and this seems to be the case with most of Kaufman’s youngsters, who correspond to what Brake would call “delinquent youth” (23). The terms “punk” and “delinquent” had already been connected with the youngsters’ social origin in Sondheim’s lyrics for *West Side Story*, where the deviant behavior of youth reflected modern social problems:

Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke,  
 You’ve gotta understand—  
 It’s just our bringin’ upke  
 That gets us outta hand.  
 Our mothers all are junkies,  
 Our fathers all are drunks,  
 Golly Moses—natherly we’re *punks*.  
 Gee Officer Krupke, we’re very upset;  
 We never had the love that every child oughta get.  
 We ain’t no *delinquents*,  
 We’re misunderstood,  
 Deep down inside us there is good! (qtd. in Rogers 177; my emphasis)

*Tromeo* raises similar issues, since the male protagonist himself is son to a bankrupt father and an adulterous mother.

However, not all of Kaufman’s young characters are part of the punk culture; apparently, the film touches on different categories of youth. London (Paris’s counterpart), for example, falls in the category of “respectable youth,” as Brake would call him (23), and so does Juliet, although she seems incompatible with London (she is a macrobiotic, whereas London is in the meat industry) and falls in love with Tromeo, who rather belongs to the category of “delinquent youth” mentioned above. It is obvious that these two distinct youth categories correspond to different social levels; unlike Luhrmann’s—or indeed Shakespeare’s—young heroes, Kaufman’s belong to different social classes. In *Tromeo* the “two houses, both alike in dignity” became “two houses, different as dried plums and pears” when Cappy Capulet tricked Monty Que (Montague’s counterpart) out of the pornographic film business they ran together, leading him and his family to poverty, which is also responsible for deviant demeanor.

---

15. On the punk phenomenon also see Brake 76-80; Garratt 147.

As for argot, Brake's third element of style, Luhrmann and Kaufman have little in common. Consistent with the teenage culture they assumedly introduce among the young members of the "two households," both directors clip some of the youngsters' names. For example, in Luhrmann's film "Abraham" becomes "Abra," to suit an era when "Abraham" seems too old-fashioned (especially when, being the name of an old patriarch, it is given to a young man) and when names, especially among youngsters, are often clipped.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Benvolio in *Tromeo* becomes Benny (with an additional hypocorism),<sup>17</sup> thus losing the peace-making connotations of his original name. However, these are rather superficial, small scale changes; regarding the language they choose for the whole film, the two directors adopt two totally different attitudes.

In Luhrmann's version there is no argot; the Australian director decided to keep the Shakespearean text intact in his film (which justifies its full title, *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*),<sup>18</sup> to "inspect the place of Shakespeare . . . in contemporary culture," as W. B. Worthen claims (qtd. in Rothwell 244); furthermore, some *IMDb* (*Internet Movie Database*) users believe that the original language added to the quality of the film.<sup>19</sup> However, Rothwell remarks that "[t]he verbal runs against the grain of the visual semiotics" and admits that "it is odd to hear Romeo say 'O me! what fray was here?' (1.1.173) after a violent explosion in a gasoline station" (241); so it is to hear the young Montagues and Capulets "speak Shakespeare like some crazy gang-rap" (Rutter 258) or "spout . . . Shakespearean verse like trash talk" (Westhoff).

Unlike Luhrmann, James Gunn and Kaufman himself, who wrote the dialogues of *Tromeo and Juliet*, seem to acknowledge this incompatibility between the verbal and the visual, and resort to a linguistic mixture: in *Tromeo*, Shakespeare's language merges with the social dialect used by modern youngsters.<sup>20</sup> Thus, for example, Juliet's famous Shakespearean line "Parting is such sweet sorrow" (2.1.229)<sup>21</sup> is followed by Tromeo's response in a "mid-nineties grunge fashion":<sup>22</sup> "Yeah, totally sucks!" According to Lanier, Kaufman's approach to Shakespearean language "stresses its mismatch with

16. On clipping see Yule 66.

17. On hypocorisms see Yule 67.

18. On the film's title see Boose and Burt 16; Lanier 191; Walker 20, 27-28 n. 2.

19. On this view see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117509/usercomments>.

20. On social dialects and age see Yule 241-42.

21. The quotes from Shakespeare's text follow the compact edition of the Oxford Complete Works.

22. See Steve on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

contemporary teen culture" (191).<sup>23</sup> But although such a dialogue may be considered "irritating and stupid,"<sup>24</sup> Brian McKay rather sees "an odd but compelling mixture of classic Shakespearean lines mixed with Bronx slang."<sup>25</sup> And if Kaufman is far from using the whole text, Allan Ulrich argues that his version "communicate[s] so more eloquently to the younger generation."<sup>26</sup>

To Brake's components of "style" Daren Garratt adds musical preferences (144, 147). Once more, Luhrmann seems less specific than Kaufman as far as his musical selections are concerned. Although the soundtrack of *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* contains mostly pop artists and bands (including Radiohead, Garbage and The Cardigans), a choice that aptly matches the MTV culture reflected in the film,<sup>27</sup> there is also classical music (such as "Liebestod" from Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*), which most youngsters find rather boring.<sup>28</sup> Kaufman, on the contrary, not only seems faithful to the rock/punk scene (the soundtrack includes music by The Wesley Willis Fiasco, Supernova and The Meatmen), but also hires Lemmy "of the house of Motörhead" (an obvious pun on the houses of Montague and Capulet) to play the role of the Chorus, which seems in tune with the punk mood of the film (Scheib).

On the whole, Luhrmann seems less specific regarding youth culture, and this is no wonder; as it has been pointed out, his film is "cunningly designed to appeal to the parents and even the grandparents of that 'natural' audience" (Anderegg 61). "At first glance," remarks Michael Anderegg, "Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* could be mistaken for yet another (mis)appropriation of Shakespeare's play for purposes of parody or even burlesque, a hip (hop?) retelling aimed at an irredeemably low-brow audience of clueless teenagers inhabiting an intellectually bankrupt culture." However, the critic argues that the film undermines such a reading at the same time, not only through Shakespeare's "richly poetic language" but also through Luhrmann's own style, which often reflects his

---

23. On the same matter also see Lanier 190.

24. See Paul Andrews on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

25. In fact, the Bard's lines are only sporadically heard, as Leslie remarks.

26. It has been argued that Shakespeare's dialogue was "trimmed a lot . . . after test audiences didn't approve" (hockeybutt on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>).

27. On Luhrmann's use of MTV culture see Boose and Burt 18; Cartmell, *Interpreting Shakespeare* 46; Lanier 182.

28. On the role of music in Luhrmann's film see Modenessi 70; O'Connor 30; Rothwell 241.

experience in theater and opera and evokes “historical” avant-garde cinematography. Nevertheless, Luhrmann still combines all the above with pop-culture elements, such as MTV aesthetics, familiar to him from his work in rock videos, which turns the film into a “recognizable contemporary cultural object” that defies “the cultural encrustations that have made Shakespeare ‘highbrow’” (Anderegg 58, 59, 60, 70). Brode also regards Luhrmann’s film as “an important attempt to bring Shakespeare out of the elitist enclave of high culture” (57).<sup>29</sup> In effect, by giving Shakespeare “a pop cultural cachet” (Lanier 191), the Australian director ultimately created what is often regarded as a mainstream movie (O’Connor 48).<sup>30</sup>

Although Luhrmann’s film is perhaps not exactly what one would call mainstream in terms of style, it is definitely so regarding its casting, starring Leonardo Di Caprio and Claire Danes in the title roles. Kaufman, on the contrary, cast relatively unknown actors (Will Keenan and Jane Jensen respectively) in a film that involves much more than what we get in a typical Hollywood movie (nevertheless, the film was widely released and not only in the States).<sup>31</sup> And if car crashes are pretty common in American filmography (also being part of Luhrmann’s film), kinky sex or live body-piercing is surely not so.<sup>32</sup> Also considering previous Troma releases, Kaufman’s target group is more restricted than Luhrmann’s, and *Tromeo* is “DEFINITELY not for all tastes!”<sup>33</sup> It has been said that Kaufman’s film is “[u]pdated to appeal to the sick-minded youth of today,”<sup>34</sup> featuring, just like any Troma film, “over the top gore, lots of nudity . . . and just plain sickness.”<sup>35</sup> Tony

---

29. Zeffirelli also saw himself as a “popularizer” (Hapgood 80-81); Robert Hapgood argues that Shakespeare himself was also one (80-81).

30. *William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet* has generally been considered mainstream as opposed to *Tromeo and Juliet* in *IMDb* users’ comments of the latter (most of whom seem to prefer the Troma movie). For more see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

31. *Tromeo and Juliet* was also released in Argentina, Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany and the UK, and, considering the users’ comments on the *IMDb*, it was mostly well received.

32. Kaufman’s aim was to provide “[a]ll the body-piercing, kinky sex, and car crashes that Shakespeare wanted but never had” (see the synopsis of *Tromeo and Juliet* on <http://www.troma.com/movies/tromeoandjuliet/>).

33. So says *IMDb* user mattymatt4ever. However, the *IMDb* users’ views on that matter vary. For more see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

34. See Steve on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

35. On a rough definition of a Troma film see TMAN247 on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.



Howard regards as "emetic" (298) a movie that has been characterised by users of the *IMDb* as "perverted," "disturbing," "demented," "twisted," "sick," or simply "gross."<sup>36</sup>

The place of the two films in the film industry is reflected in critical literature: Luhrmann comes second only to Zeffirelli in popularity,<sup>37</sup> whereas *Tromeo and Juliet* is in most cases only briefly commented on, mostly along with pornographic references<sup>38</sup> or among B-movies assumedly not worth further analysis (Howard 298).<sup>39</sup> Kaufman reduces Shakespeare's high cultural status to low forms of popular culture, such as pornography (as in *Tromeo's* CD-ROM collection, which includes a set entitled *Shakespeare Sex Interactive* containing titles such as *The Merchant of Penis* and *As You Lick It*), thus rejecting official culture and its elitist views (Freeth 29). As Matthew Freeth remarks, the film contains several elements (including soft porn) considered of bad taste according to the moral and aesthetic criteria of a bourgeoisie that discriminates between high and low art (2-3, 25-27) and argues that "[i]n resisting mainstream Hollywood aesthetics, Troma is also resisting serious academic attention" (2).

It has been argued that, if in Luhrmann's film Shakespeare "is deployed to 'classicize' the pop genre of the teen romance," *Tromeo and Juliet* "insists upon (re)establishing the determinedly low nature of teen culture" (Lanier 191). However, *Tromeo and Juliet* is much more than a crypto-pornographic B-movie. Another element that probably deters critics from writing about *Tromeo* is the film's transgression of dominant ideology. As Margaret Jane Kidnie remarks, "[b]y locating a theme as apparently universal and trans-historical as young love in unexpected or disturbing contexts Kaufman renders the familiar strange, a process of cultural disruption that enables his audience to question and re-evaluate modern value systems in a reflective manner" (qtd. in Freeth 7). Kidnie suggests that the power of the film "lies precisely in its ability to disturb the belief systems and apparently stable categories of truth held by mainstream culture" (qtd. in Freeth 30).<sup>40</sup>

36. For all characterizations see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>. Interestingly, the majority of these comments come from people that approve of the film.

37. Luhrmann's film appears in almost every single analysis of Shakespeare on film since 1996; the plethora of references to it throughout this essay makes the popularity of the film quite evident.

38. See Burt, "New Shakesqueer Cinema" 244; Howard 298; Rothwell 228.

39. The few exceptions include Freeth, Kidnie and Lanier, who focus mostly on aesthetics.

40. On cultural disruption also see Freeth 34.

It has been observed that most youth subcultures' deviance from what adult society considers to be the norm is mainly stylistic, that is, symbolic, representing no real threat.<sup>41</sup> In *Tromeo and Juliet*, however, the adult society itself, which is largely based on family values (Dimmock 190), seems to deviate from what is commonly seen as normal. If the characteristics of a "normal family" include, among other things, an "exclusive, mutually satisfying sexual relationship" between husband and wife, children biologically theirs, and a husband in full-time work who also spends time with his family (Dimmock 190), then these are just some of the values that are at stake in Kaufman's film. The director's justification of his young characters' deviant behavior lies in the portrayal of the two rival families' heads. Cappy Capulet represents the dark side of bourgeois society: he has deprived his partner of his part in the porn business, has seduced his partner's wife, and harasses sexually his own daughter. At his antipodes, Monty Que embodies various low-class problems: he is black, which rather relates him to a lower-class status as well as to issues of racism (Brake 5), he is unemployed, his wife sleeps with a richer man that used to be his business partner, and his child is not his own (at the end of the film it is revealed that Tromeo is son to Capulet). And all this is happening "in fair Manhattan," as Lemmy informs us delivering the paraphrased lines of Shakespeare's Chorus.

Unlike Kaufman, Luhrmann avoids referring to a particular society and does not seem to criticize a specific status quo. This decision cannot be irrelevant to the "postmodern dystopia" he creates, setting the play in "a (dys)place in a (dys)time" (Modenessi 69). The film's setting evokes various places, such as Los Angeles, Miami, Mexico City or Rio de Janeiro, but in Luhrmann's Verona Beach the various cultural signs "are rendered unspecific by their combination, magnification, and reiteration through an equally eclectic disruption of style as unifying device" (Modenessi 69-70). Rothwell talks about "the constructed world of a never-never land of Verona, partly filmed in Mexico city but as placeless in many ways as the set for a sci-fi movie" (241). The Australian director's view is rather clear: the CD-ROM version of the film defines Verona Beach as a "mythical city similar to Los Angeles or other contemporary cities in the world" (Modenessi 70).

Kaufman, with his obvious social criticism, may be more daring than Luhrmann; still, he does not totally reject what is commonly regarded as normal. The ending of *Tromeo and Juliet*, showing the young protagonists living happily with their children, though an "irreverent" transgression of Shake-

---

41. On this matter see Brake 5-7; Garratt 143, 147, 150; Wulff 1.

spare’s tragic closure, not only reproduces the conventional happy ending, so popular in Hollywood filmography, but also alludes to some kind of American bourgeois normalcy. According to Brake, the impact of a particular subculture on youth lasts until marriage, and what follows is reintegration in the dominant culture (22, 25). At first sight, Tromeo and Juliet eventually get the “bourgeois normalcy” they had always dreamt of (Lanier 188), which seems to reflect modern youth: “Despite the current concern about the uncertain future for marriage and the family,” remarks Brian Dimmock, “statistics suggest the majority today still seek a union of two people—80% wanting children—ideally for many years” (192). However, Kaufman’s young protagonists only get there after having killed Juliet’s incestuous father. Moreover, Tromeo and Juliet are revealed to be brother and sister, and the “unsettling qualities” of Kaufman’s happy ending also include the happy couple’s daughters, who bear in-breeding mutations (Freeth 15). Nevertheless, neither the couple nor their friends and relatives seem annoyed by this incestuous relationship and its offspring. And if a “normal” family would also include children “without serious physical . . . impairments” (Dimmock 190), which is not the case here, Tromeo and Juliet certainly have an “exclusive, mutually satisfying sexual relationship” and children biologically theirs.

In his ending Kaufman is “both evoking and mocking the bourgeois ideal that is so often the unstated ideological norm in teen dramas” (Lanier 188). As he himself explained, his intent was not “to destroy the idea of the Nuclear family, but merely satirize and expose certain values and hypocritical aspects of the society and world in which we live” (qtd. in Freeth 3). Considering that young people are commonly critical about social hypocrisy, the American film-maker is closer to modern youth than his Australian colleague. Furthermore, Kaufman lets his own youngsters have their way: if parting “totally sucks,” then he lets them be together for ever.

Kaufman’s criticism does not apply only to the dominant social ideology of his time. *Tromeo and Juliet* “directs its exaggerated violence in two directions at once, literally against those who seek to subject the lovers’ bodily desires to social or moral discipline, and symbolically against protocols of mainstream aesthetic taste represented both by Shakespeare and by mass market cinema (and thus the hybrid crafted by Luhrmann)” (Lanier 190). Although aesthetically it shares a lot with Luhrmann’s version,<sup>42</sup> Kaufman’s

---

42. Interestingly, quite a few critics saw in Luhrmann’s film qualities that would rather suit the Troma version, such as a parodic character (Lanier 183; Modenessi 79 n. 3; Rutter 258; Tatspaugh 143) or a “campy” humor (Lanier 183).

film is not merely a parodic, but a grotesque, carnivalesque adaptation of Shakespeare's play (Lanier 189). Moreover, the movie is a satire<sup>43</sup> not only of Shakespeare himself, but also of mainstream film clichés, as in the prologue, epilogue and revelation scene, which "adopt a pseudo-Elizabethan doggerel that mocks the notion of a seamless Shakespop hybrid" (Lanier 191).

This mocking of "a seamless Shakespop hybrid" that Lanier sees in *Tromeo and Juliet* obviously aims at *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*. Despite its various pop-cultural sources, Luhrmann's film keeps Shakespeare's play almost intact, which often makes his modernization look superficial. If Zeffirelli's version looked "stodgy" compared to Luhrmann's, the latter's aesthetics does not work for Kaufman's fans, who regard *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* as "pretentious, artistic-wannabe crap," paraphrasing its director's name into "Blah Boreman."<sup>44</sup> But what is mocked in Kaufman's film is not only the aesthetics of his Australian colleague; as Lanier remarks, "[w]hat *Tromeo* seeks to lampoon in Luhrmann's superficially daring update is its ultimately bourgeois idealization of love and teen alienation" (188). Regarding its ideological background, Luhrmann's film seems rather conservative compared not only to *Tromeo*, but also to Zeffirelli (or indeed to Shakespeare himself). Unlike Luhrmann, who presents a pair of young lovers swallowed by their parents' bourgeois ideology and the mass media through which it is expressed, Kaufman and Zeffirelli (and even Shakespeare), despite their massive differences, focus on the subversion of this ideology. Although we may not place Kaufman next to Zeffirelli or Shakespeare, *Tromeo* is not merely a bad taste flick. It is a movie that attacks daringly an imposed ideology and its cultural vehicle (Freeth 35).

Unlike his American colleague, Luhrmann does not seem to make a particular statement in his film; instead, the Australian director apparently neutralizes the whole story. In Shakespeare's final scene Montague and Capulet promise to bury their enmity and erect golden statues of each other's children to commemorate their ideal love. Moreover, the presence of the Prince seems to guarantee punishment for those who deserve it. In *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* the two fathers' promise to erect the young lovers' statues is left out, and the Prince's last speech is given to the Chorus-figure of an anchorwoman, while the further "talk of these sad things," the

---

43. On this matter see leila and John Lindsey on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

44. See Matt Huls and Jake respectively on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

forthcoming punishment and the gloom of the scene are all swallowed by a TV screen. Unlike Kaufman, who makes his point out of Shakespeare's story (even in its distorted form), Luhrmann seems to treat Romeo and Juliet's "star-crossed" love as yet another unfortunate incident shown on television, starting and ending with an anchorwoman's "calm, unemotional commentary" (O'Connor 33).<sup>45</sup> After the Prince's last lines are delivered, the script reads: "The anchorwoman changes beat to the next story" (162).

Despite its disturbing transgressiveness, we may argue that *Tromeo and Juliet* manifests much more clearly than *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* the idea of unconditional love. The latter is evident not only at the end, when the protagonists decide to stay together despite the fact that they are siblings, but also earlier on, when they fall in love. When this happens in Luhrmann's film, Romeo and Juliet are dressed the former as the boy King Arthur and the latter as an angel, costumes which allude to traditional stereotypes of ideal masculinity and femininity respectively; Kaufman's Juliet, on the contrary, falls in love with Tromeo regardless of his ridiculous cow costume. Although it is not clear what exactly makes Juliet fall in love with Tromeo (it might as well be his inventive costume itself),<sup>46</sup> it is obvious that she does not fall for an appearance that conforms with a social stereotype. Similarly, Juliet's transformation into a pig-like creature due to the priest's potion does not seem to trouble Tromeo. Kaufman does not exclude romantic love from his view of modern youth, and romance still shines, in spite of grossness, incest, and soft pornography. The American director may insist on the carnality of love (Lanier 189), but he still offers "romantic" moments between the young lovers, where he keeps largely Shakespeare's verse, even if he undermines the romantic mood shortly afterwards (Lanier 191).

It has been said that Luhrmann's modern setting is effective, as it brings the audience closer to the story (O'Connor 31-32); however, his world does not seem to reflect social reality, let alone modern youth culture. On the contrary, *Tromeo and Juliet*, though only *based on* the original (as the credits advertise on the official website), is a more complete modernization of the story, a full "urban update,"<sup>47</sup> touching on different issues of contemporary society. As for Luhrmann's transgressiveness, the Australian director deviates from mainstream cinematography only in terms of style, which makes his

---

45. On the anchorwoman also see Modenessi 62; Rothwell 241; Rutter 258; Westhoff.

46. The deviation of Juliet's character from what is commonly regarded as normal is also evident in other aspects of her personality: she is a macrobiotic and a bisexual.

47. See doublegh on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

divergence superficial. In fact, Luhrmann eventually recycles not only Hollywood's standards, but also the bourgeois ideology behind them, whereas Kaufman transgresses both. The two directors apparently address two different youth audiences: Luhrmann rather addresses the representatives of "respectable youth," the young people who "manage to pass through life without being involved in any teenage culture, or at least those aspects of it seen as deviant" (Brake 23), whereas Kaufman addresses mainly those who belong to the category of "delinquent youth." And if Luhrmann victimizes his young protagonists, Kaufman lets them have their way, because, among other things, parting "totally sucks" indeed. With his aberrant, if gross, *Tromeo and Juliet*, Kaufman shares with us the large autonomy of independent cinema, whereas his Australian colleague, entangled in the mainstream mechanisms of Hollywood, has little more to give than a superficial modernization of technical perfection. If *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* is a pleasure to watch, *Tromeo and Juliet*, despite its vulgar wrapping, has much more to offer.

University of Patras  
Greece

### Works Cited

- Anderegg, Michael. "James Dean Meets the Pirate's Daughter: Passion and Parody in *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* and *Shakespeare in Love*." *Shakespeare, the Movie, II: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, Video, and DVD*. Ed. Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose. London: Routledge, 2003. 56-71.
- Boose, Lynda E., and Richard Burt. "Totally Clueless?: Shakespeare Goes Hollywood in the 1990s." *Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*. Ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. London: Routledge, 1997. 8-22.
- Brake, Michael. *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada*. 1985. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987.
- Brode, Douglas. *Shakespeare in the Movies: From the Silent Era to "Shakespeare in Love"*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Burt, Richard. "Afterword: Te(e)n Things I Hate about Girlene Shakesploitation Flicks in the Late 1990s, or Not-so-Fast Times at Shakespeare High." *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*. Ed. Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002. 205-32.
- . "New Shakesqueer Cinema: The Love that Dare Not Speak Shakespeare's Name." *Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*. Ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. London: Routledge, 1997. 240-68.
- Cartmell, Deborah. "Franco Zeffirelli and Shakespeare." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Ed. Russell Jackson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 212-21.
- . *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen*. New York: St Martin's, 2000.

- Castaldo, Annalisa. "The Film's the Thing: Using Shakespearean Film in the Classroom." *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*. Ed. Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002. 187-204.
- Dimmock, Brian. "Young People and Family Life: Apocalypse Now or Business as Usual?" *Youth in Society: Contemporary Theory, Policy and Practice*. Ed. Jeremy Roche and Stanley Tucker. London: Sage (in association with The Open University), 1997. 190-98.
- Edmunds, June, and Bryan S. Turner. *Generations, Culture and Society*. Buckingham, Phil.: Open University Press, 2002.
- Freeth, Matthew. "All I Ever Know About Life I Learn from Spielberg (Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about My Family and See Troma as 'Art'): How Troma Destructs the Idea of the Nuclear Family." *Troma*. 4 March 2007 <<http://www.troma.com/fan/essays/papers/docs/mattfreeth-tromathesis.doc>>.
- Garratt, Daren. "Youth Cultures and Sub-Cultures." *Youth in Society: Contemporary Theory, Policy and Practice*. Ed. Jeremy Roche and Stanley Tucker. London: Sage (in association with The Open University), 1997. 143-50.
- Hapgood, Robert. "Popularizing Shakespeare: The Artistry of Franco Zeffirelli." *Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*. Ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. London: Routledge, 1997. 80-94.
- Hodgdon, Barbara. "Spectacular Bodies: Acting + Cinema + Shakespeare." *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*. Ed. Diana E. Henderson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006. 96-111.
- Howard, Tony. "Shakespeare's Cinematic Off-shoots." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Ed. Russell Jackson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 295-313.
- Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*. 10 September 2006 <<http://www.imdb.com>>.
- Lanier, Douglas. "Will of the People: Recent Shakespeare Film Parody and the Politics of Popularization." *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*. Ed. Diana E. Henderson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006. 176-96.
- Lehmann, Courtney, and Lisa S. Starks. "Introduction: Are We in Love with Shakespeare?" *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*. Ed. Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002. 9-20.
- Leslie, Dwayne E. Review of *Tromeo and Juliet*, dir. Lloyd Kaufman. *Boxoffice Online*. 12 September 2006 <<http://www.boxoffice.com/scripts/fiw.dll?GetReview?&where=ID&terms=3082>>.
- McKay, Brian. "Tromeo! Yo, Tromeo! Where the &%%\$@ is You, Tromeo?" Review of *Tromeo and Juliet*, dir. Lloyd Kaufman. *efilmcritic.com*. 12 September 2006 <<http://www.efilmcritic.com/review.php?movie=288&reviewer=258>>.
- Modenessi, Alfredo Michel. "(Un)Doing the Book 'without Verona walls': A View from the Receiving End of Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*." *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*. Ed. Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002. 62-85.
- O'Connor, John. *Shakespearean Afterlives: Ten Characters with a Life of Their Own*. Foreword by Stanley Wells. 2003. Cambridge: Icon, 2005.

- Rogers, Rex Stainton. "Constructing a Way of Life." *Youth in Society: Contemporary Theory, Policy and Practice*. Ed. Jeremy Roche and Stanley Tucker. London: Sage (in association with The Open University), 1997. 176-82.
- Rothwell, Kenneth S. *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Ruddick, Susan. "Modernism and Resistance: How 'Homeless' Youth Sub-cultures Make a Difference." *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. Ed. Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine. London: Routledge, 1998. 343-60.
- Rutter, Carol Chillington. "Looking at Shakespeare's Women on Film." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Ed. Russell Jackson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 241-60.
- Scheib, Richard. Review of *Tromeo and Juliet*, dir. Lloyd Kaufman. *The Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Film Review* 1998. 12 September 2006 <<http://www.moria.co.nz/horror/tromeo.htm>>.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells et al. Introd. Stanley Wells. Compact ed. 1988. Oxford: Clarendon, 1997.
- Tatspaugh, Patricia. "The Tragedies of Love on Film." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Ed. Russell Jackson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 135-59.
- Troma*. 10 September 2006 <<http://www.troma.com>>.
- Ulrich, Allan. "Wherefore Art Thou, You Crazy Cutup?: The Redoubtable Troma Guys Tackle *Romeo and Juliet*." Review of *Tromeo and Juliet*, dir. Lloyd Kaufman. *sfgate.com*. 18 April 1997. 12 September 2006 <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/e/a/1997/04/18/WEEKEND6654.dtl>>.
- Walker, Elsie. "Getting Back to Shakespeare: Whose Film Is It Anyway?" *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*. Ed. Diana E. Henderson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006. 8-30.
- Westhoff, Jeffrey. Review of *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, dir. Baz Luhrmann. *Rotten Tomatoes*. 12 September 2006 <<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/click/movie/1073352/reviews.php?critic=columns&sortby=default&page=4&rid=1160414>>.
- William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: The Contemporary Film, the Classic Play*. The screenplay by Craig Pearce and Baz Luhrmann and the text of Shakespeare's original play together in one volume. Notes to William Shakespeare's play by John Bettenbender. 1996. London: Hodder Children's Books, 1997.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture*. 1981. London: Fontana, 1986.
- . *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. 1976. Revised and expanded edition. London: Fontana, 1988.
- Wulff, Helena. "Introducing Youth Culture in Its Own Right: The State of the Art and New Possibilities." *Youth Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Ed. Vered Amit-Talai and Helena Wulff. London: Routledge, 1995. 1-18.
- Yule, George. *The Study of Language*. 1985. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.