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Christopher Baker
cbaker@dana.edu

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The Persistence of the Sacred in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*

Abstract

Romeo + Juliet (1996) is a hip, stylish update of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in a contemporary American Hispanic setting. The film's pervasive religious images have generally been seen as mere cultural trappings devoid of any genuine religious import. However, elements of the film are similar to the religious aspects of the Mexican fiesta, which mingles the sacred and the profane. Also, while most of the film's characters seem unresponsive to the religious imagery around them, this is not true for Romeo and Juliet themselves, for whom this symbolism denotes the spiritual dimension of their love.

Critics of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, divided over whether its setting in an urban Hispanic community was a truly effective rendering of Shakespeare's play or merely a sensational cinematic ploy by the director, often dismiss the film's portrayal of religion as "just another commodity in post-modern consumer culture."¹ Statues, icons, and holy images flood virtually every scene, making the very idea of spirituality seem somehow cheapened in the midst of glitzy Verona Beach and Luhrmann's self-conscious cinematic allusions to Hollywood westerns, grand opera, and even Tennessee Williams (Lady Capulet is portrayed as a Southern vamp). As if to signal his cheeky adaptation of Shakespeare, he even replaces the conjunction in the title with "+." However, the persistent religious imagery in the film—what Andrew Dickson calls "in-your-face-Catholicism"² — suggests that, while the Hispanic toughs of the feuding families of Verona Beach seem oblivious to any spiritual dimension to their lives, Luhrmann himself is attentive to the religious dimensions of Shakespeare's play and especially of its two central characters. The contrast between the debased religious imagery of their environment and the poignant symbolism associated with Romeo and Juliet underscores the unique transcendence of their relationship. Like the amorous couples in John Donne's love lyrics, their passionate affection carries its own religiosity as they canonize each other with a devotion more genuine than the faith of their fathers.

The dominant iconic image in *Romeo + Juliet* is the cross, and the recurring presence of crosses establishes the motif of the lovers as both "star-cross'd" and having to bear the cross of their love. Luhrmann filmed part of the movie in Veracruz, Mexico, a city whose full name is La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz ("the rich town of the true cross"), and the "+" in the title may also be linked with the crosses sometimes used to mark obituaries in Spanish newspapers. Besides the cross in the title of the film, we find a cross on the wedding rings of the tragic couple, atop the back seat of the Montagues' limousine, and etched into the windshield of Balthazar's car, as well as small crosses on the rear wall of the elevator in which Romeo and Juliet steal their first kiss, crosses formed by the window panes of the Capulet mansion, and a large, ornate cross tattooed on Friar Laurence's back, to cite only a few. Crosses make their most striking appearance in the final scene within the church where the supposedly dead Juliet lies in state. Romeo approaches her bier walking down a central aisle lined with neon crosses of blue, the traditional color associated with the Virgin Mary. Juliet's candle-filled vault is a strikingly hagiographical setting that renders Romeo a kind of martyr in this "feasting presence full of light."³

A second visual motif is that of holy statues and the recurring, iconic faces of saints. Luhrmann opens with an aerial establishing shot of a statue of Christ dominating the city from atop a church (actually the Catholic church of St. Peter in

Mexico City). This opening sequence recalls the famous beginning of Federico Fellini's film *La Dolce Vita* (1960), in which a statue of Christ dangling from a helicopter is flown over the city of Rome. Like Fellini, Luhrmann seems intent on displaying a society for whom religion has been reduced to little more than nostalgic symbols. Yet unlike Fellini, whose characters lead lives of quiet desperation in "the sweet life," Luhrmann preserves Shakespeare's focus on a pair of young lovers whose vital passion is an earthly experience of the divine which lifts them above the amorality of their surroundings. Throughout the film the statues of Christ and the Virgin Mary reappear in both high- and low-angle shots, suggesting a framing spiritual reality above and beyond the world of the violent city, a reality to which Romeo and Juliet's love offers them unique access.

The film is so saturated with religious symbolism that these objects at first strike us as little more than stereotypical tokens of Hispanic America, religious "signs" which have been demoted to the garish trappings of pop culture. However, though Romeo and Juliet are immersed in this culture, they are set apart from it in the world of their own romance; they are in Verona but not of it, and these religious symbols present them as, in Donne's phrase, "canonized for love."⁴ As impetuous, even reckless youth, they resemble the other hot-blooded adolescents around them, but as the defiant children of powerful Veronese families they seek to separate themselves from a culture in which power has replaced piety. In the early scene of

the costume ball, Juliet's white angelic wings denote a spiritual dimension to her character which distinguishes her from the other young women, while Romeo's medieval suit of armor marks him as the chivalric knight who will defy all challenges to pursue his paramour. This medieval motif is continued at the movie's conclusion, as the soundtrack plays the "Liebestod" from Wagner's operatic retelling of the doomed love of Tristan and Isolde.

By suggesting the Hispanic ethos of both Miami Beach and Los Angeles, "Verona Beach" is a cinematic amalgam of Latino life and its Chicano subculture.⁵ As Philippa Sheppard points out, by placing the film's Elizabethan stage motifs in a Hispanic context, Luhrmann calls up a variety of Latino elements—the overbearing Mediterranean father, the historic Black Legend which derides Spanish Catholicism, Juliet's nurse as the stereotypical Latin American servant—all of which establish a multicultural context.⁶ However, Luhrmann's film-world also overlays Shakespeare's plot with another Latin folk context, the fiesta. The film's color, music, emotional intensity, and unpredictable violence all recreate features of the fiesta, a social event central to the Mexican identity. A variety of details combine to create a world of carnival that is both festive and threatening: the movie's rapid cutting, especially in the opening twenty minutes as Montagues and Capulets confront each other; the repeated use of extravagant fireworks and strings of bright, decorative lights; the faded gaiety suggested by the "Sycamore Grove"

amusement park on the beach; the customized cars driven by the feuding youths; the everpresent glint of their pistols (given names such as "Sword" and "Rapier"); and the allegorical costuming of Tybalt (wearing devil's horns at the costume ball) and Abra (with a metal plate across his teeth engraved with "Sin"). Two of Tybalt's sidekicks even appear as skeletons at the costume ball, a gesture toward the Mexican festival of the Day of the Dead.

As Octavio Paz points out in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the celebration of the dead, like those fiestas dedicated to various saints, recognizes the flawed and passionate nature of human life, linking it to a dominant theme of Shakespearean tragedy. These fiestas are windows into Mexican culture which, according to Paz,

all give [the Mexican] a chance to reveal himself and to converse with God, country, friends, or relations. During these days the silent Mexican whistles, shouts, sings, shoots off fireworks, discharges his pistol into the air. He discharges his soul. . . . This is the night when friends who have not exchanged more than the prescribed courtesies for months get drunk together, trade confidences, weep over the same troubles, discover that they are brothers, and sometimes, to prove it, kill each other. . . . Now and then, it is true, the happiness ends badly, in quarrels, insults, pistol shots, stabbings. But these too are part of the fiesta⁷

Paz stresses that "The fiesta is by nature sacred, literally or figuratively, and above all it is the advent of the unusual. . . . [T]ime is transformed to a mythical past or a total present; space, the scene of the fiesta, is turned into a gaily decorated world of its own; and the persons taking part cast off all human or social rank and become,

for the moment, living images.”⁸ He points out that in ancient Aztec culture, ritual sacrifices to the gods emphasized that life and death were intimately linked, and that all of society thus served a higher destiny. However, with the advent of Christianity, one's fate became an individual matter concerning the afterlife. "To Christians," says Paz, "death is a transition, a somersault between two lives, the temporal and the otherworldly; to the Aztecs it was the profoundest way of participating in the continuous regeneration of the creative forces which were always in danger of being extinguished if they were not provided with blood, the sacred food.”⁹

Paz's analysis of the fiesta helps us to appreciate the insistent mingling of the religious and tragic strands in the fabric of Luhrmann's film. First, the spontaneous, unpredictable nature of fiesta provides a fitting cultural setting for the variety of surprising theatrical effects by which the director sought to link the film to the energetic London stage of Shakespeare's era. While the majority of characters in the film seem oblivious to the religious icons around them, the audience is unavoidably aware of this spiritual presence, most clearly apparent in the two lovers. The icons seem to have been crassly degraded by being placed on automobile fenders or garish tropical shirts, but their pervasiveness reveals the underlying spiritual dimension of fiesta. This mixture of sacred and secular, more than merely a part of "post-modern consumer culture," is central to this cultural

event. Secondly, the fiesta is by nature a religious event which permits an outpouring of uninhibited, blatantly defiant energy in the name of a patron saint or the honored dead. Social conventions are overturned, rules and regulations temporarily suspended, and the whole event recalls the fervent energy of the ancient Greek festivals of Dionysus, the god of procreation and wine, whose festivals gave rise to dramatic tragedy itself. Nietzsche's theory of tragedy famously linked this type of drama with the release of unbridled powers in the name of the pagan god Dionysus who defies propriety, reveling in the mysterious and the violent. Finally, the fiesta is a celebration with the potential of turning tragic at any moment. Shakespearean tragedy ends in death, but this is typically a restorative event after which the society of the play may return to a healthier state. The brutal sound of Juliet's final pistol shot shocks us into realizing that these families have unwittingly contributed to their children's deaths. In a dramatic reflection of the propitiatory Aztec rituals cited by Paz, their deaths become an offering which will eventually bring peace to the city.

The religious symbolism in this film is intimately mingled with the mercenary and even sordid details of life in Verona Beach, but a remnant of spiritual presence in these icons, statues, and paintings is never completely obscured by the material culture for which they seem little more than decorative frills. Sacred and profane exist in a dynamic balance which for Luhrmann resembles

the blended relationship of society and religion in Shakespeare's London. As he told an interviewer in 1996: "I wanted to create a place where religion mixed with politics, . . . a place with a degree of mysticism."¹⁰ Luhrmann's characters—with the exception of Romeo, Juliet, and Friar Laurence—seem unaware of any spiritual dimension in their lives, despite all of their religious tokens. In the opening gas station scene, the lewd behavior of one of the Montague boys designed to shock the nun and her Catholic schoolgirls is more typical of the Verona Beach attitude toward religion, far different from Romeo's ardent desire that "He that hath the steerage of my course / Direct my sail."¹¹ He later loses his "course" by murdering Tybalt, but Leonardo DiCaprio effectively shows the extreme provocation Romeo endures before succumbing to revenge and then guilt.

The film captures the intensity with which the young lovers convey their affection in Shakespeare's religious idiom. Juliet is Romeo's "bright angel," "a winged messenger of heaven," and "a dear saint,"¹² while Juliet says that he is "the god of my idolatry."¹³ This language might seem to be nothing more than the conventional discourse of Renaissance love poetry if the couple did not then act on their words and seek to have, in the friar's words, "Holy Church incorporate two in one."¹⁴ Luhrmann also fills Juliet's bedroom with religious kitsch, but we sense that these objects express the most genuine faith in the play. In Shakespeare's text, when Juliet discovers that Romeo has killed Tybalt, she expresses her fears to the nurse,¹⁵

but Luhrmann significantly has her utter these statements while kneeling in prayer before a statue of the Virgin. The lovers' devotion sets them apart from their warring families, and they are frequently shot within enclosed spaces which separate them from the secular world: in the Capulet's elevator, in the pool beneath Juliet's balcony, enclosed by the sheets on Juliet's bed, or together in the church where they die.

The placement of religious images in the film sometimes suggests that the church's traditional influence has been compromised by power politics. This occurs notably in the opening shot, where the large statue of Christ is glimpsed between the towering Montague and Capulet skyscrapers, as if hinting that the authority of religion is being eclipsed by the secular power of these two wealthy families. The bizarre juxtaposition of the totem-like image of the Virgin on the pistol grips of some gang members seems to imply their magical belief that heaven will side with them in their feud. Yet the holy faces that we see of Christ, Mary, and various saints throughout the film compose a ghostly group of silent onlookers to the violence, as if no act committed by these clashing gangs goes unnoticed by the divinity which their culture has reduced to tawdry artwork. Several scenes are shot from a vantage above a statue of Christ, looking down on a traffic circle, as if from a God's-eye view. When the devil-horned Tybalt appears at the costume ball flanked by his two skeleton-clad friends, we glimpse behind them an oil painting of the crucifixion.

As Romeo and Friar Laurence leave the church the camera lingers on a wall painting behind them of the head of Christ sporting Tybalt-like dark sideburns—a Chicano Jesus. And even the outrageously campy dance at the Capulet's ball by Mercutio, portrayed here as a black transvestite, is performed on a grand staircase overseen by a colossal painting of the Virgin.

These religious juxtapositions are firmly fixed within a palpable world of physical sensation and ethnic values, not apart from them in some spiritually sanitized location free from the contradictions of human experience. This conjunction of the holy and the common would also have been familiar to Shakespeare's audience, who could have seen pagan imps, gargoyles, or naked figures occasionally carved into the sacred corners of their cathedrals, a common medieval practice. Graham Ward accurately captures the provocative religious undercurrent of the film:

For despite its kitsch attachment to holy accessories and paraphernalia . . . , there are moments when the transcendent is taken more seriously, when we view the action from above, from the head of Christ. There are moments of devotional awe and reverence relating both to what the lovers feel for each other and to Christ's own love. These moments run counter to the iconoclasm which sometimes borders on the blasphemous (lending an added frisson to the film). The tone of the film's portrayal of Roman Catholicism is ambivalent and irreducibly so.¹⁶

An artistic medium can become a point of dialogue, as Clive Marsh emphasizes: "Any aspect of human culture—including film—which explores in however slight

a fashion such themes as 'the human condition,' the nature of reality, or how people should live is addressing subject-matter of concern to Christian theology, and about which Christian theology has things to say."¹⁷ Precisely because Christians believe that God entered history in physically human form, "God, in Christian perspective, is tangled up with the ordinary, the mundane, the seemingly trivial, in a way which is worthy of close examination."¹⁸ In Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* religion is a persistent presence within society, even if that presence is signaled for most as little more than an aesthetic style. The violence, passion, and power of Verona Beach which threaten to overwhelm the validity of the spiritual are themselves central to the mingling of sacred and secular in the world of fiesta; we are reminded that in the fallen world spirituality must often assert its presence accompanied by the threat of tragic failure. The concluding deaths of Romeo and Juliet in Luhrmann's film occur in a candle- and cross-filled vault which raises them both above the sordid city they have left behind, gesturing towards an overarching spiritual dimension which the film never lets us forget.

¹ Lehmann, Courtney. "William Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet*." *Shakespeares after Shakespeare: An Encyclopedia of the Bard in Mass Media and Popular Culture*. Ed. Richard Burt. 2 vols. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007. I, 124.

² Dickson, Andrew. *The Rough Guide to Shakespeare*. London: Rough Guides, 2005. p. 314.

³ Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore. Evans. 2nd ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 5.3.86.

⁴ Donne, John. *John Donne's Poetry*. Ed. Donald R. Dickson. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. p. 36.

⁵ West-Durán, Alan. "Crossing Borders: Creative Disorders." *Latino and Latina Writers*. Ed. Alan West Duran. 2 vols. New York: Thomson Gale, 2004. I, 21-40.

⁶ Sheppard, Philippa. "Latino Elements in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*." *Latin American Shakespeares*. Ed. Bernice W. Kliman and Rick J. Santos. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005. 242-62.

⁷ Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985. p. 49.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 56.

¹⁰ Darlington, Shasta. "Yo! Romeo!" *Los Angeles Times*. July 21, 1996.

¹¹ (1.3.112-13)

¹² (2.2.26, 28, 55)

¹³ (2.2.114).

¹⁴ (2.6.36-37)

¹⁵ (3. 2)

¹⁶ Ward, Graham. *True Religion*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003. p. 28-29.

¹⁷ Marsh, Clive. "Film and Theologies of Culture." *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Ed. p. 27 Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. 21-34.

¹⁸ _____ and Gaye Ortiz. "Theology Beyond the Modern and the Postmodern: A Future Agenda for Theology and Film." *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. 245-56. 253.