FROM WEST TO EAST: *ROMEO MUST DIE* BUT SHAKESPEARE IS THE SUN

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Abstract: *The paper presents a mini survey of the hallmark English language motion pictures which are explicitly based on William Shakespeare's* Romeo and Juliet*. The selection of the six films under investigation takes into account various criteria such as aspects of chronology, culture, impact or novelty of approach. The analysis is based on four categories: genre, auteurism (authorship), reception and verisimilitude.*
Keywords*: film theory, genre, auteurism (authorship), reception theory, verisimilitude*

> *For never was a story of more woe*
> *Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.*
> (William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.325-326)

1. By Way of Introduction

It is without any doubt that the youngest of all arts is also the most popular. Films are part of modern culture. Before the introduction of film in the early part of the twentieth century, only plays were performed on stage in the presence of live audiences. In less than a century this so called "seventh art" has turned into a real and profitable industry. The emergence of film making raised (among both theorists and practitioners of film making) questions about the advantages and the efficiency of films over theatre as well as queries around the emotional participation of an audience watching a drama performed on stage as opposed to a film adaptation. Sontag (1977:90) claims that, although film making had an early connection with the stage, one can make a film of a play but not a play of a film and then concludes that "theatre remains the favoured candidate for the role of summative art". Added to this, Eidsvick (1978:306-307) claims that

> film and literary critics alike confuse literature with its dominant medium, print, and confuse the medium of film with its dominant genre, the narrative. (…) A medium is something we look through, not at, and it is what we see through a medium that defines which art we are involved in.

The theorist on film and founding editor of the influential French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, André Bazin (l999:529), put forward two crucial arguments: first, that the best films rely on *mise-en-scène* to construct their moods and effects (rather than montage editing), and second, that the best films bear the mark or, better said, they illustrate "the vision" of their

directors. The latter became known as "auteur theory" ("auteur" is the French word for author). The issue of auteurism, along with other concepts is to be explored later in this paper as they will constitute the category system of the analysis presented here.

Literary classics are a rich source of adaptation for film makers and Shakespeare is not by far an exception to this rule. Quite on the contrary, his plays have enriched the film making industry for decades and have inspired many directors. More than that, it stands to reason to argue that his *Romeo and Juliet* is probably his most popular play, not only when it comes to its fame but also when it comes to its staging and film versions. Unfortunately, as Spencer (1967:7) argued as early as in the 1960s at the very beginning of his introductory words to the Penguin version of *Romeo and Juliet*: "Most discussions of *Romeo and Juliet*, and most stage productions, give a simplified view of the play", by focusing on the tragic love theme and thus "do an injustice to the complexity of *Romeo and Juliet*". It will be interesting to see whether Spencer's argument is also valid for the film versions we chose to overview.

Romeo and Juliet was first produced in 1908 directed by J. Stuart Blackton in the USA, simultaneously with *Romeo e Giulietta,* directed by Mario Caserini in Italy. The years to follow witnessed countless attempts to adapt (for the big screen or television) William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet. Wikipedia* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_and_Juliet_%28films%29) records 148 productions among which some are highly memorable, some are not; some are parodies and spoofs, while some are sheer pornography. In other words, all tell the story of Romeo and Juliet, yet they differ in dramatic presentation, philosophical viewpoint, in the nature of the characters and in the kind of love they instantiate, in the culture (and its values, beliefs and practices) which frame the story.

Under the circumstances, and since the main concern of our endeavour is to present a mini survey of the trademark English language films which are explicitly based on William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, we had to decide in a principled way what "trademark" films might mean. Thus, the films included in the corpus of our mini survey, had to display certain features pertaining to various aspects, such as chronology, culture, impact, or reception and, last but not least, novelty of approach. We will, therefore, try to account, in comparative terms, for the selection as well as the nature, substance, and reception of the films included in the corpus. As follows, we will first clarify the methodological and theoretical concepts of our study and then we will present and discuss the findings of our analysis.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

Before the analysis proper, it is necessary to explain some theory-related issues which informed the construction of the corpus and of the analytical framework. To this end, in this section of our paper, we will briefly overview some hallmark moments in the development of film making and then we will clarify the categories employed in our analysis.

2.1. A history of film-making in a nutshell

Although the beginnings of the movie history was largely attributed to the Lumière Brothers, it was Tomas Edison's Kinetoscope, first presented at the 1893 Chicago World Fair, which generated the development of cinematography to one of the most powerful means of communication, entertainment, and mass media in the 21st century.

During the first 30 years, silent movies were accompanied by live music and sometimes sound effects, and with written dialogue and narration presented in intertitles. This was the period when the most popular and powerful cinemas developed in France and Italy. But the European film industries were brutally interrupted by World War I (1914-1918) and thus, the American industry, known as "Hollywood" gained the position it has preserved ever since: film plant for the whole world, holding extensive control over the market. The Hollywood era's novelty was *the studio system* with its publicity method, and *the star system* which prevailed for the decades to come.

The transition from silent movies to all-talkies was very quick and, by 1929, it was almost completely accomplished in Hollywood. As a result, new genres appeared, among which the classic-style Hollywood musical. Ten years later, Hollywood reached a climax with hallmark films like *Gone with The Wind*. The war and post-war years revived the British cinema which started to produce realistic war dramas as well as classic films like Shakespeare's *Henry the V* starring Sir Laurence Olivier. Also, the classic film noir can be traced back to the same period. The Cold War of the 50s brought themes such as invading armies of evil aliens. Television started to compete with films on the big screen.

The studio system in Hollywood underwent a decline during the 1960s, and many films were now being made on location in other countries, or using studio facilities abroad, such as Pinewood in England and Cinecittà in Rome. Meanwhile, independent producers and film production companies emerged, and the power of individual actors increased as well, thus underlying the *European auteur cinema*.

"New Hollywood" or "post-classical cinema" was called the period of the 70s, characterized by explicit sexual content and showing gunfight and battle scenes that included graphic images of bloody deaths. A new group of American filmmakers emerged, such as Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Brian de Palma. This overlapped the *auteur theory* in film and media, giving these directors far greater control over their projects than before.

The 1980s brought another competitor: the home VCR. The decade vas dominated by directors like Lukas and Spielberg. The 1990s witnessed the development of a commercially successful independent cinema in the United States based on new special effects. The 2000s brought along new experiments and genres and revived the interest in epic drama (cf. *Gladiator*). Home theatre systems became increasingly sophisticated.

One major new development in the early 21st century is the development of systems that make it much easier for regular people to write, shoot, edit and distribute their own movies without the large apparatus of the film industry. (http://www.filmbug.com/dictionary/moviehistory.php)

2.2. From film genre to film reception: conceptual clarifications

Film theory can be defined as a sustained interrogation of propositions about the nature of the medium, the features of individual films or the interaction between viewers and films. (Corrigan and White 2004:419).

Based on this definition, we outlined our paper by combining several perspectives and dealt with six of the most innovative film versions of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet from the point of view of *genre*, *auteurism* (authorship) – the theory that a film is the creative responsibility of a single individual (usually the director) –, *reception theory* and *verisimilitude* ("Quality of truth").

2.2.1 Genre

The concept of genre is generally used to classify works of literature, music, visual arts, and other art forms. Since the beginning of film production, genre acquired an important role and the popularity of specific genres varied across the historical periods.

Like our daily lives, movies are also conceived in repetitive paradigms which allow audiences to recognize and share expectations and routines. According to Corrigan and White,

> film genre is a set of conventions and formulas, repeated and developed through film history… Like other social routines, genres describe cultural rituals, the repetition of formulas that help coordinate our needs and desires. (Corrigan and White 2004:289)

Consequently, a *genre film* designates a type of movie that is quickly recognizable, although sometimes it can carry the pejorative connotation of lacking originality (Corrigan and White 2004:432).

Film genres crystallized as early as the beginning of cinema, developing sets of generic conventions based on specific properties that identify a certain genre. To draw a complete list of film genres would be too daring and somehow confusing, because of the variable width or narrowness of scope, and because of the existence of hybrid genres and subgenres. Therefore, film theory operates with the concept of "generic constellation" (Corrigan and White 2004:297). Still, the generic classification is of utmost importance in the economic strategy of the film industry. It is the genre which attracts and draws audiences back again and again to experience the genres they enjoy.

As mentioned before, the popularity of genres depends very much on the stage of film history and periodization. Thus, the six film versions of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which represent the object of our case study, belong to different film genres, although they start from the same underlying story.

2.2.2. Auteurism

Film practice and theory started to have auteurism at its center in the early 1950's. The concept originates in the films and writings of the French New Wave, and is indebted for its spreading to *Cahiers du Cinéma* of the 1950's (Hillier 1986). The theory of authorship, or the auteurist criticism usually located the creative center of a film in the controlling perspective of the film's director. This resulted in the decay of the studio system that defined filmmaking before 1945. As auteurism evolved through the 1960's and 1970's (and began to include other individual forces behind a film, such as stars and screenwriters), it focused on more theoretical and formal questions about personal expression in the cinema, issues about who in fact "authors" a film. Film authorship has shaped our understanding of many film cultures around the world and across different media beyond the cinema, as models of auteurism have evolved from France to the United States and through national cinemas from China and India to Iran and Denmark. The meaning of auteurism has changed significantly across time and space due to the pressures of poststructuralist theory, feminist interventions, cultural and racial distinctions, and the challenges of new media (Corrigan and White 2004:372).

2.2.3. Verisimilitude

A Dictionary of Film Studies (Kuhn and Westwell 2012:67) records the term *verisimilitude* under the definition of "the appearance of being true or real; believability". Corrigan and White (2004:125) consider that

> *verisimilitude*, literally "having the appearance of truth", is that quality of fictional representations that allows readers or viewers to accept a constructed world, its events, its characters, and the actions of those characters as plausible. In cinematic storytelling, clear, consistent spatial and temporal patterns greatly enhance verisimilitude.

These patterns have a special role in the film editing process, being part of the *Hollywood continuity style*.

The standards of verisimilitude constantly change with audience tastes and cultural trends.

2.2.4. Reception

Reception theory focuses on how different kinds of audiences regard different kinds of films. It is one of the most important approaches used by cultural film studies. As its name reveals, it doesn't focus on the filmmakers, but it places at the centre of film experiences the audience. Not only sociologists are interested in collecting information about audience structure or preferences, but the film industry is as least as interested in the viewer surveys as the former. An interesting component of the *reception theory* is the theory of audiences, which are perceived as dynamic in the sense that films from the past may be received by today's audiences in new ways. According to Corrigan and White (2004:461),

> [t]he responses of particular viewers to cultural phenomena are considered *situated responses*, readings that are influenced, though not predetermined, by geography, age, gender, wealth, and a host of other contingent factors… The methodologies associated with reception studies include comparing and contrasting protocols of reviews drawn from different periodicals, countries or decades.

In the analysis of our corpus we made use of the *International Movie Data Base* (IMDB) ranking, which is based on anonymous reviews, as opposed to the evaluation of recognized authorities such as the Oscar, BAFTA and Berlin awards, including nominations.

The first Academy Awards were presented on May 16, 1929, at a private dinner at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel with an audience of about 270 people and the ceremony ran for 15 minutes. Ever since, it has become the most prestigious cultural event honoring artists, directors and other personalities of the filmmaking industry.

BAFTA started out as the British Film Academy, founded in 1947 by a number of notorious directors such as David Lean, and Laurence Olivier. In 1976, HM The Queen, The Duke of Edinburgh, The Princess Royal and The Earl Mountbatten of Burma officially opened the organisation's headquarters at 195 Piccadilly, London, and in March the Society officially became known as the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA). (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Academy_of_Film_and_Television_Arts)

The Berlin International Film Festival, also called the *Berlinale*, is one of the world's leading film festivals and most reputable media events. It has been held yearly in Berlin, Germany, since 1951 when a U.S. film officer initiated it.

3. Methodological Underpinnings

Presenting and discussing briefly the issues pertaining to the methodology underlying the present endeavour has a twofold dimension. First, we need to engage in the discussion of the construction of our corpus for analysis, more precisely the selection principle and the criteria we based it upon. Secondly, we need to explain the approach we adopted and the steps we followed in our analysis.

As observed before, Shakespeare in general and his *Romeo and Juliet* in particular are probably the most frequently resorted to themes for the film making industry. Constructing an analytical corpus under the circumstances can turn out to be a fairly daunting endeavour, both when it comes to quantity (as mentioned before, *Wikipedia* records almost 150 films) and when it comes to quality (the criteria according to which such a selection should be made). To explain, both including too many films in the corpus and taking into account a large number of criteria would create a corpus impossible to manage. Thus, only three criteria were adopted: film making culture, impact and novelty of approach. The movie-making culture refers to the becoming of the film industry and the fact that we took into account English language based movies. When determining the impact of the movies we took into account both an international perspective and a local one. The international perspective was represented by the internet based IMDB, presented before, while the local was basically a mini survey conducted among the initiated, educated colleagues of our faculty. Added to that we also included in the impact criterion an aspect which we labeled as "trend setting", that is to say that we considered that for a movie to be included in our analysis, it would propose a fresh perspective that opens a path to be followed by other film adaptations.

We ended up with six films in our corpus and they are listed together with their general characteristics in the figure below.

Figure 1. Overview of the films under scrutiny and their general characteristics

	Romeo and Juliet (1936)	*West Side Story* (1961)	*Romeo and Juliet* (1968)	*Romeo+Juliet* (1996)	*Shakespeare in Love* (1998)	*Romeo Must Die* (2000)
Place	Verona, Italy	New York, US	Verona, Italy	Verona Beach, US	London, UK	New York, US
Director	George Cukor	Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins	Franco Zeffirelli	Baz Luhrmann	John Madden	Andrzej Bartkowiak
Language	Original text	English	Original text	English	Modern English and original text	English
Genre	Romantic tragedy	Romantic tragedy crime, musical	Romantic tragedy	Romantic tragedy, burlesque	Romantic tragedy, comedy,	Tragedy, crime, action martial arts
Leading Roles	Norma Shearer, Leslie Howard	Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer	Leonard Whiting, Olivia Hussey	Leonardo DiCaprio, Claire Danes	Joseph Fiennes Gwyneth Paltrow	Jet Li, Aaliyah
IMDB score	6.7	7.6	7.6	6.8	7.2	5.9
Time	16th century	1950s	16th century	1990s	16th century	2000

As can be seen, the observations recorded in the table refer to the authorship in terms of film directors, star actors and actresses, of the kinds of genres they instantiate, of reception: the score they got from the viewers, and verisimilitude to the original: time, place, and the language of the films. It needs to be mentioned at this point that, by and large, with this table we have introduced the category system of our analysis, whose purpose was to conduct a survey of our corpus in terms of the genre, auteurism, verisimilitude and reception. A further, more detailed analysis, both when it comes to cinematographic perspective and a linguistic one, will continue the endeavour presented in this paper.

4. The Films: Focusing In

If previously we overviewed the most important theoretical frameworks, the reasons and principles underlying the selection of the films which constituted our corpus, in this section we present, analyse, and discuss the films selected for our analysis. As mentioned before, to this end, the following categories will be looked at by film genre, auteurism, reception and verisimilitude.

4.1. Genre

Only two of the films analysed appeared to have taken the classical-loyal-to-Shakespeare approach: Cukor's 1936 version and Zeffirelli's 1968. The remaining films are all of a more or less hybrid nature, the most complex in this respect being the 1961 *West Side Story* and the 2000 *Romeo Must Die* turned into contemporary tragedies and adding two extra distinct genre features to the classical tragedy: crime and musical in the first case and crime and martial arts action in the second. The most innovative, though, of the six films appears to be Madden's 1998 *Shakespeare in Love* not because it is the most impregnated with comedy elements but because it is a framed movie of the type play-within-a movie. The frame consists in the love story between Shakespeare himself and lady Viola de Lesseps, a member of the emerging bourgeoisie who, initially in love with Shakespeare's work, ends up playing the part of Juliet (sacrilegious and law breaking in the period when all roles had to be played by males) and irremediably falls in love with Shakespeare in the process. An interesting genre related approach is put forward by Luhrman's 1996 *Romeo+Juliet* with its mixture of contemporary elements and extravagant, burlesque elements.

In brief, as far as genre is concerned we consider that the "boldest" of the films analysed are the 1956 *West Side Story* and *Shakespeare in Love* due to their cutting edge, postmodern, trend setting nature: musical and framed play.

4.2. Auteurism

This turned out to be the most complex category of our analysis as it produced probably most interesting findings. In his review of *Romeo+Juliet*, Berardinelli (1996) claims that:

> Ultimately, no matter how many innovative and unconventional flourishes it applies, the success of any adaptation of a Shakespeare play is determined by two factors: the competence of the director and the ability of the main cast members.

We would like to add that, particularly in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, the limelight will inevitably shine upon the two adolescent tragic heroes of the play, and therefore on the "stars" (actors and actresses) who were so lucky to be chosen to take their part. In this way, besides the directors' "visions", these actors would inevitably influence greatly the sense and direction of the film as well as its reception. It has to be mentioned at this point that, regrettably but inevitably, some of the complexity and of the great subtleties of Shakespeare's play are either downplayed or go unnoticed in film adaptations. Thus, when discussing each of the films, we will have to focus on the main protagonists and whether it was the way they interpreted their roles that had the major part to play in the film auteurism or whether there were other elements at stake. Within this category we will also refer to the "novelty" of treatment and the trend they set.

The most "unsuitable", ridiculous and at time hilarious (to a third millennium viewer) protagonists are the 1936 Romeo and Juliet. Though it set the record of being MGM's most expensive movie at that time, for example, as Orgel (2003:90) deems it, it was

> largely miscast ... with a preposterously mature pair of lovers in Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer, and an elderly John Barrymore as a stagey Mercutio decades out of date.

The "vision" belongs to the producer Irvine Thalberg, and it was his desire to have the film revolve around his wife Norma Shearer and every aspect of the movie had to take this into account (from the selection of Cukor as a director, known as the women's director at the time to the rest of the cast). The two protagonists, in spite of their opulent costumes and surroundings, are but two mature lovers, who have to behave like two hot-headed impetuous adolescents. Though highly acclaimed and prized at the moment of release and though faithful to Shakespeare, the film succeeds neither as a passionate romance nor as costume epic-drama. It was, however, like all the rest of the movies selected for our analysis, a trend setter: literal, theatrical adaptations (to this date, it held the highest ratio of the original Shakespearean text used: 45%).

The two protagonists of *West Side Story*, on the other hand, do not take the limelight, they are suitable, they are beautiful, reasonably young, and they sing and dance (less of the singing though in the case of Natalie Wood) well. Their selection was prompted by the desire to combine fame (Natalie Wood) with professionalism (the rest of the singing and dancing cast). Auteurism in this case was a combined "vision", which resorted to other arts than drama. It is the music that marked the movie and ensured its impact, music composed by the most famous American composer Leonard Bernstein. The trend set by the film is that of liberal adaptations grafted by hybridization of genres (just as an example, see another famous movie of the eighties, *Dirty Dancing*).

It is without any doubt that when it comes to taking the limelight, i.e. the protagonists' contribution to auteurism, the two adolescents selected by Zeffirelli made the greatest impact ever. The director's audacity to choose two virtually unknown actors having the same age as Shakespeare's originals proved to be a stroke of genius. Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting played the parts of their lives, and were forever marked by it. It was Leonard Whiting's sole prominent cinematographic role and his very short movie making career ended in the 70's, while Olivia Hussey only played in B rated movies after that. (The only actor who had a successful career after playing a part, Tybalt's, in the film was Michael York.) The protagonists' acting was so convincing and emotional that, to date, they remain the closest embodiment of the Shakespearean Romeo and Juliet. It is only almost fifty years later that another director dares to follow the trend set by Zeffirelli: that of beautiful, unknown adolescent actors and a more

liberated view on the sexual side of their attraction. (See Carlo Carlei's *Romeo and Juliet*, released in October 2013).

In a sense, the 1996 Luhrman's *Romeo+Juliet* does seem to follow Zeffirelli's suite when it comes to the two protagonists put forward. However, as young and beautiful as they might be, they are not teenagers and they are not that innocent in the movie making business. It is rather the imprint made by the director himself that rendered the movie its specificity both when it comes to his choice of actors (Di Caprio being a most favourite) and to his vision. The elements which constitute his authorial mark pertain to the burlesque, particularly evident in the ballroom scene (these elements of burlesque reach their full potential in Luhrman's adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*). This comical, burlesque, hybrid approach is to be followed and taken to another level by the 1998 *Shakespeare in Love.*

Shakespeare in Love is the most prized of the films scrutinised here, as it will be discussed in more detail in the reception subsection of our analysis. Though the two protagonists played their parts gloriously (Gwyneth Paltrow actually won an Oscar as best actress in a leading role but only after the withdrawal of Julia Roberts, whose presence in the film was sought after in order to secure the film's commercial success) we consider that the auteurism of the film is shared between the film directing (done by John Madden) and the script writing (belonging to Marc Norman and the famous playwright Tom Stoppard). Thus, besides its innovative framed theatrical play approach, combined with witty dialogue and savory supporting parts (i.e. the "producer"/apothecary), the vision put forward is highly postmodern in its hybrid and intertextual nature. This hybridism and intertextuality is all encompassing, from Shakespeare's plays (such as the reference to *Twelfth Night*) to the use of contemporary verbal clichés (such as: *Follow that boat* and *The show must…Go on* grafted on Shakespeare's language. Thus, even though the film is apparently loyal to Shakespeare's age and play, it most often than not "reads" like a contemporary romantic comedy, being thus the most postmodern Shakespearean movie ever made. The trend set is yet to be followed. No other director has yet dared to imitate this framed theatrical play vision when it comes to any of Shakespeare's plays. (The Spanish director Pedro Almodovar has recently done something similar, but obviously not with a Shakespearean play.)

In contrast, *Romeo Must Die* is the film in which the protagonists' parts have had the most prominent contribution to the film's auteurism. It is obvious the film has been produced with those particular actors in mind, both of them being very popular among the adolescents of the late 90s. Thus Romeo is played by Jet Lee, an actor of Chinese origin and a martial arts specialist, while Juliet is played by Aaliyah Haughton, a famous Afro-American recording artist, dancer, actress and model, who also ensures the film's soundtrack and who, unfortunately, died in a plane crash accident a year after the film was made, in 2001, at the age of 22.

This aspect probably determined the film's unexpected success since it was only meant to be a highly enjoyable fans' trip into the world of kung fu, spiced up with R'n'B and gangster rap scenes. The mere recycling of the Shakespearean theme in a film vaguely related to the original – a trend initiated by *West Side Story* – was rather richly followed since then. (See, for example, Solanas' 2013 *Upside Down*, a sci-fi set in a dystopic future.)

In brief, contrary to what one might expect in the case of Romeo and Juliet, only in three of the films investigated the auteurism can be attributed to the protagonists' playing parts in various degrees and with various results. Thus the most prominent contribution is that of *Romeo Must Die*; the most complex, loyal, emotional and long lasting effects were produced by the (anonymous) protagonists in Zeffirelli's film (greatly influenced by the director's vision), while

the most unnatural and slightly ridiculous are Cukor's 1936 protagonists, with the producer strongly influencing their selection and performance. In the remaining three films auteurism was provided by the directors' visions. The most complex auteurism, however, was put forward by *Shakespeare in Love*, where the combination of the director's vision with that of the scriptwriters along with the parts played by the protagonists made for the film's novelty of approach and impact.

4.3. Verisimilitude

It stands to reason to observe that when it comes to performance, most stage productions or films, for that matter, offer a simplified view of the original text. As T.J.B. Spencer (1967:7), the editor of the New Penguin's edition of *Romeo and Juliet* remarked in his introduction:

> It is a work of art which weaves together a large number of related impressions, ideas, images and moral judgments. It changes from violence to beauty, from bountiful love to malicious hate. There is music and dancing; fantasy and bawdry; the heights of joy and the depths of misery, the lively festivity indoors and the tranquil moonlight outdoors, the unhappy dawn in the bedroom and the desperate suicide in the tomb.

Shakespeare spent a great deal of drama time in building up the environment in which we can understand and assess the two lovers. Apart from one instance, the whole play is set in Verona: in the streets, in the Capulets' house and garden, in Fra' Laurence's cell, in the churchyard by the Capulets' monument. The origins of the feud are not known, the feud just being the status quo. The dramatic construction is really dramatic and it moves on in a dizzying speed. It thus opens on Sunday morning and it ends the following Thursday at dawn. In this way, four July days cram intense experiences, which give the impression of a much more extended time span. The young lovers are barely teenagers, and though the younger of the two, Juliet at twelve is the more mature and responsible. Their love is instant, impetuous, ardent and eye-catching, though the play instantiates almost all the faces of love: sexual love, mature asexual, well-behaved kind of love, parental as well as "clan" love, brotherly love, pious or commiserating love. Apart from this ever encompassing theme of love, Shakespeare's play illustrates other themes such as public life and the complex but rigid kinds of relationships of the period. To what extent the films under investigation manage to capture this complexity and remain loyal to the play is to be explored as follows.

The producer of Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* went to great lengths to establish authenticity and the film's intellectual credentials: researchers were sent to Verona to take photographs for the designers; the paintings of Botticelli, Bellini, Carpaccio and Gozzoli were studied to provide visual inspiration; and two academic advisers (John Tucker Murray of Harvard and William Strunk, Jr. of Cornell) were flown to the set, with instructions to supervise the production freely. To date, it remains the most loyal of film productions in terms of respecting the spirit and original language of Shakespeare's play. However, as it turned out, this did not make for the success of the play, which was marred by the unfortunate cast of mature, unconvincing actors. Equally unsuccessful was the intended desire for authenticity. Some of the blame could fall on the black-and-white character of the film inherent to the film making period. On the other hand, the actual choice of costumes was not a very happy choice. In the balcony scene Juliet is dressed in what looks like a frilly nightgown of the 1920s. In short, in spite of the proclaimed intentions and of the pains taken, the film only succeeded in being a first complex and expensive attempt to capture the nature and spirit of Shakespeare's play.

As for *West Side Story*, its authors transplant the classic tale to the New York City of the 1950s, in the Upper West Side ethnic, blue-collar neighborhood. The two feuding families are replaced by brawling street gangs. The Montagues become the Anglo Jets, led by Riff, and the Capulets become the Puerto Rican Sharks, led by Bernardo. At a dance, Tony, former leader of the Jets and Riff's best friend, and Maria, Bernardo's little sister, see each other across the room and this is how the story begins. The plot unfolds while all sing and dance on Bernstein's pop-opera. The only connections to Shakespeare are the theme and the plot.

The most accomplished loyalty to Shakespeare's play is instantiated by the Florentine Shakespeare lover, director Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film. (He actually directed three film adaptations based on Shakespeare's plays: *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967) with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, the most famous adaptation to date, *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) his most famous film ever, and *Hamlet* (1990), starring Mel Gibson). At the peak of the age of epic historic films, the setting that Zeffirelli envisaged captures the very texture of time and place, re-creating the sixteenth century Verona, in an exquisite combination of visual elements such as the burning sun, or the rich and resplendent costumes, and of blazing emotions and passions. The protagonists are convincingly young and beautiful, innocent and sex-driven at the same time. All the characters are well constructed, none of the most important missing, while the plot unfolds dramatically and speedily by keeping to the original. All in all, the film not only gloriously captures the very nature and substance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* but it also captures, to a great extent, the complexity of Shakespeare's original, by achieving that combination of music, dancing and bawdry, outdoor-indoor, high and low balance mentioned at the beginning of this section of our paper.

Though Luhrmann retained Shakespeare's language, he brought the setting up to date, making the Montagues and Capulets mobsters in a modern Miami-like city (although actually filmed in Mexico City and Veracruz). The film is set in the "crass, violent and superficial society" (Orgel 2003:91) of Verona Beach and Sycamore Grove. The visual conventions of the film were – as Orgel (2003:92) puts it – "largely those of porn films". Apart from the unusual setting and burlesque elements, which prevent the viewer to take this tragic story very seriously, Luhrman's film stays loyal to the content of the original.

The frame story of *Shakespeare in Love* depicts the impossible, furtive love story between William Shakespeare the playwright and a noble woman, Viola de Lesseps, while he was writing the play *Romeo and Juliet*. They also play the parts of Romeo and Juliet (lady Viola disguised as a young man who then plays the part of a woman) in the framed theatrical play staged within a compromise between the *Rose* and the *Curtain* rival theaters. The story is fictitious, though some of the characters are based on real people (Queen Elisabeth I or the playwright Christopher Marlow, for example). In addition, many of the characters, lines, and plot strategies make intertextual references Shakespeare's plays (*Twelfth Night*). The film is "not constrained by worries about literary or historical accuracy" (Maslin 1998) and includes anachronisms such as a reference to Virginia tobacco plantations, when the American colony of Virginia was non-existent. The most obvious deviation from literary history is the initial title of the "comedy": *Romeo and Ethel the Pirate's Daughter* that Shakespeare allegedly set out to write. The essence and atmosphere of the Elizabethan period are exquisitely captured in the film and the fragments from *Romeo and Juliet* presented in the film are faithful to Shakespeare's original.

If the *West* in the title of the paper was suggested by the 1961 *West Side Story,* the *East* definitely comes from the last but most recent of the films analysed in this paper, the 2000

Romeo Must Die. This *East*, however, is not of a geographic nature but of a cultural one. To explain, even if the setting of the film is the West (contemporary Oakland, California, USA) (a sort of, kind of Romeo is played by an Asian (whose name is Han) and his most accomplished skill is kung-fu fighting. As in the case of *West Side Story*, only the theme is Shakespearean. Thus, Jet Li plays an ex-cop who investigates the murder of his American-based-Chinese-mafia related brother and in the process falls in (a rather platonic, without a single kiss kind of) love with the daughter of an American mob boss, played by another ethnically different actress, the hip-hop and R'n'B star Aaliyah at her debut in the film making business. Neither of the clans approves of their romance, their feud being a racial one rather than a family one, and the protagonists fight and sing their way through the story. Romeo/Han does not die in the end, he manages to get the girl, but his father commits suicide. In brief, in spite of the title, *Romeo must Die* it is the most remotely related to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* film of our corpus.

All in all, four of the films analysed display various degrees of verisimilitude, the most literary (and literally) proclaimed loyal to the original text, although the least accomplished, being Cukor's 1936 version, while the most accomplished as far as the nature and spirit of Shakespeare's original is concerned, being Zeffirelli's 1968 version. The remaining two, *Shakespeare in Love* and *Romeo+Juliet,* though bearing some elements of verisimilitude stray away from the original. *West Side Story* and *Romeo Must Die* just adopt the theme, with the former focusing on the love theme, while the latter focusing on the feud theme and being the most remote from the original from the six films surveyed here.

4.4. Reception

The last category of our analysis looks at the receiving end of the film making industry. As can be seen from Figure 1, as far as IMDB scores go, the best received scores were achieved by the 1960's *West Side Story* and Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (both got 7.6), being the second highly rated of all Shakespearean film adaptations (second to Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet*, which received a 7.8 score). They are closely followed by the 1990's *Shakespeare in Love* (7.2). *Romeo Must Die,* even though it had a very promising debut, eventually was rated only 5.9. As explained before, IMDB scores represent the perceptions of "anonymous" viewers. When it comes to "the voices of authority", i.e. important award nominations and winnings, the story is only slightly different. See the figure below for a summary of the awards won by each of the films analysed.

Figure 2. Awards won across the six films in our corpus

Rank	Film/year	Oscars won	BAFTAs won	Berlin Bears won	Nominations won	Total number of awards won
1	*Shakespeare in Love* / 1998	7	5	2	6	14
2	*West Side Story* / 1961	10	-	-	1	10
3	*Romeo and Juliet* / 1968	2	1	-	4	3

4	*Romeo+Juliet* / 1996	-	-	1	1	1
5	*Romeo and Juliet* / 1936	-	-	-		-
6	*Romeo Must Die*/2000	-	-	-	-	-

The most appreciated of the films investigated is *Shakespeare in Love*, which won seven Academy Awards (a.k.a. Oscars) for best: picture, actress, supporting actress, art direction, costume design, original music, original screenplay, and six other nominations, five BAFTA awards and two Bears at the Berlin festival. The first runner up in this respect is *West Side Story* with ten Oscars won for best: picture, director, film editing, supporting actor and actress, cinematography, art direction and costume design, sound and best original score, plus one more nomination for adapted screenplay. The second runner up is Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* with two Oscars won for best cinematography and costumes plus four more nominations. It also won a BAFTA award for best costume. The "poorest" in terms of awards and nominations are *Romeo+Juliet*, which nonetheless won a Berlin Silver Bear award for best actor and an MTV award, while *Romeo Must Die* was nominated for an MTV award but got nothing. MTV – Music TV Awards are given to the films popular among the specific audience of the MTV channel, i.e. adolescents. Due to the rather restricted nature of the audience, we decided not to take into account these kinds of awards in our analysis. (www.imdb.com)

Profit wise, the most "lucrative" enterprise (in terms of raw financial profits, expressed in millions of dollars as reported by *Wikipedia*) turned out to be *Shakespeare in Love* with almost 300 million box office rate, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 3. Box office figures across the six films in our corpus

Rank	Film/year	(Domestic + Foreign) Box office/$
1	*Shakespeare in Love*/1998	289 million
2	*Romeo+Juliet*/1996	147 million
3	*Romeo Must Die*/2000	91 million
4	*West Side Story*/1961	19 million
5	*Romeo and Juliet*/1968	14,5 million
6	*Romeo and Juliet*/1936	975,000

At a first superficial glance, it seems surprising that a popular film like Zeffirelli's (or Cukor's for that matter) are the two films that had the "poorest" box office results. These kinds of analysis definitely can produce misleading results, as there are various factors which might make for these inconsistent results. They can range from cultural and historical factors (such as film going practices across periods of time), social practices (such as promotion and by product policies) or demographic and geographic factors (the age group of cinema goers or where the

film was made and released) to financial factors (such as the value of the dollar to audience income) or IT development. This might explain why one of the most highly valued films (both by the viewers and by award givers) like Zeffirelli's had turned in considerably less money than *Romeo Must Die*, which nowadays is mainly appreciated by martial arts fans. Similarly, it is obvious that a million dollars in the 1930's represented hugely more as compared to the million dollars of the 2000's. It is nevertheless significant that the popularity of the films in terms of viewer score and awards is supported by financial data (with, for example *Shakespeare in Love* cashing in twice more than *Romeo+Juliet*, and three times more than *Romeo Must Die).*

5. Conclusions

The mini survey presented in this paper showed two important things: the fatigueless, die-hard, ever-increasing interest in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, on the one hand, and on the other, the diverse and fluid nature of the approaches. The films included in our corpus straddle the boundaries of almost a century (seven decades, to be more precise), roughly from the dawn of the film making industry in the first half of the twentieth century to the dawn of the third millennium. All the films investigated put forward what we called "freshness" of approach and set a trend in the film making industry. This "freshness" ranged from high verisimilitude to hybridism of genre and postmodern approaches. The most postmodernly versatile in terms of combining freshness of approach with intertextual and hybrid approaches turned out to be the framed Romeo and Juliet theatrical play put forward by *Shakespeare in Love*, which might account for its winning the largest number of awards and nominations, as well as for its turning in the best box office numbers. It is noteworthy though that the most emblematic for and closest to Shakespeare's original is the last but a less profitable of the films adaptations scrutinised. The beauty of the unknown adolescent actors, the combination of their innocence with their sexually explicit impetuosity proved to be Zeffirelli's stroke of genius along with the minute recreation of Shakespeare's time setting, in line with what Shakespeare did. (Cukor also attempted to recreate such an atmosphere but failed in almost every respect, for technical want of the time but also for want of directorial vision.) And for the latest attempt to revive Shakespeare and Zeffirrelli's vision stands proof the 2013 adaptation. The success of *West Side Story* initiated the telling of a different story: that of the perennial success of the theme made famous by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Whether it is depicted in a medieval or a contemporary setting, whether it is spoken (in Shakespeare's language or not), sung, or danced away in poor hoods, ballroom glitz or in martial arts choreography, this theme never seems to wear off.

And, as a final word, ever since Shakespeare bred them, Romeo and Juliet re-surface anew with clockwise regularity in theatres, books and films, in Western or Eastern cultures, never aging, never stale, forever telling a somehow fresh kind of the same tragic story in which Romeo must die and so must his Juliet. Only Shakespeare lives forever.

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