

# Music as Facing-Page Translation in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*

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## Abstract

Andrew Goodwin observes that "[o]ne absence in postmodern theorizing about music television lies in the neglect of music," and this crucial absence extends to assessments of Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. Although film critics and scholars have almost universally cited "MTV stylings" and the teen-friendly soundtrack as central to the film's success, none of them has examined the music itself in more than a cursory fashion, raising the possibility that the highest-grossing Shakespeare film in cinematic history has been fundamentally mischaracterized. While it is true that *Romeo + Juliet*'s flash-cut camerawork often gives it a music-video-like visual style and that Twentieth Century Fox vigorously marketed the film with the music-television demographic, the MTV references obscure Luhrmann's unusual approach to using music in adapting Shakespeare for the screen — in particular, his striking decision to have it provide "modern-day . . . equivalencies that could decode the language of Shakespeare." Using both semiological and musicological approaches, I analyze the function and effects of the music track in *Romeo + Juliet* and conclude that its "translational" mandate makes it behave very differently not only from the music in a video, but also from most movie sound tracks. Far from providing an entrée into or helping "dumb down" the source material for a Shakespeare-challenged audience, the fragmented sound collage of *Romeo + Juliet* serves as an agent of disruption, working to alienate the viewer, psychologically and physically, from the fictive world and to trigger a strenuous intellectual effort. Ironically, this purported source of the movie's commercial success enacts Eisenstein's Marxist notion of the cinematic experience as an active dialectical process.

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A decade after the Shakespeare film boom was declared over and the postmortem began, there remains a consensus among scholars on two points: first, that Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, which grossed nearly \$150 million worldwide in its cinematic release (*Romeo + Juliet* 1996), represents the boom's apotheosis; and, second, that music was central to the movie's success. Indeed, *Romeo + Juliet* has been referred to so universally as a kind of extended music video that the uninitiated would be justified in believing it to be a product of the music industry rather than a film in its own right. Douglas Lanier, in his analysis of Shakespeare's

fluctuating "cultural capital" in the post-boom period, performs the typical triangulation of the film's commercial success, music, and purported music-video essence when he refers to its "MTV video style and pop visuals" and says that it "established the template for teen Shakespeare, the signature genre of the period" (2010, 107).

This characterization of *Romeo + Juliet* does not belong to the retrospective view alone: nearly every review and article published about the film at the time emphasizes the central role of its soundtrack and cites these same "MTV stylings." Among the film critics, the *New York Times*' Janet Maslin writes that "Baz Luhrmann . . . invents a whole new vocabulary . . . [that] calls for pink hair, screaming billboards, tabloid television stories, [and] music-video editing" (1996). Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* remarks, "The film reworks Shakespeare in a frenzy of jump cuts that makes most rock videos look like MTV on Midol" (1996). Welton Jones of the *San Diego Tribune* comes straight out and calls *Romeo + Juliet* "an extended music video" (quoted in Lehmann 2002, 132). The Shakespearean scholars concur. Samuel Cowl says, "The film's young stars, coupled with its relentless, in-your-face MTV visual style and soundtrack, made its treatment of Shakespeare's tale immediately and excitingly available to its audience" (2003, 119). Douglas Brode observes that "some sequences played like extended MTV rock videos . . . Hip-hop music played loudly and incessantly" (2000, 56). Even Julie Sanders, in an extended semiotic analysis of the film's music that would seem by definition to present a more complicated view of *Romeo + Juliet*, falls into line, assuming that the film's audience is made up of "the MTV generation . . . a visually literate, quotation-literate audience" (2007, 161).

There can be no denying that these perceptions have some basis in fact, and that if critics and scholars have taken the generic links between *Romeo + Juliet* and music-video culture too far, or applied them too loosely, this also is not without cause. Twentieth Century Fox deliberately encouraged the conflation of the movie with music television from the outset by vigorously marketing *Romeo + Juliet* to the MTV audience (in both the channel-specific and larger cultural senses). It had a half-hour *Romeo + Juliet* special aired on MTV (Wetmore 2006, 123) and created a promotional trailer, featuring De'sree's "Kissing You" and the heavy bass riff of One Inch Punch's "Pretty Piece of Flesh," overlain with flash cuts from the film, that looked (if it did not necessarily sound) like a music video. The studio strongly promoted the Volume 1 soundtrack, issuing a string of hit singles from it, and later released a Volume 2 soundtrack, as well as a special "music edition" DVD containing interviews with the composers and sound-mix engineers. And perhaps most important, it fostered a powerful demographic overlap between *Romeo + Juliet*'s audience and the music-television audience by particularly targeting female teens — a group whose "re-

enfranchisement" within the music-marketing industry (Straw 1988, 6) was instrumental to creating the singles-based, high-turnover culture out of which MTV emerged in the early 1980s.

Meanwhile, although Luhrmann accepted the MTV parallels with only lukewarm enthusiasm (York 2006, 60), he nonetheless contributed to them by aiming his movie explicitly at the "youth culture," by giving music a central role in capturing this demographic, and by employing a cinematographic style that features the ultra-quick-cut, "post-classical" camerawork typical of the music video, in which "the rhythm of the images [is] carefully reunited with physical rhythm [of the music]" so that "the video, like the song, has its basis in rhythm" (Berland 1993, 38-39). These factors, together with a music track played at intrusive volume levels at many points in the film (albeit briefly, for the most part), gave movie critics every reason to assign *Romeo + Juliet* a strong MTV sensibility. Academics, similarly, were justified in seeing in Luhrmann's film the same "collagist" ethos, full of freneticism and intertextual pastiche, that characterizes a number of seminal early music videos and makes the form, in some scholars' opinion, the apogee of postmodernist media genres (see, for instance, Straw 1988; Kaplan 1987; Fiske 1986).

The trouble with these references is that they are as vague as they are pervasive. While they may represent accurately the film's marketing strategy, and to a certain extent its visual style, they give a misleading picture of Luhrmann's use of music in his approach to adapting Shakespeare for the screen. Since music is indeed as central to *Romeo + Juliet* as is generally held, this is a significant point of inaccuracy. Andrew Goodwin observes, with commendable mildness, that "[o]ne absence in postmodern theorizing about music television lies in the neglect of music" (1993, 46); this crucial absence extends to assessments of *Romeo + Juliet*. None of the texts that reference "music television" or music videos examines the music itself in more than a cursory fashion. Even Julie Sanders's article is more a textual analysis than a musical one, in the sense that it either associates the songs' lyrics with the film images (for instance, the lyrics to "Angel" with the scene of Juliet wearing angel wings) or examines the effects of their literary intertextual references (for instance, Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, used in the film at the end of the tomb scene). Given that writers almost universally fail to theorize about the music-video genre or specify what aspect of "MTV style" they have in mind, the comments do not really even refer in any meaningful way to music videos, but rather seem to be shorthand for the film's commercial quality. Conventional wisdom about *Romeo + Juliet* therefore extends from a premise that is both unexamined and untested, making it possible that the highest-grossing Shakespeare film in cinematic history has been fundamentally mischaracterized.

A closer look at the use of music in *Romeo + Juliet* suggests that this is indeed the case. While it is true that Luhrmann and his team deliberately put much of the film's music in harness with the

visuals to create what he calls "modern-day . . . equivalencies that could decode the language of Shakespeare" (Luhmann 1996), music so employed does not result in anything like a music video. In fact, it results in quite the opposite: a filmic construct whose music track subserves the narrative to a remarkable degree and "manipulatively hyperexplicates" (Brown 1994, 2) the narrative in a way perhaps not attempted since Hollywood composer Max Steiner wrote his notorious "mickey-mousing" underscores for *Mildred Pierce* and *Don Juan* in the 1940s. In subordinating the aural track to translational purposes, Luhmann violates both the central premise of the music video and the basis of music-television culture itself: the sanctity of the song. As Will Straw points out, the music-video era came about when the recording industry, trying to solve the problems of slow turnover and low innovation rates caused by the 1970s album-oriented approach to marketing, put new primacy on "the individual song as the basic unit within the marketing of . . . music" (1988, 7). Whatever disruptions music videos may have caused in the listener's traditional ways of processing music, they respected the genre's *raison d'être*, preserving the central element of "the song as a singular structure . . . the structure never contested in the video" (Berland 1993). By contrast, the process of creating the *Romeo + Juliet* sound track was, in the words of score mix engineer Geoff Foster, "a matter of breaking down elements from the multi-tracks," to the extent that "[composer/mixer] Nellee [Hooper] had conversations with certain managers saying the record company will not release your multi-tracks, which means that all we've got is your stereo mix, and we can't use it in that form, so it will be butchered" (2007). Luhmann's use of music also violates the converse rule of music videos: that "[their] visual-semantic complexity rarely . . . allows the song to challenge the video's seduction of the viewer" (Berland 1993, 39). As I argue below, the *Romeo + Juliet* sound track, with its deliberate intrusiveness, systematically interrupts precisely that seductive process.

In fact, the decision to use music to perform a literally (and literarily) hermeneutic function confounds almost every traditional approach to film-music theory and practice, and resonates through the filmic whole. Having a movie provide, essentially, a facing-page translation for its own dialogue track is both radical and conservative — the latter in the sense that it heralds a return to techniques used in the "silent" era, such as the use of captions and, more relevantly, a music track that "consist[s] of pieces with different tempi and moods strung together, like tracks of a compilation album" (Chion 2009, 407). I argue that Luhmann's seemingly simple decision to employ a significant portion of the music as a linguistic "translator" sets the stated intent of increasing accessibility at odds with the actual effect by repeatedly disrupting the viewers' absorption into the diegetic world, forcing them to engage in an effortful intellectual process of reconciliation and impeding the film's thematic and narrative coherence.

In my examination of the way the music's translational mandate acts on the film's structure, viewership experience, and ontological whole, I follow K. J. Donnelly's call for a "dual logic" in film-music analysis that employs both semiotic and musicological tools for observing the ways in which the music works in the overall film (2001, 3). I look at not only what Claudia Gorbman terms "cinematic codings" that express the interplay of musical and other filmic elements, but also "cultural codings" (otherwise known as *topoi*, or "style topics") that aid the viewer's interpretation on a number of levels (1987, 3). Given that the sound track contains both classical underscore and popular songs, it seems fitting to apply both the conventional theory of style-topic function in narrative films and Ronald Rodman's more recent ideas about what might be called "generic style topics" — a recognition, as Rodman points out, that "unlike themes in the classic film score, traits of . . . characters [in films with popular-song sound tracks] are not represented by singular leitmotifs. Instead, it is the *style* of the popular songs that signify as leitmotifs in the film" (2006, 126, emphasis in original). To a considerable degree, however, the peculiar workings of the music track in *Romeo + Juliet* stymie both traditional and new soundtrack theories.

The comprehensive implications of Lurhmann's musical employment can best be understood by first considering the typical aims and the global effects of music within a film's fictional construct. One of the primary goals of most film music, as Gorbman writes in her still-definitive *Unheard Melodies*, is to "render the individual an untroublesome viewing subject; less critical, less awake" (1987, 5), as well as to "act as a suturing device" that "lessens spatial and temporal discontinuities with its own melodic and harmonic continuity" (6). The viewer, she notes, "tends to be conscious of the discourse (elements, including music, that enunciate the story) only insofar as it 'transgresses' or 'interrupts' story (that which is enunciated)" (31). Other major functions of film music include establishing and sustaining mood, moving the viewer emotionally by means of pitch-relation affectiveness (that is, the harmonic and melodic progressions of the music), and aiding narrative interpretation by the use of culturally recognized motifs or styles of music (the abovementioned "style topics"). In sum, a movie's music track is typically characterized by invisibility, inaudibility, emotional signifying, continuity, unity, and narrative cuing (Gorbman 1987, 73).

Film-music theorists increasingly recognize, as well, that sound tracks using popular songs function somewhat differently — partly because in order to fulfill their function, they must be made intermittently overt, and partly because the subliminal absorptive effect of the classical underscore, which Anahid Kassabian calls "assimilating identification," is usually replaced with more individualized "affiliating identifications." In other words, many of the emotional and mnemonic associations made between viewers and the movie through the music will "depend on

histories forged outside the film scene, and . . . allow for a fair bit of mobility within it" (2001, 3). Nonetheless, the basic roles of the music remain the same. In the soundtracks for Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, Emile Ardolino's *Dirty Dancing*, and Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*, for instance, "popular" songs such as "Son of a Preacher Man," "I've Had the Time of My Life," and "Wild Night" play at sufficient length to create continuity and mood and to build emotional affect even for those viewers who are unfamiliar with the song and have imported no extra-filmic associations.

### Music as Fragmentation

The portions of the *Romeo + Juliet* sound track that act as an "equivalency" to the Shakespearean dialogue perform none of the functions listed above. They are, to start with, necessarily conspicuous: a "translator" must be consciously registered in order to work. The songs with lyrics carry a special burden, as they are literally the only source of modern-day language in the movie. Luhrmann not only retains the play's Shakespearean dialogue, but also uses Shakespearean language and references in posters, signs, and newspaper headlines. Perhaps even more anomalously, the hermeneutically employed music cues, whether songs or scored elements, are kept very short, as part of their mandate to synchronize tightly with the visual track. Notwithstanding critics' commentaries about "continual, in-your-face music" and "hip-hop music played incessantly," the contemporary songs associated most strongly with *Romeo + Juliet* are used only fractionally. For example, of the nearly five-minute span of Gavin Friday's "Angel" found on the triple-platinum-selling CD *Music from the Motion Picture 1* (Hooper, de Vries, and Armstrong 1996a), within the movie the first five notes alone constitute Juliet's motif, and the longest iteration, at the masquerade ball, lasts only thirty seconds. As short as this is, it is longer than any other stretch of contemporary music in the film's sound track. The audible portion of Garbage's "Local God" runs for fifteen seconds. One Inch Punch's "Pretty Piece of Flesh," written with the filmmakers to accompany the verse that Sampson of the Montague Boys recites in the gas-station scene (and played again in their car after the ball), is twelve seconds long, with lyrics for only several of those seconds. Even the Cardigans' "Lovefool," which reached the number-one position on the charts in cross-marketing between the Cardigans' CD *First Band on the Moon* and the *Romeo + Juliet* soundtrack ("First Band" 2012), plays for only six seconds. Meanwhile, the filmmakers' decision to bring in sound editor Roger Savage at the beginning of the shoot, so that "work on sound and image overlapped" (Cook 2010, 69-70), also means that most of the songs were commissioned specifically for the film, so that viewers during the film's first run, at any rate, could import few extra-filmic associations.

Nor are contemporary songs the only kind of music put to the service of "translation" and thus asked to fulfill non-normative operations of film music. Many scored sections of the sound track created by composers/sound producers Nellee Hooper and Marius de Vries (as distinct from the film's third credited composer and main underscorer, Craig Armstrong) share that mandate and are similarly fragmentary and conspicuous. De Vries says, "Many of the musical gestures which served as themes were not sequences of notes which were recognizable melodies so much as they were excerpts from our source material, or they were parts of a song that we decided to use in the film that we were then able to quote from, not just musically but textually" (2007). Like the songs, these "musical gestures" often come from unrelated genres and are stylistically incongruous; if one listened to the music from the film's first ten minutes, one might think it was anything from an epic drama to a punk documentary to a *Road Runner* cartoon. Such generic disjuncture is disruptive enough to be very rare, even in films that seem to use a wide range of music. Rodman points out, for instance, that the overall tone of the ostensibly diverse *Trainspotting* soundtrack is set by the dominating presence of variations on "Britpop" (2006, 131). Ken Garner, likewise, finds as common characteristics of the music on Quentin Tarantino's soundtracks that "it is old [and] it is referential to distinct musical, film, or media genres" (2001, 191). Though the same generalizations could be made about *Romeo + Juliet's Music from the Motion Picture* CD, they cannot of the music within the film itself, which swings from Mozart to Sergio Leone, from Wagner to The Butthole Surfers, from epic choral to scratch-grunge, from soul ballads to solo clarinet.

We have, then, a significant element of the music track to *Romeo + Juliet* that does not function as music normally does in a film (and certainly nothing like it does in a music video). It does not establish a tone. It does not set any consistent mood for any length of time. It creates neither temporal nor narrative continuity. It highlights rather than obscures the "seams" and disjunctions of other filmic elements. It does not move the viewer emotionally in any traditional way. Instead, it jars, alienates, and confuses, keeping us emotionally destabilized and intellectually alert and making us aware of the film as a film. Thus, even while the "accessible" musical genres and blatant musical "tags" may help to "translate" the Shakespearean scenario and dialogue, they simultaneously make the film's fictional world difficult to access and even more difficult to remain in. In a section called "breaking the rules," Gorbman concedes that "certain conditions . . . may require one principle [of film-music use] to take precedence over another" and gives as an example that "in its illustrative function, mickey-mousing music often becomes noticeable, violating the principle of inaudibility" (Gorbman 1987, 91). It is hard to imagine, though, that she or any student of film-music history envisaged a filmmaker choosing to violate the principle so often and to such an extreme degree as Luhrmann does in *Romeo + Juliet*.

Perhaps the most notable instance of the music's translational (and hence disruptive) effect comes in the gas-station battle between the Montague Boys and the Capulet Boys, the latest of "three civil brawls bred of an airy word" (*William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* 1996; 1.1.9). At this early point in the movie, when the characters' identities and the basic plot are not yet established, the filmmakers were particularly concerned about the fact that, in the words of *Romeo + Juliet's* co-writer Craig Pearce, "[Shakespeare] writes in this obscure language called Elizabethan, and ninety percent of the world can't understand it" (Luhmann and Pearce 1996). This scene, while misrepresentative in degree, is representative in kind. No other scene after this is quite so frenetic, either visually or musically, but the cinematographic and musical techniques are characteristic of much of Luhmann's overall style. The "modern-day equivalency" the filmmakers chose for conveying to the audience the nature of the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets was the trope of the spaghetti Western. Accordingly, the camerawork features techniques typical of that genre, from swish-pans to slow-motion shots. The music, intermittently, follows suit. Pearce notes, "The music [when the Capulet Boys arrive in the scene] is sort of reminiscent of a Sergio Leone type Western. Tybalt, when he's presented, you know, you get the image of a big bad gunslinger. So it says to the audience, even if you can't quite tune your ear into the Shakespearean dialogue at that early stage, they're going 'Okay, he's a scary guy'" (Luhmann and Pearce 1996). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Using music to indicate genre and character is, of course, nothing new; indeed, "music that is reminiscent of a Sergio Leone type Western" is the very definition of a "style topic" — that is, part of "the vocabulary of a rudimentary system of musical signification" that "film composers rely on [to elicit] predictable responses" (Neumeyer and Buhler 2009, 22). Spaghetti Western topics — twanging guitars, open chords, male choruses singing intervals of thirds and fourths in a kind of faux-Indian chanting, sound effects of wind on an open plain — are used so widely that film-music books often cite them as an easily referenced example of the technique, with the imputation that they are hackneyed even by style-topic standards. According to *Romeo + Juliet's* editor, Jill Bilcock, the filmmakers acquired that part of the music for the gas-station scene by the simple expedient of taking it from pre-existing movies: "We just went down to the local video shop and got out all the spaghetti Westerns and stole the music off it and chopped it up and put it on the cut, because we wanted it to be like that, a spaghetti Western" (1996).

The main point of complication, of course, is that *Romeo + Juliet* is not a Western. The "gunslinger" music is used nowhere in the film except when the Montagues and Capulets are in a scene together. (Despite Pearce's suggestion, the motif does not attach to Tybalt, who appears at the ball, for instance, without instigating it.) It happens even then only for a stretch of seconds at



a time, just long enough to "tag" the narrative setup of the scene, and interrupts between other "tags," none from the same genre. In the gas-station scene, the distinctive twanging of the guitar abruptly cuts into the heavy bass riff of "Pretty Piece of Flesh" and is itself interrupted several times by pockets of silence, strange vocal screeching, background tympani, and a violin/cello *sforzando* marking the freeze-frame-captioned identification of Benvolio.

It is almost impossible to overstate how anomalous this kind of "sound collage" is in the world of film music. Legendary film composer Quincy Jones is merely "fantasiz[ing] the impossible" when he says, "I've always wanted to see the juxtaposition of a Victorian setting with modern soul music. It would really crack me up to find, in the middle of a scene out of Dickens, James Brown screaming away as the town crier" (quoted in Gorbman 1987, 83). Obtrusively fragmented music is especially forbidden inside a montage. So invariably is a continuous musical underlay used to suture the visuals of a montage that film-music theorist Roger Hickman even puts it in terms of an imperative: "The rapid number of cuts in a montage often necessitates the use of music to create a sense of unity. Usually a single musical mood is projected" (2006, 41). In the gas-station scene, however, the music has a different set of mandates: to match as closely as possible each new occasion for identification within the scene; to function as an aural-register duplicate for the textual captions; and in general to synchronize tightly with the visual track, which is providing the other "equivalencies."

In his choice to give translation primacy over other musical functions, Luhrmann is defying two key traditions of film-music practice. First, he is using the "popular" songs in *Romeo + Juliet* as part of the underscore. Second, he is using the underscore as (in a manner of speaking) an overscore. Despite the impression of continuity that they impart, underscores are in fact highly — though very subtly — fragmentary, written in spans of seconds rather than minutes. Frank Skinner's classic book *Underscore* gives us some idea of this. He composes the music for one scene in the following manner:

For the first cue at twelve and one-third seconds (0.12 1/3) a phrase is written for full orchestra as Stanhope rides away, with a diminuendo for the dialogue at fifteen and one-third seconds (0.15 1/3). Here Kitty says, "Why did he leave me here?" rather sadly, so an English horn phrase is written. At nineteen and one-thirds seconds (0.19 1/3) is a cut to the thugs. Ominous chords are employed in the lower register. The snare drum and tympani effect reappears. (1960, 31)

Max Steiner, similarly, "wrote detailed descriptions of the action into every bar of his musical sketch" for *Mildred Pierce* (Buhler 2001, 45). Compared to this tight coordination between

soundtrack and visuals, not to mention control over affective intent (as seen in the introduction of the English horn for a line spoken "rather sadly"), songs are usually musical loose cannons. However carefully chosen and manipulated, they have what Anahid Kassabian calls "an aleatory quality . . . a loose fit with the visuals [that] contributes further to the larger range of identification possible with pop soundtracks" (2001, 80). As Kassabian points out, the musical cue may start off exactly matched with the beginning of the visual passage, but it cannot stay closely matched, and the longer the song goes on, the more loosely it fits.

In the *Romeo + Juliet* score, though, segments of "song" are for the most part used interchangeably with the scored elements in short, close-fitting cues. The initial *Music from the Motion Picture* CD is misleading in this regard, as it plays all the songs fully; the *Volume 2* CD, which features the rest of the music, gives a more accurate picture of the intermixture of song fragments and score, noting that the "Original Score contains samples from 'Talk Show Host' (Radiohead) . . . 'Kissing You (Love Theme from *Romeo + Juliet*)' . . . 'Cough Syrup' (Butthole Surfers) . . . 'Torclivia' (John King and Mike Simpson) . . . and 'To You I Bestow' (Edmund Enright)" (Hooper, de Vries, and Armstrong 1996b, liner notes). As a method of exteriorizing the characters' moods and thoughts in "translation" of the Shakespearean dialogue, filling in gaps in that dialogue instead of adding lines to the play, identifying the characters and adding to their characterization, the musical tags function exactly as intended (incidentally adding a musical hyper-explicitness to the aural band that matches the hyperbole and literalization in the image track). When the Montague Boys pull into the gas station in the first post-Prologue scene, Justin Warfield of One Inch Punch raps "the boys, the boys" as the image track goes into freeze-frame and a caption saying "The Montague Boys" appears. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) The most audible fragment of "Angel" plays when Juliet appears at the ball in angel wings. "Lovefool" plays for a few seconds in the giddy moment when the Nurse tells Juliet that Romeo wants her to come to the church and get married. "The You and Me Song" plays when the two have first confirmed their love.

By the same token, however, the songs must draw attention to themselves, which by definition contradicts the nature and function of an underscore. The very blatancy required for the tags to carry out their annunciatory function means that they disrupt the viewing experience, so that the movie insistently draws attention to itself as artifact and artifice. It is hard to think of another film that so consistently breaks whatever mood it has established and rejects the viewer's full entry into the fictional filmic world.

The stylistic incongruities dictated by the music's "translational" role have an even greater impact on the film when they occur between scenes than when they occur within them. Granted,

in some instances the music is allowed to smooth over changes of scene in traditional fashion — for instance, when Mozart's Symphony No. 25, played during the preparation for the Capulet ball, starts while the camera is still on Romeo and Benvolio at Sycamore Grove. In others, the musical incongruity makes sense as signaling a corresponding incongruity in the characters' state of mind, as when the aggressive, screaming guitars that play while Romeo chases and then shoots Tybalt are abruptly intercut with the childlike, ethereal vocals of Stina Nordenstam's "Little Star," played over the unknowing Juliet's "mansion of love" soliloquy. At other times, however, startling changes of visuals are attended by equally startling changes of musical genre in adjacent scenes, imparting to the film an effect of not only fragmentation, but also segmentation. This is particularly notable with the first music to appear in the film, Craig Armstrong's epic choral composition, "O Verona."<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that this does not come at the beginning of the film: *Romeo + Juliet*, significantly, has no opening theme. The first visual shows a snowy black-and-white television set suspended on a dark screen as a female newscaster reads the Prologue, with "news headline" text behind her; all other tracks are silent. Since music is one of the chief means by which the filmmaker directs interpretation, music as an opening frame, as Hickman notes, is particularly important in "alerting the audience . . . to the beginning of the film; introducing the dominant musical theme of the film as a whole . . . establishing the mood of the film as a whole; [and] foreshadowing significant aspects of the story" (2006, 36). Silence in the music stratum of the sound track at the film's beginning is a highly destabilizing move, akin to a film opening in the middle of an action scenario without providing any narrative exposition (as in, say, *The Matrix*). Although the viewers are receiving some amount of information about Luhrmann's approach through the image track, they have no clear idea of how they are meant to interpret the words, nor what to expect from the film — what mood, style, or level it is likely to take.

However, when the "newscast" has finished, we are visually and aurally sucked through the television screen into the world of "Verona Beach," and the Prologue is reiterated (in what Peter S. Donaldson observes is the first of the film's many "doublings" [2002, 64-65]). This time it is not only delivered more sententiously, in a man's voice-over, but its interpretation is guided by Armstrong's choral composition. The portentousness inherent in large-scale choral singing — especially lyrically unintelligible singing in what seems to be a foreign language, and even more especially in a work that seems to allude in its title and "style topic" mode to *Carmina Burana*'s much-used "O Fortuna" — imparts gravitas to the establishing montage of police and news helicopter, the skyscrapers of "Verona," the freeze-framed, captioned identifications of the film's main players (signally excepting Romeo and Juliet themselves), and the proleptic, trailer-

like flashes of key scenes in the movie to come. The bewildering visual track, with its quick cuts, captions, steep angles, and mix of incongruous images, is given not only spatiotemporal continuity, but also, through the constancy and structural predictability of the music track, narrative and thematic coherence. This far into the movie, if the music is to be trusted, Luhrmann's adaptation would seem to be one in a fairly traditional Hollywood vein, with the source material treated as "high culture" and the story played as high tragedy.

The music immediately proves an unreliable narrator, though, as a right-to-left wipe clears away the epic atmosphere from the screen and a muscle car packed with the "Montague Boys" drives down the highway to the accompaniment of raucous, bass-driven scratch-grunge. This scene is deliberately jarring and contains a number of incongruities. For one thing, the dialogue track, already alienated from all the other tracks as the film's anachronistic and anomalous element, is also internally misaligned here by virtue of the fact that the Shakespearean dialogue — "A dog of the house of Capulet moves me!" — is delivered in an unintelligible yell. Gregory, the Montague Boy doing the yelling, almost, but not quite, breaks the fourth wall: although ostensibly he addresses the people in a passing sedan, the fact that he is facing the camera means that the highway would have to be running directly out of the real-world space where the audience is sitting. However, the main jolt of the scene stems from the change in music. Nothing the viewer *sees* on the screen is particularly out of keeping with the setting that has been established in the previous scene: it is easy enough to identify as the same location during daytime hours. Nor does the cinematographic style of quick cuts and extreme angles change significantly between the two scenes. To the extent that the viewers are surprised visually — for instance, at the casual, semi-skinhead appearance of the Montague Boys — it is because "O Verona" had led them to expect something more dramatic and formal. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) They could not have known, though, that the music itself was going to behave in such a manner. "O Verona" acted exactly as an opening theme should, if somewhat belatedly: it pulled the viewer in and made coherence out of chaos. Now the music reverses its personality, colluding with the chaotic visuals to disorient the audience, as if punishing their willingness to believe the fictive proposition. These two early scenes demonstrate the power of music to unify discordant visuals and establish expectations, in both a positive and negative manner.

The aural shock does more, though, than shatter the viewers' newly established mood and knock them back out of the diegetic world into the spectator's sphere. It also triggers the first of many attempts to reconcile scenes, to make sense of seemingly contradictory information. Again, the *visual* information in the second Prologue and the highway scene, although not cohesive, is coherent; it requires only to be kept up with and sutured narratively in order to make sense.

The music track, however, is telling the viewers very different, and initially incompatible, things, forcing them to revise retroactively their understanding. The musical elements of the second Prologue scene and the highway scene cast those scenes into reciprocal confusion. One could see the juxtaposition as an egalitarian move, a statement that "high" and "low" culture are equally present and equally important in the filmmaker's value system. Alternatively, the highway scene could be read as a move to mock the self-importance of the adults who run Verona and carry out their (presumably corporate-based) feud. If one takes the music of the opening at face value, on the other hand, it could be that the import of the feud and the treatment of the story as high tragedy are legitimate, and Sampson and the other Montague Boys are showing themselves to be oblivious to the consequences of the fight in which they are participating. Whatever the reading, it is mainly the music track that creates the mock-epic high/low quality of the film's first minutes and initiates the viewers' struggle for understanding. By the time the strains of "O Verona" start up again at the end of the gas-station scene, the audience has learned to mistrust its prima facie message and to suspect that someone is making fun of something with it — a suspicion that becomes generalized when we cannot figure out what exactly is being mocked.

The destabilization of the underscore's normative function carries through when "O Verona" reprises during Romeo's re-entry into Verona from exile in Mantua to join Juliet in her tomb. Once again, the attendant visuals are of choppers, bird's-eye views of the city streets, police on the ground, sharpshooters kneeling and aiming. This time around, the quality of the music is matched by the intensity and import of the action, making it more evident that we are supposed to take the choral bombast seriously. Far from confirming through repetition a certain reading of the scenes to which it is attached, though, this use of leitmotif sends interpretation into even greater flux. The first time the theme played, in the second Prologue scene, the music that came directly afterward encouraged us to understand it, retroactively, as indicating mockery, or at least parody. The filmmakers, in the meantime, seem to confirm our suspicions that they mean to deride the corporate adult world out of which the feud is generated. The idea that "O Verona" is meant more pretentiously than portentously and attaches generally to the adult world rather than the feud, has also been encouraged by the fact that a separate, incontrovertibly sincere theme for Romeo and Juliet's tragic fate, "Slow Movement," has been played throughout. Yet now the theme is playing in a context that virtually forbids us to understand it as ironic. Leitmotifs used in film do often change from iteration to iteration — moving, for example, from major to minor keys to connote sadness, being played on different instruments to express a change of mood or condition, dissolving into disharmony to mirror or foreshadow events. However, for the music and its corresponding visual

elements to stay the same even while their context changes the way we read them only confuses our interpretation further and largely defeats the point of a leitmotif.

At this point, the multiple ironies of the MTV references begin to show themselves. Far from being a continuous element in the construct, as it is in a music video, the music here is the main agent of disruption and fragmentation. While generically the presence of contemporary "rock" music may make a certain audience feel more comfortable, within the film the juxtaposition of this music with other genres works to alienate the viewer, both psychologically and physically. The component of *Romeo + Juliet* that has been held most responsible for "dumbing down" the source material actually triggers a stringent intellectual effort, arguably more of one than if Luhrmann had given the movie a "period" score, in the manner of Nino Rota's famous music for Franco Zeffirelli's version, and left the Shakespearean dialogue musically "untranslated." And through creating, in effect if not by intent, an inelastic aural collage, this purportedly most "commercial" aspect of the movie enacts Eisenstein's Marxist (and markedly uncommercial) notion of the cinematic experience as an active dialectical process, a "*collision* of . . . factors [that] gives rise to an idea" (2009 19, emphasis in original).

### Music as Assimilation

Only in the stretches when the filmmakers want to let the audience "enjoy the beauty of [Shakespeare's] language" (Bilcock 1996) and the music is released from its unwonted duties as a textual translator does it relax into its customary function as "assimilator" and affective agent. Not coincidentally, these are the parts of the movie that feel most *like* a movie, and I would suggest that they, not the so-called "MTV" segments, contribute to the film's aesthetic success. These stretches allow the viewer (whether a female teen or otherwise) to sink into what Gorbman calls "a bath or gel of affect" (1987, 5) in relationship to three crucial thematic aspects: Romeo's character, as relayed musically by the leitmotif "Talk Show Host," commissioned from Radiohead for the film (Randall 2000, 218); the love between Romeo and Juliet, as verbally expressed by the music and lyrics to "Kissing You" and legitimated by the subsequent orchestral versions of that song; and the pair's tragic fate, signaled by Craig Armstrong's 1994 string composition, "Slow Movement." Each of these compositions creates a low band of aural repose and quietude within the film's surrounding freneticism.

As if in recognition that the obstructive nature of the music in other segments has undermined the viewer's trust and kept her or him physically and emotionally unsettled, these compositions are designed for maximum film-music effect. For one thing, they are generally positioned between frames of silence or other quiet music. The first iteration of "Talk Show Host" begins to play,

unusually, beneath an interlude for solo clarinet. The diegetic version of "Kissing You," sung at the Capulet ball, comes after the sonic confusion of Romeo's drug trip has been end-stopped by him dunking his head in water; thereafter, it usually follows silence in the music track (five full minutes of it, in the balcony/pool scene) or extends out of the equally quiet (and musically similar) "Slow Movement," as when Romeo goes to Juliet's bedroom after the slaying of Tybalt. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

"Slow Movement," the theme of Romeo and Juliet's tragedy and the piece of music that receives by far the most playing time in the movie, almost always emerges musically out of "Kissing You," to the extent that it often feels, fittingly, like a variation on that theme. We hear it first in the ballroom scene, after Romeo and Juliet meet and kiss to the accompaniment of Des'ree singing "Kissing You" (sometimes onscreen, sometimes off). As Juliet ascends the stairs to her mother and the Nurse, revealing to Romeo that she is a Capulet, the strings begin moving downward, against her, into the "ominous" range, and "Kissing You" slides into "Slow Movement." The strings continue downward and acquire discordant augmented notes, as the Nurse whispers to Juliet that Romeo is a Montague. Beneath noisy diegetic music within the fiction, the "fate" theme sustains Romeo's sense of foreboding as he delivers the lines "my only love, sprung from my only hate" — an apt description of the music, which has evolved from a love theme into a harbinger of death. "Slow Movement" traces the main line of Romeo and Juliet's star-crossed fate, recurring after Romeo kills Tybalt; under the voice-over of Juliet's thoughts about the killing (after which it morphs back into "Kissing You" to tell the viewer that she has forgiven Romeo); when Romeo falls into the pool on the morning of his banishment, spurring Juliet to speak of "an ill-divining soul"; as Juliet refuses Paris; as Romeo speaks to the "dead" Juliet. Tellingly, where Mercutio's requiem is a variation on the opening choral composition "O Verona," Juliet's is sung over the chords of "Slow Movement."

All three of the emotionally affective pieces are also played at length. Although this statement would appear to be only marginally true of "Talk Show Host," which completes just a couple of full cycles (verse, chorus, guitar-riff interlude) when it is played at Sycamore Grove and again in Mantua, that changes in the film's afterlife on DVD. In this format, "Talk Show Host" accompanies every item on the menu, thus functioning essentially as the film's post-theatrical opening music and providing a consistent musical frame that the cinematic version lacks. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Thom Yorke's vocals, though lyrically unintelligible in the film (and not heard on the DVD menus), also associate Romeo with Radiohead, enforcing the idea

that the speaker in that band's end-credits song, "Exit Music for a Film," is Romeo. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

"Kissing You" is played at lengths which, in the opinion of FilmTracks.com's editorial writer, "will test the patience of some listeners" (Editorial Review 2009). After the diegetic version has ended during the ball scene, segued into the orchestral version, and then transmuted into the "fate" theme (i.e., "Slow Movement"), it follows Romeo out of the mansion and signifies that his new love overrides all other states of mind, as it literally plays on top of both the dance music that invariably attends Mercutio and the reprise of "Pretty Piece of Flesh," once again issuing diegetically from the Montague Boys' car. Likewise, during the "balcony" (i.e., pool) scene, "Kissing You" starts after Romeo and Juliet have fallen into the pool and plays throughout their protracted flirtation and attempts to part from one another, interrupted only briefly by a faint echo of "Angel" that ties that theme to the visual motif of water as both love and death. "Slow Movement," meanwhile, not only recurs with regularity, but at one point comprises a musical cue that is a staggering fourteen-minutes long.

Most importantly for their affective purposes, all three compositions have key structural traits that make listeners feel the music as trustworthy and sincere. First, they center around the tonic chord and note of the key they are in, with only small stepwise movements away from this harmonic "home." This minimizes the effect of larger tonal increments that spur "a sense of loss and anxiety in . . . [the] various departures from [the harmonic] order, and then reassure the listener by finally returning to that order" (Brown 1994, quoted in Neumeyer and Buehler 2009, 20). "Talk Show Host" renders this flattened aspect ideally, even while it represents Romeo and is therefore more lyrical and expressive than most of the other songs. The song's quiet, minor-key guitar riff moves stepwise down two degrees to repose on the tonic and repeats this motion several times; then a synthesizer stretches in a lazy, elastic movement to the tonic of the relative major key, the dominant, and back to the minor-key tonic, like a cat that had started to get up and then decided not to. The closed cadences and repetition signify solitude and interiority and help counter the potentially parodic effect of Romeo's bad verse and romantic impetuosity.

Both the chords and the melody of "Kissing You" are limited and highly repetitive in pattern, essentially walking the two steps up and two steps down between the tonal center and its relative minor (generally felt as the "happy" and "melancholy" versions of the same location), passing through the traditional inverted five-chord on the way. This restriction of range is reinforced even more by the lock-step parallel motion between chords and melody through most of the song. The simple structure could be said to accelerate the "avant/après" process, and hence our familiarity,



by using the same chord progression (ii-vi-Vb-I-Vb-vi)<sup>2</sup> and nearly the same melody for its verse and chorus structures. We have then a case of the almost complete predictability that makes a song immediately memorable, together with a small vocal range that allows the viewer to hum along subvocally and ingrain the music in her or his head. Thus, the leitmotif function can act rapidly even on viewers with little or no musicality.

Despite the narrow range of motion, the song also functions admirably in its affective purposes. No chord pattern makes the listener feel more as though he or she has walked up the steps to home, fulfillment, and rest than vi-Vb-I; it is the musical equivalent of the words "You complete me" or "I am home." Similarly, no pattern is more effective than I-Vb-iv at moving the listener into a kind of comfortable wistfulness, with even the normally steep drop down into the dominant chord filled in by the chord inversion. The song's pitch relations impart dignity to the young lovers' interactions even when other filmic components — the visual track, which records the potentially risible interactions of the young couple; the sound-effects track, which records much splashing of water; the dialogue track, which features sometimes amusing exchanges — might make the scene a less than dignified one. "Slow Movement" takes the static, restful nature of "Kissing You" and imbues it with a quiet sense of foreboding that contrasts with the bombast of "O Verona," the other "portentous" composition. With the violas sustaining the tonic note, the rest of the strings descend in steps down below the tonic, giving the listener the sensation of being pressed further and further below the surface of the ground (or, perhaps, the water).

These stretches of quiet, sanity, and genuine emotion in the aural band, paralleling slower camera cuts and longer scenes in the visual track, an amplified dialogue track, and (often) the sound of water in the sound-effects track, valorize Romeo and Juliet's love and intact humanity within the frantic world of mass culture that surrounds them. Simply the "organic" sound of chords being played quietly on a grand piano at the introduction of "Kissing You" and the sustained cellos and violas of "Slow Movement" soothe the viewer's much-assaulted ears and move her or him into a new mood of relaxation, out of which she or he will come only reluctantly. It also makes untenable at least one reading of the film: Luhrmann is not mocking love, and he is not playing Romeo and Juliet's relationship for comedy. He is honoring it with musical beauty. Likewise, the movie's sympathy for their doom is signaled and enforced by "Slow Movement."

## Conclusion

Although the unusual presence of music in *Romeo + Juliet* has led critics and academics to misperceive it, they have generally agreed that Luhrmann has not wrought significant injury upon the story itself. Except for a growing number of academics who follow Courtney Lehmann's belief

that Luhrmann takes Arthur Brooke's 1562 *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* more as his source than he does Shakespeare (2002, 139), most who look through Luhrmann's bewildering audiovisual innovations believe that the *Romeo and Juliet* behind *Romeo + Juliet* remains the same, and that Luhrmann's version can be seen as another instance of "repetition with variation . . . the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (Hutcheon 2006, 4), if perhaps with a little more variation and piquancy than usual. Granted, executives at Twentieth Century Fox tried to mitigate the inevitably unhappy conclusion by making Luhrmann put in post-mortem flashbacks to happier times (Cook 2010, 79), and elisions of the play leave Paris still alive, but nonetheless the lovers are dead, and the ending newscast shows them being covered with sheets and taken away on ambulance gurneys. It would seem that, unlike with his feature-film debut *Strictly Ballroom*, which is usually read as a happy-ending version of *Romeo and Juliet*, this time Luhrmann is resigned to being "stuck with Shakespeare's downbeat ending" (Travers 1996, quoted in Lehmann 2002, 144).

As with the opening, though, this music-less ending is a false frame, the first half of a double limen. The final ending frame, which might equally be taken as standing outside the movie or as constituting its true conclusion, is Radiohead's end-credits song, "Exit Music for a Film"; and this song, arguably, provides the most significant "modern-day equivalency" of all by suggesting an alternative ending, a rewriting of the story itself. Lyrically, it repositions Romeo either at a point just before he acknowledges (erroneously) that Juliet is dead, when he still has hope of a life together, or, perhaps, earlier that day, as a prothalamion, before he observes his banishment. "Pack and get dressed," he tells Juliet, "before your father hears us / before all hell breaks loose." Harmonically the song is unusual in that it establishes neither a major nor a minor key, since the tonic chord (B) is missing its third, the middle note of the triad that determines modality. Accordingly, it moves between a melancholy and hopeful mood, as the lyrics start over a minor chord, but at the end of each verse the guitars move the third-note up half a tone to form the major. The melodic line, centered around the five-note (rather than the one- or three-note, which would give a stronger sense of stability due to those notes' proximity to "home"), jumps down to touch the one-note briefly before moving back up and then, at the end of each verse, coming to rest on the one-note, which would close the cadence with finality if not for the guitars' contradictory move into the major. The indeterminate moods keep us uncertain whether to read the song as poignant in its futility (if we take Juliet already to be dead) or openly hopeful (if we believe that the song's position outside the diegetic world means that it has the power to rewrite).

What does seem certain is that Juliet wakes to join Romeo in his indictment of the adult world: "You can laugh / a spineless laugh / let all your rules and wisdom choke you." Her voice is in the synthesizer line of the contrapuntal movement of the song's C-section, a line that is mixed almost as

high as the melody, running in counterpoint — a musical form historically taken to indicate equal partnership. The extreme voice-crossing here — the synthesizer line moving up in large intervals as the vocal line moves down in reverse parallel, the two crossing paths to take the other's position — is the musical equivalent to the shared sonnet the lovers construct on first meeting, and unites them, fittingly, in hatred and rebellion just as the sonnet united them in love. It turns out, perhaps, that vague readings of the music have once again led to a false analysis, this time in the opposite direction.

It is likely that these complex musical functions, lying as they do well below the level of most filmgoers' consciousness, are indeed less important to the selling of *Romeo + Juliet* than the various elements of Twentieth Century Fox's "synergistic marketing" campaign (York 2006, 57): the music-video-like trailers, the demographic overlap between the film and the MTV audience of the time, the forceful promotion of the soundtracks. These promotional strategies cater frankly to what Richard Burt and Lynda Boose indict as the "strictly market-responsive milieu" (Boose and Burt 1997, 12) of anti-intellectual America, the most lucrative audience for any mainstream English-language film. But these are extra-filmic attributes, and we need to be careful to identify them as such. With the exception of Luhrmann's "post-classical" cinematographic style, the designation of *Romeo + Juliet* as a music video cannot validly be carried over to the film itself, and failing to make this distinction not only mischaracterizes the movie, but also obscures a much more revolutionary use of music and a much more interesting approach to the problems of adapting Shakespeare than is suggested by the tag phrase "extended music video." Further, if we continue to see Luhrmann's film as a "template" for commercially viable filmic adaptations of Shakespeare without recognizing the ways in which the mood-disrupting use of music within the film works against the commercial effect achieved by the use of music outside the film, neither critics nor future filmmakers will understand correctly the schematic for its success.

The implications of such issues affects many areas: adaptation theory, film theory, emerging ideas about youth culture, film-music theory, and questions about Shakespeare's marketability. Oddly, some of the most extended and serious treatments of the film — e.g., those by Courtney Lehmann and Peter S. Donaldson — omit mention of the music altogether. I would suggest that these analyses err on the other side of the spectrum from those that miscast the movie as a form of MTV video, and contend that no reading is likely to be complete or accurate without taking into account *Romeo + Juliet's* music.

## Notes

1. Although neither the film credits nor the CD liner provides a breakdown of scoring duties among the film's three credited composers (Armstrong, British alternative-pop/dance producer Nellee Hooper, and Luhrmann regular Marius De Vries), other sources convincingly attribute the film's orchestral elements to Armstrong. For instance, several of these elements, including "O Verona" and "The Balcony Scene," appear on Armstrong's CD *Film Works, 1995-2005* (Armstrong 2012).
2. Here I use the small-letter notational style to indicate inversions. Vb means the V (five) chord in first inversion — that is, with its third note rather than first note in the root position. Likewise, Vc would mean the V (five) chord in second inversion. Roman numerals without small letters following are assumed to be in root position; the "a" is implied.

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