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Ut Pictura Kynesis: Pictorial Art in *Romeo and Juliet* Film Adaptations

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The presence of pictorial art in the various film adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has been traditionally expounded as part of an exercise in stylization and historical localization. Elaborating upon a comparative and revisionist approach, which draws on Douglas Lanier's (2014) "rhizomatic" methodology, this paper reexamines the interaction between pictorial art and film rhetorics in the five major sound film adaptations of the play released, to date, for Western mainstream audiences. Exploring a representative selection of scenes evidences how the use of pictorial material in these productions aims to satisfy an aesthetic and historicist need while also serving a dialogic and discursive function. In so doing, this study demonstrates that *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations have made use of pictorial art as a means to (re)negotiate the meaning of the literary text in response to their particular historical-social conditions and commercial interests. Ultimately, therefore, the analysis posits these productions as distinct ekphrastic media and proposes that they be reassessed as complex semiotic configurations, founded upon an exercise of textual, pictorial and kinetic transmediatization.

Keywords: Film adaptation; Shakespeare on film; William Shakespeare; *Romeo and Juliet*; pictorial art

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Ut pictura kynesis: El uso de arte pictórico en las adaptaciones cinematográficas de *Romeo and Juliet*

La presencia de arte pictórico en las diferentes adaptaciones cinematográficas de *Romeo and Juliet* se ha analizado tradicionalmente como parte de un ejercicio de estilización y

localización histórica. Haciendo uso de un enfoque comparativo y revisionista, que se basa en la metodología de análisis "rizomático" de Douglas Lanier (2014), este artículo pretende reexaminar la interacción que se da entre el arte pictórico y la retórica fílmica en las cinco adaptaciones cinematográficas de la obra realizadas para el público mayoritario occidental. La exploración de una selección representativa de escenas permite demostrar cómo el empleo de material pictórico en estas adaptaciones busca satisfacer una necesidad estética e historicista y, a su vez, cumplir una función dialógica y discursiva. De esta manera, este estudio demuestra que las adaptaciones fílmicas sonoras de *Romeo and Juliet* han usado el arte pictórico como un conducto para (re)negociar el significado del texto literario como respuesta a sus respectivas condiciones histórico-sociales y económicas. En última instancia, este estudio concluye presentando tales producciones como expresiones de écfrasis en medios de comunicación concretos y proponiendo que se las reconciba como configuraciones semióticas complejas, fundamentadas en un ejercicio de transmediatización textual, pictórica y cinética.

Palabras clave: Adaptación cinematográfica; Shakespeare en el cine; William Shakespeare; *Romeo and Juliet*; arte pictórico

1. Introduction

Pictorial art has long been acknowledged as one of the prime sources of inspiration underpinning film adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, from George Cukor (1936) and Renato Castellani (1954) to Franco Zeffirelli (1968), Baz Luhrmann (1996) and Carlo Carlei (2013). Indeed, these are the five major sound film adaptations released for Western mainstream audiences, and all are defined by their reliance on pictorial media. Traditional research, however, has expounded the presence of pictorial material in these productions being simply an exercise of aesthetic enhancement—a reading that has largely obscured the semiotic function that pictorial art would also appear to serve in these productions. In addition to contributing to advancing character psychology and film narrative, pictorial art remains among the central codes *Romeo and Juliet* adapters have deployed in their efforts to translate the literary text from a verbal medium to a visual and kinetic space. Far from acknowledging its semiotic potential, film critics have analyzed the use of pictorial art in these adaptations as a stylizing device, meant, as Kenneth S. Rothwell (1973) concluded, "to prettify, to idolize, to sermonize, to elevate and inflate every action into heroic size" (347).

It is in an effort to contribute to a more accurate critical appraisal that this essay provides a close-reading analysis of the terms framing the presence of pictorial art in the renditions of Cukor, Castellani, Zeffirelli, Luhrmann and Carlei. For this purpose, the analysis that follows reassesses the use of pictorial media in these productions by taking a comparative approach founded upon the methodology of analysis Douglas

Lanier outlines in "Shakespearean Rhizomatics" (2014). Echoing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), Lanier takes the provocative stance that Shakespeare's writings and the multiple adaptations with which they may be connected should be considered as expressions of a broader, abstract "work" that operates within a conceptual structure that he refers to as a "rhizome" (27). In contrast to a vertical (or arboreal) structure, as he puts it, "[a] rhizomatic structure […] has no single or central root and no vertical structure. Instead, like the underground root system of rhizomatic plants, it is a horizontal, decentered multiplicity of subterranean roots that cross each other, bifurcating and recombining, breaking off and restarting" (28). For Lanier, this implies that the relationship between the Shakespearean text and film adaptations is not text-dependent: rather, the text is conceived of as just another part of "the vast web of adaptations, allusions and (re)productions […] we call 'Shakespeare'" (29), a web in which the meaning of text and film remain in perpetual (re)negotiation, or "endless 'becoming'" (27). Calling for the need to leave behind "the ability to regulate Shakespearean adaptations […] according to fidelity to the Shakespearean text(s)," Lanier proposes a new way of looking at Shakespeare on film, one which involves a "scrupulous attention to texts within larger processes of adaptation, to their status as creative acts" (30), and a critical revaluation of the terms that bind textual, pictorial and kinetic media, aiming to seek out "which relations, of the multiplicity of relations in which a work partakes, are particularly creative" (35).

Elaborating upon Lanier (2014), this study contends that the use of pictorial art can stand as one of those "particularly creative [relations]" that bind Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and its five major sound film adaptations. Like Jim Casey (2017), Sally Barnden (2020) and Yukari Yoshihara (2021), the essay draws upon the theoretical foundations proposed by Lanier and, in so doing, suggests the need to embrace a revisionist approach in order to re-examine the presence of pictorial media in *Romeo and Juliet* cinematic renditions. It aims to do this through a detailed analysis that pitches not only text against film, but also film against film. In essence, this essay conducts a "rhizomatic close-reading" of the five film adaptations of the play so as to shed light on how their directors have made use of pictorial art not so much as an embellishing device, but as a dialogic and self-reflexive tool, one conducive to better conveying the meaning of the Shakespearian text. First, the article sets the broader scene and examines the presence of pictorial art in Shakespeare's film adaptations and cinematography at large. Next, it compares the five major *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations, distinguishing Cukor and Castellani from Zeffirelli, Luhrmann and Carlei in terms of the historical-social, cinematic and aesthetic conditions framing pictorial art in their renditions. Lastly, by exploring the dialectical function pictorial art plays in these productions, the essay concludes by positing *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations as distinct ekphrastic media, that is, complex semiotic configurations founded upon an underlying exercise of textual, pictorial and kinetic transmediatization.

2. Pictorial Art, Cinematography and Shakespeare on Film

In 1911, Ricciotto Canudo, frequently referred to as one of the first film theoreticians, published his influential manifesto, "The Birth of the Sixth Art." Anticipating his later "Reflections on the Seventh Art" (1923), where he would go on to coin the term still used as a synonym for cinematography to this day, in his manifesto Canudo interrogated the expressive potential inherent in the (then) burgeoning medium, which he depicted as a privileged mode of artistic expression. Foremost among the text's proposals lay the idea that cinematography was not only a distinctive but also a superior art, capable of bringing about a unique synthesis of all preexisting art forms, that is, "a superb conciliation of the Rhythms of Space […] and the Rhythms of Time" (3). In the text, Canudo ascribes to films the power to engage multiple stimuli at once and, hence, heighten "the basic psychic condition of western life which manifests itself in action" (5). In contrast to poetry, music, architecture, sculpture and painting, which had only been able to produce "a stylisation of life into stillness," for Canudo, cinematography seemed to afford "the greatest mobility in the representation of life," enabling artists to transcend "all traditions and constraints" and represent "the whole of life in action" (5), thereby appearing to elevate cinematographers "fatally and irresistibly […] towards the attainment of Aesthetics" (4). Positing film-making as the sixth art and destined to preside over all other forms, in his manifesto Canudo therefore concluded by prophesying the central role the new medium would come to play in later years—a role he linked to its capacity to reconcile visual and kinetic media in order to produce a unique aesthetic experience that he likened to the contemplation of "*a Painting and a Sculpture developing in Time*" or, rather, "*Plastic Art in Motion*" (4; italics in the original).

Ricciotto Canudo, admittedly, is not the only scholar to suggest films' aesthetic potential. Nor is he the only film critic to point out a direct connection between cinematography and the liberal arts. His work, however, should be credited for opening up a line of discussion that has remained at the forefront of critical debates within the field of film studies. At the crossroads between a mode of creative expression and a commercial enterprise, cinematography has long problematized the nature and scope of "art." Its status as a legitimate art form has often been contested, and only recently have critics begun to call for the serious consideration of that aesthetic power Canudo discerned in 1911—a call that has sparked an increasing interest in cinematography's connection to other art forms and, in particular, pictorial art. There is a good reason behind this increasing interest. "While some may feel that film does not belong to the history of art," Angela Dalle Vacche (1996) claims, "the fact is that filmmakers often use paintings to shape or enrich the meaning of their works. Thus the history of art is *in* film" (1; italics in the original). A rapid overview of the history of Hollywood's most recognizable blockbusters suffices to evince how pictorial art, from scenography, costumes and hairstyling to lighting, color and textures, has been a quintessential part of cinematography since its inception. Rather than standing as two necessary opposites at the end of a continuum that spans low to high culture, cinematography

and pictorial art may be argued to be two modes of artistic expression that tend to coalesce through an exercise of "convergence," an operation whereby both media "lose their medium-specific qualities by being remediated" (Balsom 2013, 13). Despite what has been noted by several scholars and referred to by Susan Felleman (2006) as "cinema's sometimes uncomfortable and always shifting position among the worlds of art, commerce, industry, and mass media" (3), cinema and painting often enrich and respond to one another, engaging in a self-reflexive encounter that comes about on screen and on canvas.

For a variety of reasons, the intimate connection binding cinematography and pictorial art should not, though, come as a surprise. Following the use of the term proposed by Gérard Genette (1997), films could be regarded as a distinct form of "palimpsest," that is, as complex semiotic configurations elaborated upon endless connections to (or traces from) "another preexistent text" (5). Like literature, music and painting, cinematography is a multivocal and multimedial mode of expression which participates in an endless web of signs and references that render films into symbolic utterances "filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances" (Bakhtin 1986, 91). Pictorial art would seem to stand, in this regard, as one of the many semiotic systems imbricated in the cinematic fabric, as central to film rhetorics, and as responsible for its cultural and discursive signification. Robert Stam (2000) summarizes this point accurately when he writes that "cinema is both a synesthetic and a synthetic art [...], [a] composite language by virtue of its diverse matters of expression—sequential photography, music, phonetic sound, and noise [...]. Cinema can literally include painting, poetry, and music, or it can metaphorically evoke them by imitating their procedures" (61). In other words, contrary to widespread popular assumption, pictorial art does not stand (only) as a form of aesthetic enhancement. Rather, as part of the battery of codes that inform kinetic media, it remains central to the process of convergence upon which the film narrative relies—a process founded upon film directors' endeavors to broker meaning through the reconciliation of pictorial and cinematic signs into a product that, to use a phrase from Julia Kristeva (1980), comes across as "heterogeneous mosaics of texts" (41).

To this "heterogeneous mosaic," one should add another central piece, textual media, which becomes especially significant when it comes to the genre of film adaptations, namely, films that realize a particular work of literature onto the screen. Predicated upon an effort to remediate literary writing into cinematic language, film adaptations—whether based on novels, poems, or plays—stand, as Mireia Aragay (2005) claims, as "hybrid" products, an unparalleled expression of art able to bridge "the verbal/visual or word/image divide" (24). In order to "bridge" this gap, film adapters must deploy different resources, aiming to translate textual signs into visual and kinetic codes by "searching two systems of communication for elements of equivalent position in the systems capable of eliciting a signified at a given element of pertinence" (Andrew 2000, 33). In this process, pictorial art is paramount. Pictorial media have a distinctive semiotic

power that can actively contribute not only to convey but also to challenge the meanings of a literary text in cinematic language. Far from serving a superficial function, pictorial art enables filmmakers to transpose verbal signs into visual and kinetic language, to negotiate the literary text into a new semiotic and conceptual product and to provide, as Dennis Cutchins (2017) argues, "a way of thinking about texts" (80).

It is not then without reason that, in this light, film directors have shown a conspicuous interest in resorting to pictorial art when tackling William Shakespeare's dramatic production. Indeed, "spectacularity," "stylization," "beautification" and "pictorialism" are four terms commonly used in the specialized literature whenever Shakespeare on film is discussed. Among other contemporary scholars, Russell Jackson (2000a, 19-24) provides an enlightening account concerning the history of the relationship between the Bard's writings, film adaptations and pictorial art, departing from the painterly nature of silent films such as James Blackton and William Ranous' *Julius Caesar* (1908) and Frank Benson's *Richard III* (1911) to more recent productions. Laurence Olivier's reference to John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1852) when depicting the eponymous character's demise in *Hamlet* (1948) and Akira Kurosawa's allusions to Ichiyusai Kuniyoshi's woodblock prints in *Throne of Blood* (1957) are but a few examples that point to how film directors, in the U.S. and abroad, have appealed to pictorial media when translating the Bard to the cinematic canvas. As Patricia Tatspaugh (2000, 136) suggests, the reasons why these directors have resorted to pictorial art in their productions are no coincidence, even though some scholars have tended to reduce them to a superficial desire to produce an aesthetically pleasant or historically accurate rendition. Such has been the unfortunate conclusion reached in most critical analyses centered on the five major *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations released for Western mainstream audiences: George Cukor (1936), Renato Castellani (1954), Franco Zeffirelli (1968), Baz Luhrmann (1996) and Carlo Carlei (2013).

Romeo and Juliet, together with *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, is one of Shakespeare's most screen-staged tragedies, as Graham Holderness and Christopher McCullough (1986, 31-33) evince in their insightful compilation of a selective filmography of Shakespeare's plays. Given the interest filmmakers have shown in the play, it comes as no surprise to learn that *Romeo and Juliet* has also occupied a privileged position within academic discussions of Shakespeare on film—a substantial number of which have centered on the analysis of the pictorial idiom upon which directors have traditionally elaborated their renditions. The general critical consensus concerning the use of pictorial art in *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations, however, is that the principle controlling the productions of Cukor, Castellani, Zeffirelli, Luhrmann and Carlei was "to reclaim Shakespeare for the wide, popular-moviegoing audience from the art-film elite" (Crowl 2008, 54). Because they target a mainstream audience, these adaptations have been discussed as commercial and mass-oriented enterprises whose prime concern was none other than "to make Shakespeare's famous young lovers attractive to the cinema audience" (Tatspaugh 2000, 136). Pictorial art, in this reading, has been

analyzed as a beautifying device, meant to produce a visually appealing production (Rothwell 1973, 349-50; Levenson 1987, 122-23; Anderegg 2004, 62-4; Lehmann 2010, 89-90; Owens 2021, 26). For several reasons, however, this reading betrays a certain lack of nuance.

3. Shakespearean Idiom, Cinematic Censorship and Religious Iconography: George Cukor (1936) and Renato Castellani (1954)

Roland Barthes (1977) famously concluded that "a narrative is never made up of anything other than functions: in differing degrees, everything in it signifies" (89). When applied to the study of pictorial art in *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations, the statement provides a productive framework within which to begin to assess the role that pictorial media have played in these productions. Contrary to what critical consensus suggests, for Cukor, Castellani, Zeffirelli, Luhrmann and Carlei, pictorial art is no ornamental addition: rather, like other visual and kinetic codes, it performs a distinct semiotic function. The question remains as to what function can be ascribed to pictorial media in each instance. As Frank Reijnders (2002) notes, "painting resists all efforts to impose upon it a linear and irreversible order that would fixate it in time. The art of painting is never completed" (167). In a similar vein, the meaning of pictorial art in *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations does not respond to a "linear and irreversible" rationale. Echoing other codes in the rhizome, as Douglas Lanier (2014) points out, pictorial art remains a complex part of "those ever-differentiating particulars" binding Cukor, Castellani, Zeffirelli, Luhrmann and Carlei in an "aggregated Shakespearean field," a field where pictorial material, alongside Shakespeare, are transformed and restructured "into something forever new" (31). To study the use of pictorial art in *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations, according to Lanier, is to acknowledge "difference as essential to the cultural afterlife of 'Shakespeare'" (31) and to account for the particular conditions underpinning how film adapters have exploited "'Shakespeare's' creative potentialities" (33).

Looking at the pioneering renditions of George Cukor (1936) and Renato Castellani (1954), one would be easily excused for assuming that fidelity to an early modern aesthetics remains the controlling principle behind the use of pictorial art in these productions. Laying the foundations for a trend that would be followed by Zeffirelli and Carlei, Cukor and Castellani based their productions on research conducted by a crew "sent to Italy [...] for background shots and sketches of paintings and museum pieces. Botticelli, Bellini, Signorelli and such narrative artists as Benozzo Gozzoli and Carpaccio, inspired the sets and decor" (Lillich 1956, 250). From Gozzoli's *Procession of the Magi* (1459-1460)—a fresco Cukor recreates in the Prince of Verona's first entrance—to Lorenzo's *Miracolo di San Bernardino* (1473)—which Castellani uses as inspiration for the costumes worn by the men of Verona—the first adaptations are brimming with references to the Italian Renaissance's pictorial tradition and, more specifically, to religious iconography (Lillich

1956, 251; Santi 1987, 24). Considering that contemporary audiences have come to see *Romeo and Juliet* as a story that retells a passionate relationship between two teenagers, the fact that Cukor and Castellani decided to employ religious iconography, of all sources, may come as a surprise. It should be noted, however, that Cukor and Castellani's adaptations, unlike those of Zeffirelli, Luhrmann and Carlei, were conditioned by a series of censorship restrictions—the "Motion Picture Production Code," more commonly known as the "Hays Code"—which largely influenced both Cukor's and Castellani's interest in these particular references.

Enforced between 1930 and 1966 in the U.S. and named after its chief proponent, William H. Hays, the Hays Code purported to uphold, as stated in the original text, "the *moral importance* of entertainment" (348; italics in the original) through a series of guidelines aiming to police the content of "[t]heatrical motion pictures" (347). Among other "[*m*]*oral obligations*" (349; italics in the original), this code limited explicit displays of affection or, rather, "[*s*]*cenes of passion*," ranging from "lustful and prolonged kissing" to "evidently lustful embraces," encouraging filmmakers to center their productions on "[*p*]*ure love*" (354; italics in the original). "*Even within the limits of pure love*" (355; italics in the original), the Hays Code purported to also ensure that tact, delicacy and general regard for propriety was manifested in the presentation of such acts and, for this reason, the code established a series of regulations for minimizing "manifestations of passion" (355). Precisely because expressions of affection were under so much scrutiny, Cukor and Castellani were cautious about the terms framing the presentation of the title characters' relationship. Tension concerning the sexual component of Romeo and Juliet's love story, admittedly, are not alien to the Shakespearean text. Gillian Woods (2013) suggests as much when she writes that "*Romeo and Juliet* stages the emergence of newer sexual attitudes," which Shakespeare appeared to address through a markedly ambivalent idiom, founded upon the translation of "Catholic imagery into the language of sexual desire" (141). At the crossroads between Petrarchism and Neoplatonism, the literary text thematizes a conflict which pitches sexual and spiritual attraction against each other—a conflict that remains central to Cukor's and Castellani's films. Conditioned by the Hays Code, however, these two adaptations were forced to privilege an asexual or, rather, Neoplatonic, take on *Romeo and Juliet,* which explains why, contrary to Zeffirelli, Luhrmann and Carlei, both directors resorted to religious iconography in their efforts to depict the lovers' relationship as being one based on spiritual attraction.

The terms framing the presentation of Juliet in the two renditions provides a good example of this insofar as Cukor and Castellani portray the young Capulet as a divine-like figure, namely, a "*Venus Coelestis*" (Walker 2002, 621). Also following Neoplatonic conventions, in the literary text, Juliet is often described as an emblem of innocence and chastity, "a snowy dove trooping with crows" (1.5.47), whose beauty is not only "too rich for use" but also "for earth too dear" (1.5.46). Elaborating upon this depiction, in their joint sonnet, Romeo elevates his beloved to a "dear saint" (1.5.102), that is, a "holy shrine" (1.5.93) which he both fears and yearns to "profane" (1.5.92). In *Romeo*

and Juliet, as Ewa Panecka (2019) expounds, "Juliet, inspired by the figure of Beatrice in Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, is both the blessed Virgin and the church, a saint who does not move, a fixed shrine, whereas Romeo represents the pilgrim church, erring" (3). Cukor and Castellani take their cue from the literary text and, hence, render Juliet through the pictorial codes of fifteenth-century Italian frescoes representing the Virgin Mary and the Catholic saints. In Cukor's film, as Juliet is first introduced to the audience, an establishing shot zooms in on the actress, who is feeding a deer in her garden while wearing a white gown and a diadem, which, together with her hairstyling, makes her resemble, as Meredith Lillich (1956, 251) and Pier Marco de Santi (1987, 23) noted, the Virgin in Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (00:12:05-00:12:11). This fresco also inspires one of the many portraits released to promote the film, where Juliet is shown inside a chapel wearing a cape and with an aureole with Romeo kneeling at her side.[1] Likewise, in Castellani's film, Juliet's costume and hairstyling are inspired by those of the Virgin in Piero della Francesca's 1460 *Madonna del Parto* and by Saint Ursula in Vittore Carpaccio's 1497-1498 *Storie di sant'Orsola* (Santi 1987, 24-25). Saint Ursula, in particular, is a recurrent source of inspiration for Castellani, as made evident in the funeral procession that ensues after Juliet drinks Friar Lawrence's vial, in that her litter, her posture as she lies (presumably) dead, and the characters' arrangement all recreate the scene Carpaccio depicts in his 1493 *Martirio dei pellegrini e funerali di sant'Orsola* (01:49:31-01:50:15).

That Juliet should be coded as a fifteenth-century Virgin in Cukor's and Castellani's productions is a revealing choice—one that suggests both directors' endeavors to use pictorial art to translate Shakespeare's Neoplatonic idiom into cinematic language, employing religious iconography to establish an "*equivalence in meaning of the forms*" (Bazin 2000, 20; italics in the original). Often captured in a superior and distant position, physically and metaphorically beyond her lover's reach, these first adaptations portray Juliet as a quasi-divine entity whose displays of affection remain bound to a spiritual, rather than physical, space. The balcony scene, as a case in point, unfolds in Cukor and Castellani through a collection of high- and low-angle shots, emphasizing the lovers' distance: the young Capulet is high above Romeo, who longs to join her but must content himself with mere contemplation of this in a series of exchanges where he addresses her as an adoring pilgrim, literally looking up to her, as if to a saint (Cukor 1936, 00:37:27-00:45:33; Castellani 1954, 00:38:03-00:42:22). Castellani maintains this distance even up to the wedding scene, placing the lovers on two different rooms that are connected through a barred window, which visually codes the ceremony as a confessional—a symbolic communion of pilgrim and saint (00:55:41-00:57:38).

Echoing the literary text, in turn, both Cukor's and Castellani's Romeo are presented as a prototypically Petrarchan lover who, like Astrophil in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil*

[1] The image is available online as picture 61 among the photographs at "Romeo and Juliet (1936)", *IMDb* [Accessed December 4, 2022].

and Stella (1591), is torn between his beloved's demands for spiritual communion and his sexual drives. This conflict, as Sasha Roberts (1998) notes, was present in Shakespeare's text, where, through Romeo's Petrarchan effusions, the playwright "engages in a powerful critique of Petrarchism, and disrupts the Petrarchan modes it evokes" (85). Like Shakespeare's character, Cukor's and Castellani's Romeo are depicted as the emblem of Petrarchan melancholy and infatuation. This becomes most conspicuous in the scene where Romeo is first introduced to the audience. In the 1936 version, as the sequence begins, Cukor includes a brief establishing shot in which a shepherd, surrounded by his flock, plays a panpipe. This is followed by a traveling shot, which turns to a melancholy Romeo, lying alone on some Romanesque ruins (00:14:58-00:15:10). Likewise, Castellani's sequence begins with an establishing shot where a lonely and crestfallen Romeo, whose costume mirrors Ford Brown's Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* (1871), is sitting on a pedestal surrounded by trees in a rural milieu while in the distance rise the walls of Verona (00:10:32-00:10:45). By stressing his melancholy mood and solitude, and by locating him in a pastoral landscape, Cukor and Castellani depict Romeo in terms of the attitude and setting that would characterize the portrayal of the suffering lover in the Petrarchan tradition. In so doing, the films render the young Montague as a counterpart to his divine beloved, who, like the virgins and saints on whom she is modeled, encourages him to restrain his sexual impulses and endorse a contemplative mode of affection—one which not only echoes the proposals articulated by the Neoplatonic tradition that informs Shakespeare's text, but also conforms to the restrictions required under the Hays Code.

4. Towards Sociological (Re)Signification: Franco Zeffirelli (1968), Baz Luhrmann (1996) and Carlo Carlei (2013)

1968 would prove to be a momentous year for the U.S. film-making industry—one that would bring about a major transition in the terms animating the use of pictorial art in *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations. "Recognizing that the one-size-fits-all structure of the Code was failing to meet the expectations of post-war audiences," as Claire Piepenburg (2018) puts it, the Motion Picture Association "developed the modern iteration of the ratings system […]. Introduced in 1968, the Code and Rating Administration […] did away with the pre-production system of review and approval used under the Hays Code" (108-109). No longer under the restraints to which Cukor and Castellani had been forced to adhere, post-1968 productions gestured to a renewed interest in reengaging the Shakespearean text and pushing their own takes on the play beyond the provinces of Neoplatonic and Petrarchan conventions. Renditions by Franco Zeffirelli (1968), Baz Luhrmann (1996) and Carlo Carlei (2013) are indeed fabricated upon a distinct endeavor to resignify the literary text and make *Romeo and Juliet* more responsive to the values and expectations their target audiences espouse. In other words, released from previous cinematic and aesthetic censorship, Zeffirelli,

Luhrmann and Carlei seek to activate new means to bridge the gap that was separating the Shakespearean text from mainstream audiences, calling on, for this purpose, new pictorial material.

With his blockbuster production, released the same year the Hays Code was repealed, Franco Zeffirelli inaugurated this new trend in the *Romeo and Juliet* cinematic canon. His timing, undoubtably, was on point. His film was not only one of the first to be produced after the end of censorship: it also premiered at the height of the 1960s "Flower Power" movement, which largely informed his take on the text. "With its emphasis on youth, energy, and passion being stifled and snuffed out by the ancient grudges of an older generation," as Samuel Crowl (2008) contends, "Zeffirelli's film captured the spirit of the 60s" (55). Accordingly, far from asexual (or spiritual) in nature, in his 1968 film, Romeo and Juliet's relationship is founded upon an eminently sexual attraction, a reading that is foreshadowed in the film's promotional poster, which shows a still from the bedding scene where Zeffirelli, unlike his predecessors, exposes (and notoriously so) the actors' bodies in full nudity.[2] There is little room to doubt that the 1968 rendition was created to satisfy the late-1960s young audience's expectation of "see[ing] teenagers fighting and loving" (Jackson 2014, 86). Ultimately, this explains why, deviating from Cukor and Castellani, Zeffirelli does not resort to religious iconography but, rather, deploys pictorial art and techniques to portray Romeo and Juliet's bond as one that is inherently physical.

The balcony scene, once again, serves as an insightful illustration. As the sequence opens, Romeo adopts a voyeuristic stance as he hides among the trees of Juliet's garden and eavesdrops on his beloved, who stands in a superior location on the balcony above him. As J. L. Styan (1977) suggests, "Shakespeare is careful to place Juliet out of reach of Romeo, and this distance adds to the lyrical and etherial [*sic*] quality in their words. Remove the balcony […] and the 'dear saint' begins to look a little fleshly" (22). Contrary to the rather ethereal quality that characterizes Cukor's and Castellani's productions, Zeffirelli's balcony scene exploits the characters' mutual desire by having Romeo climb up a tree, thus positioning the lovers on the same vertical plane. In order to emphasize the passionate nature of Romeo and Juliet's young love, Zeffirelli resorts to imagery which recalls, as is also the case in Carlo Carlei's 2013 adaptation, Frank Dicksee's *Romeo and Juliet* (1884). Carlei's rendition mirrors quite precisely Dicksee's portrayal: Romeo sits on the left of the balcony's stone railing next to a column surrounded by roses; Juliet's gown copies that of the painting, as does her grasping gesture; furthermore, Romeo's departure is filmed through a symmetrical frame in the midst of which the lovers kiss (00:31:58-00:32:10). In the case of Zeffirelli, though, the reference to Dicksee's painting is subtler, although still present in the characters' arrangement at the center of a symmetrical frame when they kiss, in Juliet's whitish

[2] The image is available online as picture 517 among the photographs at "Romeo and Juliet (1968)", *IMDb* [Accessed December 4, 2022].

gown and grasping gesture and in the prominence given to the trees around the lovers (00:48:10-00:48:18).

In addition to reclaiming the sexual component of Romeo and Juliet's relationship, Zeffirelli's rendition evinces a greater concern than Cukor and Castellani have with exploring the conflict between the lovers' feuding families, recasting it as a conflict that, similar to the (then) ongoing Vietnam War, made Verona's youth the victims of an external feud. This can be illustrated in the way in which Zeffirelli portrays Tybalt in his production. Following Shakespeare's depiction of the character, the other major sound film adaptations considered here present Tybalt as a villain, blinded by his hatred for the Montagues. In the 1968 film, however, while Tybalt can be described as a proud braggart, he is not an evil character. This is especially noticeable when Tybalt murders Mercutio, for the camera focuses on his face, surprised and frightened, a gesture that suggests Mercutio's death was but an accident. Zeffirelli's Tybalt, as Deborah Cartmell (2000, 219) suggests, is a young man trapped in a feud that springs from the adult world yet whose consequences are suffered by the youth of the community. This may explain why Zeffirelli draws on a religious motif to depict Tybalt's death. Enraged by his friend's murder, Romeo runs after Tybalt and the two men engage in a long fight that ends in Verona's main square, where Romeo pierces Tybalt's heart with a dagger. Though not necessarily based on a specific painting, Tybalt's gesture as he dies screaming, with his arms spread out as in a cross and his grimace of pain, are reminiscent of a pictorial motif used to portray martyrdom in the Western tradition, as in Francisco de Goya's 1819 *Christ on the Mount of Olives* (01:26:27-01:26:28). Through a pictorial motif that visually codes Tybalt as a martyr, then, the passage suggests that it is not in fact Romeo that kills Tybalt but, rather, the violence and hatred the adults foster in the youth—a message that would have resonated powerfully with the "Flower Power" generation Zeffirelli aimed to address.

Notwithstanding the chronological gap that separates the 1968 and 1996 productions, to argue that Baz Luhrmann draws largely upon Franco Zeffirelli's sociological approach, particularly as regards his take on pictorial art, is not an overstatement. The 1996 rendition, after all, also purports to reinterpret Shakespeare's material in terms of a series of aesthetic codes that respond to the particular tastes espoused by its target audience—in this case, the late-twentieth-century MTV generation. This explains many of the choices the director made in his rendition, including his decision to shoot his film in Mexico City and recast Verona as "Verona Beach," that is, "a massive industrial sprawl" (Arroyo 1997, 6). Following other postmodernist takes on Shakespeare's dramatic production, like Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), Luhrmann's film cannibalizes various cinematic traditions, including Sergio Leone's "spaghetti Western" and Federico Fellini's grotesque realism, and combines them with punk and surf subcultures as well as kitsch and Neoclassical aesthetics, producing a film that would seem to be difficult to reconcile with the references Cukor, Castellani, Zeffirelli and Carlei conjure up in their own renditions. As Russell Jackson (2000)

warns, however, even though the 1996 film may have "a stylised sense of actuality and modernity […] it is no less romantic at heart and pictorial in values than Zeffirelli's film" (31). Founded on providing a modern (re)reading of the play but still relying upon pictorial material, the underlying principle ruling Luhrmann's film rhetorics is to reinterpret *Romeo and Juliet* through late-1990s aesthetics and thus invite his audience to assess the place the Bard holds in the postmodern scenario.

This invitation appears, however, to entail a certain degree of self-criticism. From Michael Anderegg (2004) to Avital Grubstein (2017), numerous scholars have provided persuasive analyses of how the 1996 rendition provides a harsh analysis of late-1990s consumerist culture through its use of pictorial media. Manuel Casas Guijarro (2008), in particular, states that pictorial art is deployed in the film to suggest the idea that "[l]ove […] and religion are commercialised and commodified under the light of consumerist MTV pop culture" (9). In his production, that is, Luhrmann tries to suggest how Verona Beach's population and late-twentieth-century capitalist society at large perceive religion, love and, by extension, Shakespeare as commodities with no underlying value. This can be seen in the contrasts established between the overwhelming presence of religious iconography in the film and the characters' dubious ethics. As evinced in the opposition between the Sacred Heart embroidered in Tybalt's waistcoat and his villainous nature, the characters do not seem to discern in religion a code of moral guidance: rather it simply serves an aesthetic function (00:07:25-00:07:28). Throughout the film, too, Luhrmann exhibits a set of commercials where, through parodic references, the director suggests how love and Shakespeare's writings are also saleable products, to be consumed and disposed of. The products advertised include "Prospero's Scotch Whiskey" and "Thunder Bullets," whose slogans echo, respectively, *The Tempest* and *Henry VI, Part II* (00:49:48; 00:49:50); the name of the pub "The Merchant of Verona Beach" and the German sausage stand "Rosencrantzky's," named, respectively, after *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*'s Rosencrantz (00:49:47; 00:50:34); and, lastly, "L'amour," a recurrent billboard that mirrors Coca-Cola's logo and advertises a soft-drink and, metaphorically, love itself (00:15:56; 00:50:00).

The most remarkable example of Luhrmann's resort to pictorial art in the film can, however, be seen in his use of scenography and, more precisely, Sycamore Grove's ruined theater, the space where three of the most important scenes in this version are shot. The first is Romeo's introduction to the audience, a sequence that, as already mentioned, echoes Cukor's and Castellani's renditions due to its emphasis on a melancholy and lonely Romeo lying amidst ruins (00:10:25-00:11:19). The second is Mercutio's Queen Mab speech, a scene constructed in terms of camp aesthetics through Mercutio's sexual innuendoes and through his lavish drag queen costume (00:19:29-00:23:46). The third and last is Mercutio's death, a scene fabricated through the use of close-ups and American shots, characteristic of the Western cinematic tradition; the melodramatic use of storm clouds and orchestral music as Mercutio dies; and the camera's reiterative attempts to use the hole in the midst of the ruined theater's walls to frame his demise (00:59:59-

01:07:01). These three scenes establish an interesting connection between theater and cinema in that they provide cinema-goers with a recorded onstage performance—a self-reflexive commentary suggestive of the film's theatrical origins. As such, the way in which Luhrmann uses Sycamore Grove's dilapidated stage appears to further respond to his attempt to assess the place Shakespeare and his dramatic production occupy in the postmodern. Prima facie, Luhrmann appears to be suggesting that, much like Sycamore Grove's theater, the (traditional) theatrical conventions of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* are too in a state of decay. For a contemporary viewer, that is, the Petrarchan tradition upon which Shakespeare bases Romeo is as archaic as the stage on which he delivers his lines. Rather than discarding Shakespeare altogether, however, in his adaptation, Luhrmann—Casas Guijarro (2008, 10) concludes—proposes a dialogue between the old and the new, between high culture and low culture. Through the combination of Sycamore Grove's ruined stage, Shakespeare's text and the different aesthetic and cinematic traditions he summons up, Luhrmann seems to suggest that, if rendered in unison with modern aesthetics, the Bard's writings may still find a way to resonate with contemporary audiences' interests and concerns.

This is the same rationale that informs the latest addition to the *Romeo and Juliet* on film canon, Carlo Carlei's 2013 adaptation—a production that, like Luhrmann's, remains, to date, highly controversial. Mohammad Reza *et al.* (2020), for instance, have harshly criticized the film for its excessive efforts to stick "to the play's verbal text and cultural context" (42) and its alleged failure to address the "demands of those for whom the movie is mainly made" (46). Echoing Cukor, Castellani and Zeffirelli, the 2013 production effects a faithful portrayal of early modern Italy, shot on-location, albeit elevating the setting to a stylized world that, for Reza and other like-minded critics, remains distant to millennial viewers. This critique, however, is unfounded, for Carlei's rendition, like those of Zeffirelli and Luhrmann, does respond to his audience's expectations and, in particular, to what Russell Jackson (2014) refers to as contemporary viewers' "demand for historical authenticity" (88). To argue that millennials are unable to appreciate Carlei's aesthetics is to miss the relevance of the pictorial idiom to which young cinema-goers have increasingly become accustomed during the 2000s and 2010s. Following a trend sparked by the recent revival of so-called "heritage films," like those of Julian Fellowes, scriptwriter on both *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) and *Romeo and Juliet* (2013), Carlei's film rhetorics mirror what Claire Monk (2011) has identified as the "particular aesthetic approach to the visualisation of the past" of twenty-first-century period series and films and their "reverent approach to the adaptation—indeed, the *display*—of 'classic' literary sources" (17; italics in the original). In a context defined by numerous productions founded upon the use of a pictorial language which targets both historical authenticity and stylization, like those of Zeffirelli and Luhrmann, Carlei construes his film through the use of a series of visual and kinetic references that aim to beautify but also comment on and reclaim Shakespeare for the twenty-first century.

Foremost to understanding the aesthetic import of Carlei's use of pictorial art is his use of scenography and setting. As with Luhrmann's film, the various locations in which Carlei's film was shot are not coincidental. In addition to generating a pleasant effect on the audience through symmetrical camera frames, early modern costumes and picturesque locations, the settings Carlei used also have symbolic meaning. This is exemplified clearly in his rendition of the bedroom scene. Even though Carlei is reluctant to exploit the scene's sexual potential in the same terms Zeffirelli and Luhrmann had, in his version, Romeo and Juliet's first sexual encounter is also framed in pictorial terms. As the characters lie in bed, about to engage in sexual intercourse, the screen blurs, the music reaches a climactic crescendo and the sequence transitions to a traveling shot where the camera rotates around *Starry Heaven*, a fresco located in the ceiling of the "Hall of the Zodiac," housed in Mantua's Palazzo Ducale (01:04:58-01:05:06). Painted by Lorenzo Costa in 1579, the fresco portrays the constellations personified and Diana, the goddess of the moon and chastity, in her chariot. This shot can be interpreted as a reference to the lines Juliet's voiceover utters at the beginning of the scene, where she urges "gentle Night" (3.2.20) to bring "[her] Romeo" (3.2.21) and turn him "in[to] little stars" (3.2.22) after his death. Perhaps most significantly, Carlei may be appealing to this particular fresco to represent Romeo and Juliet's joint loss of virginity (or chastity) in a more poetic and euphemistic fashion, suggesting how, metaphorically, they have both "reached the stars."

In his production, Carlei's use of pictorial art is subtle but effective, inviting his audience to reflect on the particular frescoes that are being displayed onscreen and the terms in which they may relate to the story. It can be seen too in the scene where Romeo learns about Juliet's death—a scene Carlei sets in the "Sala dei Giganti" in Mantua's Palazzo del Te. Painted by Giulio Romano between 1530 and 1532, the frescoes on the walls portray the *Fall of the Giants from Mount Olympus*, one of the central episodes in the "Gigantomachy." In classical mythology, the Giants (the offspring of Uranus and Gaia) are primarily known for rebelling against Zeus. Fearing the power of the Olympians, as Pierre Grimal (1991) explains, the Giants "began threatening heaven by bombarding it with enormous rocks and flaming trees," only to be ultimately "slain" (161). One of the favorite themes in classical and early modern art, the ceiling in the "Sala dei Giganti," where Carlei shoots his scene, portrays the victorious Olympians and, specifically, Zeus, who, assisted by Athena, throws thunderbolts as part of his divine retribution on the rebellious giants below (01:28:44-01:28:53). Not by coincidence, after being misinformed about Juliet's death, Romeo, who physically stands at the level of the painted giants, raises his head to look directly up to the room's ceiling as he decides to visit the apothecary to purchase poison to kill himself (01:31:17-01:32:00). The symbology of the scene cannot be understated. Romeo and Juliet, after all, tried to defy the adult generation (their symbolic superiors) and elope. The use of this setting foreshadows Romeo's end, hinting at the idea that the character, like the giants that surround him, will also meet his end—in this case, through ill fortune.

The pictorial symbology that animates Carlei's film rhetorics reaches its climax during Romeo and Juliet's death scene. Once Friar Laurence leaves the crypt, Juliet, sitting on a stone altar, grasps Romeo's corpse, draws his dagger, and stabs herself. As the friar returns to the sepulcher, the camera zooms in on his face as he recoils in horror. In the next shot, set between two columns, Juliet is depicted holding her lover in her arms in a frame that echoes Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498-1499), a reference that Luhrmann had also used, though, to depict Mercutio's death (Luhrmann 1996, 01:05:22-01:06:00; Carlei 2013, 01:47:22-01:47:26). The presence of religious iconography in Carlei's scene is conspicuous: a bluish light enters from a window at the back of the sepulcher and falls upon the lovers' corpses. The shot, at the same time, places Romeo and Juliet under an ultramarine vault with angels and stars above and an assembly of saints in golden hues below, all of whom seem to be in mourning and observing them. Carlei's elaborate portrayal of the lovers' deaths is perhaps meant to suggest their ascent to the heavens and union after death. It may also be argued that the director might be further attempting to appeal to the audience's sympathy by projecting them as martyrs, the victims of a feud fostered by the adult generation, which is an approach Zeffirelli had also adopted in his rendition. Be that as it may, serving an aesthetic and semiotic function, Carlei's film rhetorics elaborates on a series of pictorial references that aim not only to respond to his audience's expectations but also to invite them to reengage and empathize with the story, evincing, in so doing, a markedly ekphrastic sensibility—a feature that the 2013 production has in common with the other major *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations.

5. Concluding Remarks

To say that *Romeo and Juliet* sound film adaptations can be considered as ekphrastic media may seem a controversial claim. Claus Clüver (2017), for instance, provides a powerful argument against what he refers to as "filmic (cinematic) ekphrasis" (463). For Clüver, the term ekphrasis should be restricted to referring to a specific mode of semiotic transposition that links only pictorial and textual media:

> I do not think that the attempt to establish 'ekphrasis' as an umbrella term for all comparable verbal representations is practicable or even helpful [...]. It is best to continue understanding ekphrasis as one of the genres of descriptive verbal representation [...]. So I will rephrase my condensed definition: '*Ekphrasis is the verbal representation of real or fictive configurations composed in a non-kinetic visual medium*' (461-62; italics in the original).

There are several reasons why such a restrictive understanding could be questioned. Firstly, Clüver fails to acknowledge that ekphrases are not only descriptive, but also expressive phenomena. As Kathryn Brown (2016) states, "the rhetorical boundaries of ekphrasis resist language, and fuel tensions between the expressive means of writer and painter"

(13). These tensions become even more pronounced when it comes to productions like those of Cukor (1936), Castellani (1954), Zeffirelli (1968), Luhrmann (1996) and Carlei (2013), where pictorial media are used to bring a visual representation of textual signs into a kinetic space. Like textual ekphrasis, filmic ekphrasis points to a symbiosis between different media (cinematography, painting and, for adaptations, literature), with the aim of effecting a distinct expressive function through pictorial material. If ekphrasis is to be defined as a remediation of visual signs into another medium, as Clüver argues, filmic ekphrasis should, then, be conceived as an exercise of semiotic transposition from text and canvas to screen—an exercise that, to all intents and purposes, informs the five major sound film adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Notwithstanding their many differences, the productions by Cukor, Castellani, Zeffirelli, Luhrmann and Carlei are bound by a shared awareness of the discursive potential inherent to pictorial art. Produced during the Hays Code era, the presence of pictorial material in Cukor's and Castellani's renditions is founded upon what may be defined as a textual aesthetics, a deliberately dialogical appeal to the Italian Renaissance's pictorial tradition and, in particular, religious iconography, which is meant to exploit a Neoplatonic reading of the story in order to conform to the (then) pressing regulations. Following the repeal of the Hays Code, the adaptations by Zeffirelli, Luhrmann and Carlei shift their emphasis from text to audience and thus carry out a complex exercise of aesthetic re-signification whereby Shakespeare's material is molded to respond, whether in terms of critique or support, to the specific idiosyncrasy of their target audience, that is, respectively, the Flower Power generation, the MTV generation and the millennial generation. In each iteration, the *Romeo and Juliet* film director provides a new reading of Shakespeare's love tragedy, modifying and expanding, rather than replicating, the literary text in accordance with their particular contextual, aesthetic and commercial interests. Pictorial art, in all cases, remains the key to translating the Bard into a visual and kinetic space, serving, as Douglas Lanier (2014) would have it, as one of the central modes of relation binding the five film adaptations and the literary text within a rhizomatic structure where Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, through pictorial art, still stands, to this day, as a work-in-progress, perpetually becoming "ever-other-than-itself" (31).[3]

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