Baz Luhrmann adaptation Romeo+Juliet

The starting point of any discussion on Luhrmann’s adaptation or perhaps a central issue in his adaptation is the visual style that he adopts as a means to examine Shakespeare’s text and to find a visual equivalence for it in the contemporary context. This visual style has been described as the “vocabulary of postmodern kitsch”( Janet Maslin) or drawing upon the postmodern predilection for a heterogeneous mix of styles—for example in the film high culture( Shakespeare’s Elizabethan language) mixed with popular media( tv, video style editing, advertising billboards)—that is suggestive of the film’s positioning as product of global capitalism but also the many questions that the film asks about language/discourse, subject identity, autonomy or agency of the subject etc.( will come to this later as discussed in the essay). Before discussing the postmodern/poststructuralist visual style and the implications for the adaptation as elaborated in the essay I would just like to offer a short note on postmodern/poststructuralist thought for those of you who may not be familiar with the terms.

While both terms are sometimes used synonymously there are differences( as well as grounds of commonality) in terms of its theoretical scope, range or applicability. Both theoretical positions suggest that norms or structures( of knowledge, power) are not natural or fixed/stable but grounded in contingency and produced through specific interests. While poststructuralism originates in the investigation of language and how it constructs experience/world, postmodernism uses this theoretical knowledge to contest the validity of a single order/reality/narrative.1 Instead the postmodern view presents multiple reality( the absence of a grand narrative), the ‘play’ with different narratives/medias etc. The postmodern style or idiom is also seen as marked or shaped by the tenets of a global capitalist world(the sense of global access, consumer culture/multiple choice) as theorized by Frederic Jameson who saw postmodernism as the logic of late capitalism.2  Postmodern art/film plays with the notion of representation via borrowing or mixing of styles3, irony, self-reflexibility i.e. conscious drawing attention to the medium by using/displaying the use of media etc.( all these elements one can see in Luhrmann’s film). To go back to the question of poststructuralism then alongside the question that if there is no single structure or norm or meaning(as postmodernity tends to celebrate) then what explains the consensus or participation of people in certain structures/discourses etc.? Structures are not natural or fixed because they are constituted through language( poststructuralism reveals how structures are produced and sustained) and they can never hold true of all ways or fully explain the ways in which we experience or apprehend the world or our relationship with the world. Yet they remain or exercise influence because many of these discourses are built into language reinforced through social practice in ways that benefit privileged groups or power interests. Poststructuralists reveal not just how structures are established(and therefore they are not natural or given or stable) but also how power and privilege are embedded in those structures or integrated with those structures. Poststructuralists then attempt to examine not just how structures are built but also how power is central to it as well: the relationship between language, discourse, power and subjectivity/agency of the subject is relevant to its theoretical discussions. This is relevant to Luhrmann’s visual aesthetic and approach. Luhrmann draws upon a self-conscious/reflexive style that uses various media( tv, billboards) that foreground the question of the ‘representation’ of Shakespeare( including Luhrmann’s film too as the reflexive style will indicate). While Luhrmann’s film is certainly located( as the self-reflexive style postmodern indicates) in the global consumer capitalist culture, the heterogenous mix of high culture( use of Elizabethan language) and popular culture—the soundtrack that includes from Prince to Wagner—and the various signifiers whether billboards, shop signs, vendor signs, delivery signs using lines from Shakespeare( the essay points to them) that point to how Shakespeare is consumed4, the film will also show how Romeo and Juliet are subject to discourse/language that seeks to embed their subjectivity in specific ways. Luhrmann’s visual aesthetic then(for example the Verona beach scene framed by proscenium arch/stage) reveal how the film is conscious of its own framing/representation of the Shakespeare story--the use of tv footage also shows the multiple layering of narrative--as specific images( including the stage in Verona beach and other images discussed later and in the essay) also reveal the socially embedded discourses/linguistic signifiers that control Romeo and Juliet( or their subjectivities) or that they are unable to escape from.

What I will try to do is to present the chief arguments of the essay that I am sending alongside these notes. These arguments will elucidate what is described as the postmodernist/poststructuralist dimensions in the visual style deployed by Luhrmann’s adaptation.

The essay starts off by enumerating what are some of the common criticisms of Luhrmann’s work( and often used in relation to filmic adaptations of Shakespeare) that it has overwhelmed Shakespeare’s language as part of a larger traditional argument about respect to the text. And yet as the essayist points out Luhrmann’s adaptation brings out(via the film’s own visual aesthetic that marks out the constructedness of perception/identity) the text’s( Shakespeare’s) signaling of the dominant language/convention of Petrarchan love that defines Romeo’s subjective position. Shakespeare will make Romeo use the same Petrarchan discourse for both Rosaline( he was in love with her before Juliet) and Juliet so both women are reduced to a linguistic construct but Romeo too is constituted by language looking forward to the poststructuralists’ notion of subjects as located in the “prison house of language”

Romeo’s subjectivity is so shaped by the discursive practices of his culture that he is as the essayist points out is a walking monument to the ‘death of the subject’—a notion that looks forward to modern/poststructuralists theorists who establish identity as mere conformity to discourse. Where is the question of agency then? Perhaps for Romeo and Juliet self-creation or self-reinvention remains impossible in relation to social discourse. Juliet contests these ‘artificial clichés’/Petrarchan conventions through which Romeo perceives her. She only resorts to such oxymoronic clichés when Romeo kills Tybalt to acknowledge the “inescapability of her social embeddedness”( from the essay by Downing) after all the Montague-Capulet feud is as much part of her discursive practices as is the discourse by Petrarch that seeks to define her in certain ways. While many productions do not tend to foreground Romeo’s conventionality as a voice of Petrarchan clichés, Luhrmann’s insertion of Rosaline( which Zeffirelli avoided) alongside Juliet’s challenge to the convention draw attention to the artificial constructedness of Romeo’s subjectivity. As he writes his love oxymorons on the beach framed by a proscenium arch, he also turns up at the Capulet party dressed like a knight.

The film opens with a frame of the television set, a signifier and form of representation that is inseparable from the experience/structure of reality. Reality itself comes to be identified with the image of reality(“postmodern simulacrum”) produced through different signifiers just as Romeo confuses the ‘reality’ of his love Juliet with the image of the Petrarchan woman. Parallel to the media signifiers that comprise Luhrmann’s visual style and self-conscious ‘framing’ of his telling/adaptation of the Romeo and Juliet story are the religious signifiers used from statues, crosses that reveal how religion(text or discourse of religion) is merely consumed because it has no relevance or authentic relationship to the feuding/violent culture of Verona. Romeo is also seen(as discussed earlier) as constituted by Petrarchan convention in the scene on the Verona beach framed by the proscenium beach writing down his love clichés. The question of finding equivalence( as the way filmic language approaches the verbal text) is evident for example in the way the film uses water, aquarium( aquarium scene when the lovers meet) etc. Romeo and Juliet’s love or experience of love too is unable to transcend the social discourse that surround them. The film’s ending is also a visual equivalent to suggest Romeo and Juliet’s inability to escape their social embeddedness/the Montague-Capulet script. The use of TV to report/represent Romeo and Juliet’s story shows how Romeo and Juliet are subject or bound to a certain discourse/narrative just as their own lived experiences too were unable to escape the discursive practices that seek to shape their subjectivity and their lives. Co-existent with the media/discourse that represent Romeo and Juliet is the way Luhrmann saturates his film with visual references to the deployment of Shakespeare in shop fronts, advertising billboards, vendor signs etc. to show the consumption of Shakespeare in popular culture or the existence of the Shakespeare industry: the way his lines are consumed/reproduced is similar to the easy/lazy(even meaningless) consumption/reproduction of Petrarch in Shakespeare’s own time. Luhrmann’s film too as the self-conscious use/display of various media indicates is one of the texts/representations. Adhering to the postmodern aesthetic/logic Luhrmann perhaps suggests that( as the essay suggests) no adaptation is authentically Shakespeare’s—all simulations of Shakespeare are always already simulation. Luhrmann’s film has been criticised as kitschy( postmodern kitsch) etc. but the film’s visual style—ironic and self-reflexive—is certainly able to show that Shakespeare( and the text of Romeo and Juliet) was engaged with the question of subjectivity and the constructedness of subjectivity—the relation between language, discourse/power and subject identity( a theoretical occupation of poststructuralists as it may be seen now) that shapes lived experiences/personal tragedies.

End Notes

1. You may legitimately ask what is the difference between modernism and post modernism then. While it is a thin line that separates, modernism to put it in a simplified way is about shift in epistemology( knowledge) based on subjectivity whereas the postmodern view tends to make it about a shift in ontology( reality): the existence of different worlds and realities that point to instability in language/structures in the world.
2. Jameson’s argument is that postmodern thought—the notion of multiple truths, narratives, contingency etc. originates in a world(west) where the reality of class, inequality, poverty has become invisibilised since economies in the west have decided to move manufacturing( factories, labour) to the third world( phenomena known as late capitalism).
3. The heterogeneous mix or assemblage( medias such as TV, video, billboards) is also reflected in the film’s music/soundtrack from pop ballads such as De’sree’s Kissing you when Romeo and Juliet meet at the ball, Prince’s When Doves Cry, to Liebestod from Wagner’s opera Tristan and Isolde.
4. Last paragraph in the essay I have posted( page 130 of Downing’s essay, “ Misshapen Chaos etc.”) lists the way Shakespeare quotes/names are used in billboards, vendor signs, shop fronts etc.