

The Analysis of the Soundtrack to Baz Luhrmen's *Romeo and Juliet*

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Abstract

Ian Inglis states in his book *Popular music and film* that music is the primary instrument for emotional direction in film. The soundtrack to Baz Luhrmen's *Romeo and Juliet* includes a spectrum of genres including classical to popular music. The music used in the film both enhanced each scene as well as attract a wider audience. Through this, Luhrmen is able to re-reveal this classic story through a different medium. It is through the direction of the film which includes the music, visuals and plot that juxtaposes the original dialogue that Luhrmen chooses to keep in film. This allows the audience to understand the film better as there are visual and musical cues. This medium also attracts a wider audience and makes the story more accessible and understandable. The objective of this article is to examine the effectiveness of popular music that is used in the film and how it helps to enhance the storyline as well as make it more accessible to a wider audience.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Baz Luhrmen, film, music

Romeo and Juliet written by William Shakespeare was adapted into a modern-day film by Baz Luhrmen. Luhrmen's unique style is able to grab the audience's attention instantly. The outrageous and glamorous style in *Romeo and Juliet* might be seen through many of his other films such as *Great Gatsby* and *Moulin Rouge*. He is able to tell the story through a different context, allowing this new media (film) to appeal to not only the modern-day audience but also allows them to relate and understand the classic story.

Romeo and Juliet is a tragic love story about two star-crossed lovers whose deaths reunite their feuding families. The intense love story is hard to grasp as Romeo falls in love with a girl whom he only meets once. However, through film and music the audience is transported to a bright and visual translation of this 'inaccessible' love story. It is especially through Luhrmen's style which encapsulates dramatic and extravagant visuals as well as popular music in film that allows one to be intrigued by the film and therefore, the story-line.

Shakespeare's works are usually introduced as a part of English literature to students in late high school. Therefore, accessibility and understandability of the plays are limited as the language that is used is a barrier to many readers which prevents many to enjoy his classic works. Luhrmen's aim in creating this film was to 're-reveal' the work Shakespeare already created. His decision to keep the original dialogue of the play juxtaposes it with the contemporary environment. This interesting combination gives the audience a chance to understand the play even with the original dialogue.

In a film, the plot, visuals and the soundtrack are important. All three of these 'elements' work together and are intertwined with each other to create a work which can be globally appreciated and understood. Without each other, the plot and the appeal to the film would be lost. Film works together with music and music with film. One can disagree that both forms of media are independent from one another; however, Inglis has argued that "All popular music contains visual elements; all film relies, in varying degrees, on musical element" (Inglis, 2003). Therefore, in the film, both visuals and sound add to the overall aesthetics of the film.

The soundtrack in *Romeo and Juliet* is a combination of original scores as well as popular songs. The popular songs include famous bands from the 1990s that include The Cardigans, Garbage, Butthole Surfers and Radiohead. In this essay, I will be exploring the effectiveness of popular music in the film *Romeo and Juliet*. I will be analyzing the lyrics as well as where the song is used. The overall analysis illustrates the importance of the soundtrack in the film as well as whether the soundtrack in the film gives the audience an optimum experience of the film and story.

Film and music have exponentially grown over the years from the original conception of the silent films during the 1890s. Musicians such as pianists and even orchestras would play and accompany the silent film. As the era

of silent films ended in the 1920s, the industry moved towards the ‘sound era’ where music and dialogue were integrated into the film. One can see the importance of music that accompanied silent films. During this period, “film music was for a long time synonymous with symphonic orchestral music”. However, “today, film music can be everything under the sun – orchestral music, electronic, pop, rock—and much more” (Larsens & Iron, 2012). In *Romeo and Juliet*, the 1996 film includes both orchestral music as well as popular music, it encompasses a wide range of genres and introduces many differing genres throughout the film. This wide variety of music throughout the film makes the film more versatile.

Music in film is an important aspect as it has the ability to manipulate the viewer’s emotions and view during a particular scene. The first scene when the audience meets Romeo, the song “Talk Show Host” by Radiohead is playing in the background. The shot shows Romeo smoking during the sunset at the Verona Beach. The music as well as the visuals enhance the portrayal of a depressed and contemplative young teenager who is questioning love and hate. As Romeo is shot smoking on the Verona Beach, he says:

Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate, O anything
of nothing first create. heavy lightness. Serious
vanity. Misshapen chaos of well seeming forms.

(Romeo + Juliet (1996) transcript - Screenplays for You, 2018)

This quote illustrates Romeo acknowledging the fact that there is a thin line between love and hate. It shows Romeo questioning why people choose to fight. He does not agree with the ‘misshapen chaos’ that is caused from people who choose to make the incorrect choice. Romeo’s emotional turmoil is enhanced through Radiohead’s song “Talk show host” that plays in the background.

In the song, “Talk show host” the lyrics “nothing” are predominant in the background after Romeo speaks, creating a sense of strain in the scene. The song which mainly includes guitar and voice instrumentals encapsulates an airy-uncertain feel which adds to the atmosphere of this particular scene. This is created through the rhythm of the song as it creates a suspension that never resolves. Radiohead’s compositions are able to create a sense of tension which adds to the atmosphere in the film. This intangible tension is able to enhance the scene as well as what Romeo is saying. Inglis confirms that music is the primary instrument for emotional direction in film—it tells the audience what to feel about a character, a place or situation (Inglis, 2003). In this instance, through Luhrmen’s direction, the audience is able to relate to the confused Romeo. Furthermore, Luhrmen’s visual technique which includes a sunset at Verona Beach also enhances the atmosphere which is already created by the music and allows the audience to understand the frustration Romeo is feeling towards love and hate.

Repetition is also used to invoke a sense of familiarity through the film. As the star-cross lovers meet for the first time and make contact through the glimmering water of the fish tank at the Capulet’s house, the song “I’m Kissing you” by Des’reë is performed at Capulet’s Masquerade ball. This song is played again as Romeo visits Juliet after killing Tybalt and the two lovers consummate their love. “I’m kissing you” could be seen as a ‘love’ theme song for the teenagers. Inglis writes how through music “some emotional triggers are universal” (Inglis, 2003). This particular love song triggers a sense of melancholy. This is achieved as the audience of the film already knows what will happen because of the prologue that was presented through the Television presenter in the beginning of the film. When the song plays at the Capulets party, the feeling of excitement is present as Romeo and Juliet first make eye contact but at the same time, the song triggers a sense of sadness through its lyrics as there is an inevitable poignant ending.

The lyrics of the song are as follows:

Pride can stand a thousand trials
The strong will never fall
But watching stars without you my soul cried
Oh, oh, the aching
‘Cause, I’m kissing you oh
I’m kissing you oh

This song plays again when Romeo meets Juliet after killing Tybalt. Again, the love song brings a sense of calmness for the viewers as the lovers are reunited again. The use of same song in the love scene allows the audience to feel nostalgic and happy that the two lovers are re-united. However, it triggers a sense of sadness as the audience knows that Romeo is banished from Verona Beach and this is the last time that the two will be

together. By repeating this particular ‘love’ song, Luhrmen “intensifies [the audiences] effective response to it” (Kulezic-Wilson, 2015). The song “subtly calls to the viewers mind a related or comparable situation” (Inglis, 2003). The viewers of the film can feel empathetic to the characters in the film due to a sense of nostalgia and relatability of one’s first crush or love. The repetition through the music increases the sense of familiarity which ultimately allows the audience to grow and understand characters.

The popular music used within the film mimics what is happening in the film. In a particular scene, at Verona Beach, the nurse questions Romeo motives with Juliet.

NURSE

If ye should lead her into a fool’s paradise, as they say, it were a very gross kind of behavior, as they say: for the lady is young; and, therefore, if you should deal double with her, truly it were an ill thing, and very weak dealing.

ROMEO

Bid her to come to confession this afternoon; And there she shall at Father Laurence’ cell Be shrived and married.

(Romeo + Juliet (1996) transcript - Screenplays for You, 2017)

Just as Romeo says “married” the nurse grins and the song “Lovefool” by The Cardigans plays in the background. The scene changes to Juliet questioning the nurse about Romeo. “Lovefool” is very playful and happy song which complements the nurse’s feelings towards Romeo and her excitement for Juliet’s potential marriage. The lyrics:

Love me love me
Say that you love me
Fool me fool me
Go on and fool me
Love me love me
Pretend that you love me

The disco feel, which is attained through the beats of the drum and electric keyboard in the song, adds to the youthful and innocent love that both Romeo and Juliet have for each other. Nina Persson’s high pitched voice as well as the overall electronic sounds compliments and adds to the upbeat song. The lyrics “love me love me, say that you love me” illustrate and emphasize the acceptance both Romeo and Juliet want from each other but cannot receive because of their feuding families.

Another scene where music complements a scene is when Romeo and Juliet get married. The church choir sings the song “Everybody’s Free” by Quindon Tarver. This is a cappella song that expresses the innocence that both Romeo and Juliet possess, without any instruments in the background, it is Tarver’s voice that is focused on. The lyrics illustrate that at this particular point in time, both Romeo and Juliet are free together to get married. Their marriage and love show their rebellion against the unreasonable family feud which prevents them from being together. This act of rebellion allows for a sense of freedom that they are able to access through the help of Friar Lawrence. The lyrics which are sung as Juliet walks down the aisle to her future husband, Romeo, are:

Brother and sister
Together will make it through
Uh-huh, yeah
Someday a spirit will take you and guide you there
I know you been hurting
But I have waiting to be there for you
And I’ll be there just helping you out

Whenever I can

(Everybody's free, everybody's free, everybody's free)

Everybody's free

As Friar Lawrence speaks, he warns the young lovers to be careful and to 'love moderately'. Their freedom through marriage must be carefully handled as "The sweetest honey is loathsome in his own deliciousness" (Romeo + Juliet (1996) transcript - Screenplays for You, 2017). The music contrasts to Friar Lawrence's words but emphasizes the freedom that both Romeo and Juliet have in this short scene. This is soon ended by the conflict that occurs between Romeo and Tybalt.

Lastly, music in the film is also used as a tool to foreshadow the events towards the end of the film. As Romeo finds out that his lover is dead, he says: "Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee to-night (Romeo + Juliet (1996) transcript - Screenplays for You, 2017). The lyrics from the song "#1 Crush" by Garbage is integrated to an original score. The lyrics:

I would die for you

I would die for you

I've been dying just to feel you by my side

To know that you're mine.

The first stanza of this song relates to the entire play. The lyrics of the stanza reflect the passion the lovers have for each other and the lengths they will take to be together, if even in death. Both lovers are willing to die for each other because they so badly want to be together in a world that does not allow them to be. However, Luhrmen does not choose to include all the lyrics from the song in this scene. He selects one line which is "I would die for". This line is echoed as Romeo drives dramatically back to Verona Beach where he is banished from.

Through these scenes, it is evident how music has the power to enhance the scene. Popular music has the power to add to the atmosphere which gave it the overall power to control and manipulate the audience's view. By watching the film with no sound, the dramatic and extravagant style that Luhrmen is known for is completely lost. The choice of music that Luhrmen includes in this film is important. Without these particular songs, the film would lose its effectiveness. Reay writes how "Music's mood must be appropriate to the scene, the point being to provide a musical parallel to the action to reinforce the mood" (Reay, 2004).

This confirms the importance of a soundtrack to the film. The soundtrack to a film is also important as it adds a sense of nostalgia to the audience who listen to a particular pop song that is played through the radio or at shopping centres. This "(provides) a vehicle through which the audience may 'revisit' it by another route" (Inglis, 2003). Music which is accessible through different platforms can evoke a certain memory. "People nourish emotional and tangible connections to songs" (Dijck, 2006). With this, there will always be a sense of communication around this film which will in essence make the film more appealing. The soundtrack or songs of the film will always be tied to a specific scene or idea, once a song is played, it might trigger an emotion or thought relating to the particular scene in the film.

The inclusion of popular music in film is also an interesting marketing tool. Robb Wright, a film composer who is interested in audio/video post-production and music technology, says that the move to "use popular music in film demonstrates the desire of producers to give their movies a particular, but very elusive, commercial and artistic signature" (Inglis, 2003). By including popular music, Luhrmen attracts more of a younger age group to the film. An audience that is not usually engaged or interested in the classical works of William Shakespeare. He brings the story alive in a contemporary setting.

It is evident that music in film plays an important role from evoking emotions, setting the atmosphere for a scene and it is even a clever marketing tool for artists. The popular music that is used in Baz Luhrmen's 1996 *Romeo and Juliet* complements his style of filming. His dramatic and exaggerated style goes hand-in-hand with the theme and tone of 1990s contemporary popular songs. It is through the music of the film that has helped the audience understand the tragic love-story. Overall, the music that he chose, particularly relating the lyrics to a certain scene compliments and enhances this classic story in the film. Ultimately, it is through Luhrmen's authentic style which allows a wider audience to understand Shakespeare's classic love-story through a different medium, film.

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