

# Media sensationalism in baz luhrmann's william shakespeare's romeo and juliet



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“ You’re television incarnate, Diana: indifferent to suffering; insensitive to joy. All of life is reduced to the common rubble of banality. War, murder, death are all the same to you as bottles of beer. And the daily business of life is a corrupt comedy. You even shatter the sensations of time and space into split seconds and instant replays. You’re madness, Diana. Virulent madness. And everything you touch dies with you. But not me. Not as long as I can feel pleasure, and pain, and love.”- Max Schumacher, from *Network*

From the very first shot to the very last, the world of news media in Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 film William Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet* encapsulates and informs this modern adaptation, which transposes Shakespeare’s original dialogue into the radically altered setting of present day “ Verona Beach.” Even though television news reports and print media appear only sporadically in the film, the manner in which they appear as well as their specific roles within the context of the story make them a constant, looming presence. Specifically, the depiction of television in *Romeo*, which enjoys a close precedent in the 1976 film *Network*, not only updates Shakespeare’s text, but also uses the cultural touchstone of the original play as a starting point from which it invites the audience to question the very medium in which the film is presented. This influence, coupled with *Romeo*’s distinct visual style, serves to sensationalize Shakespeare’s story and, in doing so, present an acute commentary on the influence and practices of mass media at the end of the twentieth century. The structure of the Sidney Lumet film *Network* provides a valuable context for looking at Luhrmann’s *Romeo*. In *Network*, the audience is treated to the tragic end of fallen network news anchor Howard Beale’s life. The first shot of the film is composed of four television screens arranged against pitch black background playing simultaneous nightly news

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broadcasts. Protagonist Howard Beale appears reading the news in the bottom right screen, and the camera slowly zooms in on his face as a voiceover introduces him and recounts the steady deterioration of both his ratings and his personal life. In the rest of the film, Beale morphs into a bitter, vulgar populist and is rewarded with his own nightly TV show, which consists entirely of a gaudy and grand attack on the political establishment. At the end, the network arranges to have Beale assassinated on his own program. Backed by a stained glass window, Beale, before a live studio audience, is shot before saying a single word at the opening of his show. He falls to the ground, and a camera operator immediately lunges forward for a close-up. The final shot of the film is the same as the first, except now all four news anchors are talking over one another, reporting on Beale's gruesome death, replete with repeating slow-motion close-ups of the gunmen, of the moment in which Beale is shot, and of his corpse. Three of the screens fade, and all that is left is a single one depicting Beale's lifeless, bloody face, over which the credits roll. Like *Network*, *Romeo* is also bookended by television screens. The first shot of *Romeo* is a single floating television set in the center of the screen before a black background. An anchorwoman appears on the set flanked by a spot graphic of a broken wedding ring titled "STAR-CROSS'D LOVERS" and dutifully recites the play's introductory sonnet — which in the original text is delivered by a chorus — as the television slowly moves towards the audience. The final shot the film returns to the ethereal television, which is now playing footage from the aftermath of *Romeo and Juliet*'s own violent deaths as the same anchorwoman recites the closing lines of the play — which in the original text is delivered by the Prince. As she speaks, the television appears to fade

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away from the audience; when her broadcast concludes, it cuts to static, and a few seconds later, the entire screen goes dark. Network tells the story of a news reporter's fate, and the fact that Beale is both introduced and last pictured on a television screen affects the viewer's conceptualization of the story. Beale, a fictional character on a fictional news network, appears to exist only within the boundaries of a television screen; his entire story — which is to say the entirety of the film, much of which is set within a network building — seems almost like a part of one continuous broadcast. Luhrmann, in deploying much the same motif, imparts Romeo with a similar quality. In contrast to news reports that appear within the action of the film, no character is watching this broadcast, and it has no effect on the plot; as the chorus in the original play, it serves entirely to speak directly to the audience. Viewed in this context, the decision to bound the action of Romeo by news broadcasts is thus not merely a cosmetic alteration of the original play. Instead, it serves to constrain the presentation of the film within the context of an actual news story, as if the “two hours' traffic” were a 60 Minutes special report. Moreover, the visual style of the film serves to reinforce this perception. A fast-paced montage immediately follows the prologue, replete with scenes of a militarized police forces, urban decay, and gang violence. Sensational newspaper headlines and magazine covers spin across the screen, helping to color the bleak setting of the film in terms of print media reportage. Rapid cuts and shaky footage refuse to allow the viewer's attention to linger on any single image. Aerial shots and grainy, low resolution footage lend the montage the feel of a dramatic news report, perhaps one of domestic riots or international turmoil. In one sense, this montage serves to acclimate the audience to the presentation which follows.

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Stylistically, the film features quick pacing, unpredictable camera motions, and rapid-fire cuts — a review of the film in Rolling Stone said that “ the film reworks Shakespeare in a frenzy of jump cuts that makes most rock videos look like MTV on Midol.” The body of the film is replete with action characteristic of Hollywood blockbusters, much of which has no direct precedent in Shakespeare’s original play: Romeo and Paris race down the streets of Verona Beach in a violent car chase; the Prince, whose character is reimagined as the chief of police, uses a helicopter as his primary mode of transportation; and towards the end, Romeo briefly takes a man hostage while holding off a cadre of police officers armed with automatic weapons. These visual effects imbue Romeo with an extraordinary and deliberate gratuity, an aspect which is inextricable from the media reportage that occurs both within the plot and on the sidelines of the story. The sensationalist news headlines of the opening montage both establish the plot and comment on it: “ Montague vs. Capulet,” avers the Verona Beach Herald, while Verona Today leads with “ Ancient Grudge.” Another paper screams “ NEW MUTINY” in massive block letters. These newspapers don’t inform the audience of any more than what’s been said by the narrator; instead, they function to color the setting as one where media reportage is a prevalent feature. They also enhance the drama by indicating the seriousness of the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets. A viewer is led to think that if all these newspapers and networks are reporting on this feud, surely it must be very a severe thing. Within the film, the news media actually influences the plot at certain critical points. Capulet, in his office, learns of the brawl at the start of the film through a report by the anchorwoman, who is flanked by the graphic of a gun-wielding Benvolio and <https://assignbuster.com/media-sensationalism-in-baz-luhrmanns-william-shakespeares-romeo-juliet/>

the title, " 3RD CIVIL BRAWL" (perhaps, " part three in a five-part series on civil brawls"). The illiterate servant in the first act of the play is replaced by two bubbly and vacuous daytime TV hosts, who glowingly read off a partial list of guests to Capulet's party in a broadcast seen by Romeo and Benvolio. This arguably biased reporting is capped off with the line, " If you be not of the House of Montague, come, and crush a cup of wine," followed by a cutesy wink. Additionally, on the cover of the newsmagazine *Timely* is none other than Dave Paris, who is the subject of a puff piece proclaiming him " Bachelor of the Year"; later, one of Capulet's security guards is seen reading a copy. On a metafictional level, these headlines, magazine covers, and TV reports can be viewed as a commentary on both the status of the news media in our society and on the manner in which this media functions. The prevalence and vitality of news media in modern society is mirrored by the effect the media has on both the events of the film and the audience's perception of these events. Luhrmann's depiction of a news media which cries in unison about this " NEW MUTINY" neatly mirrors the mid-90s hysteria over gang violence in the United States. The audience of 1996 could thus view this familiar moral panic over the Montagues and the Capulets as helping to color the world of Romeo, one in which the story of Romeo and Juliet would be broadcast in full by the media. What if the entire film were looked at as one big news story, full of sex and attention-grabbing violence? What would that say about the aims of the media in our society? Perhaps Luhrmann is suggesting that the pinnacle of a ratings-driven media, the special report to end all special reports, would be what is arguably the most well-known story in the English language. The gratuity, the violence, and the pacing of the film (and, by extension, this news report) is practically

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exploitative of Shakespeare's work. Another parallel here can be drawn to *Network*, where a rising programming executive organizes extreme spectacles in order to increase ratings. Memorably, she commissions a terrorist group to commit weekly acts of violence to be showcased on their own primetime series. The motif of media exploitation in *Network*, as emphasized by the haunting last shot of Beale's corpse on the nightly news, similarly exists in *Romeo*, which perhaps is an attempt to commodify Shakespeare's text, to package it into clips and soundbites for nightly news consumption.

Works Cited  
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