

Comparing the works of luhrmann and zeffirelli

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These two films, both interpreting the same play, but portrayed very differently. When comparing the two we have to take into consideration that the time these films were made. Zeffirelli's version was made in 1968, and supposedly set in the 16th century. This version is based mostly on the script and is set in the time Shakespeare would have pictured as he wrote the play. The more recent one, directed by Baz Luhrmann is set in the world of today. In this version Luhrmann relies more on the visual impact on the viewer and the special effects. He is able to achieve this because of the huge budget that films have nowadays. In my opinion he was able to make a film, based on the works of Shakespeare and make it appeal to a wider audience than Zeffirelli.

The older version seems more theatrical, meaning that it focuses on only a few main themes. For example, the scene where a Capulet trips up an old Montague man. It uses very basic visual effects for this, but by doing this it is made into a very melodramatic scene. It also keeps in most of the script and is based around it.

The first fundamental difference we see is in the opening sequence. I think that the way the openings differ is unique in their own right. The Zeffirelli version is basically filmed in medium camera shots, and rather plain in effects (evidence of the time the film was made in). This means you get to see most things going on. What I found when watching the Zeffirelli version, was that when the slow-moving, calm camera pans over Verona then throws you into a medieval, bustling market is a huge contrast. Because of this change, you get to feel like a bystander, buying your weekly groceries. In

both versions, when the camera zooms in on the characters during the opening scenes, you can feel the emotion and the tension, because the viewer is so close.

In the Luhrmann version, because the imagination, ideas and amount of money has moved on in time since the Zeffirelli one was made, the camera angles change a lot from wide range, to close up shots. Luhrmann also filmed in wide screen (which has evidently been brought in, in the last 25 years of film-making), which gives the film a modern outlook. The iconography of the helicopter also shows the movement of the times.

There is a lot of iconography used in both films, apart from the helicopter. In the Zeffirelli version there is the symbolism of the bell, the church and the Prince and his men riding into the scene on white horses. All these key features are very religious symbols. This is also common in the Luhrmann version because the camera focuses a lot on the huge statue of Christ in Verona. This is evidence that both directors had the same ideas about the importance of religion and different beliefs etc. For example, in Zeffirelli's version, the Prince arrives on the scene on a white horse, stopping the fight, keeping the piece. The pure white horse could symbolise the peace, which is relevant to the Prince's purpose.

It also focuses on the TV newsreader a couple of times. This is another difference in the opening sequences I realised, how the sonnet is said in each film. In the Zeffirelli one, a man says it when the camera focuses on a beautiful orange sky, and on the fiery red sun, with peaceful music in the background. When it focuses on the sun, the title of the play comes up, as

does Zeffirelli's name. Whereas, Luhrmann has again incorporated Shakespeare in a modern day object, a fuzzy television. When the female newsreader narrates the sonnet, the television gradually moves closer and closer, until it takes up the whole screen. When she has finished the television fizzles out, then the music starts up. The camera then flashes back and forth from newspaper headlines about the conflict between the two families, the police helicopters, the names, the statue of Christ etc. the flashes of scenes match the music, and it gradually gets faster and faster. As this is seen, the words of the sonnet come up on the screen (in which every 'T' is a medieval cross) and then it introduces the characters. It uses the same font throughout the opening scene, which is very effective considering it is in very bold, white letters. When I realised this, it meant that they used the same font for both families suggesting that they are both the same, both wanting the same things.

It also focuses a lot on the two names. This occurs when the camera zooms in on the crests of both families' guns, the number plates on each car and the names in huge neon lights on the two highest buildings in 'Verona'.

What struck me the most when comparing the two films is how the music affects the opening scene. The music in the Luhrmann version is a huge, thunderous orchestral soundtrack. This is a perfect background to many huge, quick, sweeping camera shots, as it draws our attention to the vastness of the city. I would say it was a 'gothic' soundtrack, because the music has a great texture and it emphasizes the 'colours' of the city. We see a lot of greys, blues and blacks of the city. I also thought that the music

enforces intense emotion, which sets the viewer up for the rest of the film. I found that it set a sense of suspense. I realised the importance of the camera shots/angles and how both directors matched the music opening with the movement of the camera shots.

Zeffirelli's version has a serene, calm, lame imitation of Elizabethan music, suitable to the time this film is set in. The music is quite quiet, wind music, quite the opposite to the Luhrmann version. This could be because the director wants the viewer to appreciate the surrounding and the environment the film is set in. Unlike the Luhrmann version, it focuses more on the actors and their speeches than the city.

Language and meaning is very similar throughout both versions. This is apparent through the way the characters act their speeches. For example the Montague boys in the car singing parts of the text to a wild rock song - showing the light hearted attitude of the people in the first few scenes - only until we see the first sign of conflict (the thumb biting in the petrol station).

In this scene we witness the rude hate signal of 'biting thumbs'. In the Zeffirelli version this scene is based exactly like the play itself, in a market place, and keeps in the sexual innuendos. Whereas in the Luhrmann version, this scene is in a modern petrol station, without all the petty language. In the Zeffirelli version, after a short number of sexual innuendos and antagonistic talk, the Capulet servants are the provokers, and with the hate signal of the biting of the thumbs, and the deliberate trip of a Montague.

On the other hand, Luhrmann's interpretation of the scene is placed in the world of today set in a modern petrol station. When both cars get to the petrol station, the camera focuses on the sign,

'Add more fuel to your fire', then after the rebellious looking Montagues provoke Abra into a quarrel, Tybalt starts the fire, and the camera then draws our attention to the sign again when it is alight with flames. This could represent the recklessness of the two gangs, and how all they have set out for is to kill. This could also represent the fact that they have no bounds or restrictions, and that their ruthlessness forces them to attack the other, no matter how much damage they cause. Most of these icons used in both films are very religious and symbolic. This can suggest the theory that maybe there can only be peace upon the death of another.

Both directors had the same ideas about the dress codes of the groups, as we can see in the pictures above. They uniformed the characters into their families. In the Zeffirelli version it is the greens vs. red and yellows and in the Luhrmann version it is the sleek, blacks vs. the colourful and very scruffy.

These two pictures show the differences of how both directors portray the different characters. Here we have Tybalt Capulet, cousin of Juliet. In both versions Tybalt has quite a laid back demeanour, sure of himself and knows he is the main man. When we compare these two characters, we have to take in to consideration that Zeffirelli's was made nearly thirty years before the modern one, so think of the difference in budget, the difference in fashion, etc. both are in smart, expensive, very different clothes and the

both stand out in the crowd. They both walk and talk in the same sly, powerful, confident manner. Out of all the Capulet boys, Tybalt would definitely be the first to catch your eye. If you compared the Montague boys to the Capulet boys, in both films, the Montague's are a lot scruffier, relaxed in their clothing, they look and act quite weedy, in a way.

Both openings have their own positive strengths and weaknesses, in different ways. The traditional opening is more accurate as it portrays how the author would have seen the story unfolding in 1595, and the language used is accurate for that period. The downside of this is that it is likely to only appeal to scholars of Shakespeare and purists.

The modern version however, appeals to a wider audience. Although not based accurately upon the script and entered into a modern context, which the author could not have imagined at the time and in no way intended, it is likely to appeal to a far greater audience who perhaps were not readers of Shakespeare and wouldn't have understood the older version. Helped by stars such as Leonardo Di Caprio the film opens up a whole new appeal to what was considered an old fashioned and to some, uninteresting story.