



## Artifice and Authenticity in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*

Thus, Art is as natural an artifice as Nature; the truth of fiction is that Fact is fantasy; the made-up story is a model of the world.<sup>1</sup>

In each of his Shakespearean films, Zeffirelli offers a lucid and subtle visual interpretation of the particular text. In *The Taming of the Shrew* this is achieved by a very precise balance between apparent authenticity and overt artifice, so that seeing becomes feeling.<sup>2</sup> In *Romeo and Juliet* the balance is equally precise though its terms are rather different, being informed by the tension announced by the Chorus between the play as history and the play as story.

In Zeffirelli's film, the action starts with a tracking shot of Sampson and Gregory's feet as they pass between the market stalls. This creates at once a sense of penetrable space quite unlike the flat backdrops that open *The Shrew*. Here, it would seem, the dominant mode is to be naturalism. The brilliant red and yellow costumes of the two men seize the eye as their figures are framed through a market stall, while heaps of perfect onions and peppers fill the foreground of the image, their colour carefully chosen to complement the costumes and to stimulate a sensuous engagement with the image. By shooting this with full depth of field, Zeffirelli actively suggests the tangibility of this Verona, creating a compelling amalgam of colour, texture, depth, movement, and sound that draws us irresistibly into the fiction.

This unrestrained, almost fanatical realism, might at first seem to be Zeffirelli's prime concern. The incidental detail authenticates the fictional world, stressing its existence as an autonomous elsewhere, yet it also achieves a fuller resonance. The perfection of the market place becomes, without our really having to think it, a symbol of that order, domesticity and community that the feud constantly threatens. The spectacle of its devastation arising from a grossly anti-social act prefigures, and therefore allows Zeffirelli to trim, Escalus's first speech. Similarly, where Shakespeare

begins with a string of Sampson and Gregory's coarse jests, Zeffirelli presents them visually as jesters. Their clothing, like their behaviour, is loud to the point of being offensive. As they begin their talk of quarreling they are momentarily obliterated, visually and aurally, by a cockerel in a cage. This brief image precisely suggests the mindless vanity of their behavior as well as helping to suggest the highly sexed nature of the world we are entering. On a more overt and energetic level, Shakespeare's obscene jokes are replaced by Zeffirelli's first piece of *obviously* careful framing in the film which, by literally underlining it with the bottom frame line, gives noticeable emphasis to Sampson's codpiece as he bites his thumb. Thus, a trivial, minutely authenticating detail of costume is modulated into a visual statement about Sampson and his Verona that completely accords with the written, but here absent, text: He is a young man in love with his own sexual prowess which he expresses through his violence.

This combination of apparently absolute visual and aural authenticity, and the revealing, textually inspired use of detail pervades the film. It is an intense yet clearly controlled naturalism that Zeffirelli offers. That is why the colours of the market produce complement the colours of the characters' costumes. That is why framing is important throughout, particularly since the overall camera style is very fluent, and is thus a persuasive extension of the detailed naturalism within the image. Ultimately, this precisely adjusted naturalism is cued by the Chorus, just as the very different but equally precise adjustment in *The Shrew* is cued by the Induction.

This artful use of authenticity is clear in the scuffles that begin the fight. The hand-held camera presses in close, peering over the shoulders of those in front. This documentary or newsreel technique is reinforced by the absence of music over these shots; the soundtrack consists of a naturalistic amalgam of scuffles, grunts, and cries. Yet if the start of the fight has a documentary quality, its next phase has not. Tybalt's entry is shot from the feet up, and this visual rhyme makes any verbal reference to his allegiance unnecessary. It also reveals what is to become an increasing tension in the film between artifice and authenticity. Tybalt's entry is documentary—the camera first looks at his feet as if the cameraman were momentarily disoriented—but the visual rhyme and the smoothness of the tilt up to his face (again via a prominent codpiece) also make his entry positively ceremonial.

Like all the characters who propel the tragedy directly, Tybalt is introduced in close-ups, in an image that contains a visible tension between the naturalism of the setting and the artifice of the framing, angle, or, in this case, lens. Here the artifice initiated by the visual rhyme (and justifying in retrospect the first shot of Sampson and Gregory) is completed by the telephoto lens. This certainly gives Tybalt added stature and menace by suddenly compressing the space between us and him. More importantly, it announces a stylistic change. The wide-angle lens and hand-held camera of documentary have been replaced by the mounted camera and telephoto lens of conscious fiction. As the visual rhyme implies, Tybalt is about to initiate a resurgence of the violence already begun by Capulet's retainers. The rhyme points to a structured train of events; a sense of structure emphasized by the film's symmetries of composition, controlled colour range and, here, the overt contrast of camera styles. Verona is not an autonomous, historical elsewhere; the authentic detail and prevailing naturalism make it seem so, and it is important that they do. Yet this autonomy is qualified by the conscious and deliberate use of artifice. Verona is a storied world, and it is important that we feel this too.

This accounts for the utterly symmetrical composition of the shot where Romeo is introduced, framed in an arch just as Juliet is first seen framed in a window. The lovers are circumscribed from the moment we see them. This circumscription is part physical—Romeo is seen between high walls, and for him there is no world without Verona walls. It is part social—Juliet is framed in a window of her family mansion, and feels ethically confined by her sense of her father's house; that is why she quite

absurdly describes Romeo as her only love sprung from her only hate. The circumscription is narrative too. The lovers are star-cross'd, and their lives are the working out of a pattern first begun by the ancient grudge. They are the proponents of a storied world. That is why the visual style has to change when Romeo first appears. Just as art has to transcend the natural viewpoint in order to create a fictional world of emotional depth, so Zeffirelli's camera moves beyond naturalism at key narrative moments, so that what we see becomes what we feel. This is the visual equivalent of Shakespeare's Chorus, with its emphasis on fatedness and fictionality. The lovers are framed visually but also, by appropriately punning extension, they are framed in the colloquial sense. It is this line of feeling that explains Zeffirelli's meticulous and brilliant handling of the Capulet ball.

It also explains the first close-up of Romeo, which is really quite daring. Dressed in deep lilac, he is obviously a Montagu, having nothing of the Capulet vulgarity and ostentation. Yet this color, the pill-box hat, the obvious eye-liner, the flawless complexion and the flower that just happens to match his doublet suggest falseness and even, perhaps, effeminacy. The former quality is textually substantiated; in his talk of Rosaline, Romeo is shown as a tedious, callow poseur. Zeffirelli relies instead on our visual sense to establish a character in the throes of an early, imaginary love; all verbal reference to Rosaline is cut. As for the effeminacy, in the context of a Verona full of young men whose brains are in their codpieces, Romeo's appearance is like a flush of sympathetic sanity.

In fact, the artificiality of his appearance is part of a larger scheme. It is a commonplace of criticism that Romeo and Juliet mature astonishingly during their brief marriage. We have only to compare Zeffirelli's presentation of Romeo here and in the tomb scene to see this brought out. Yet Romeo's maturing is expressed visually in terms of increasing naturalism and decreasing artifice; from eye-liner to bear stubble, so to speak. At the same time, the pattern of his destiny is working itself out in a movement from naturalism towards artifice, as fate makes tidy conclusions of natural impulses. This is stressed in the choric summation "A glooming peace this morning with it brings. The sun for sorrow will not show his head." Zeffirelli achieves it visually as Romeo falls beside Juliet. He is unshaven and unkempt; her lips are swollen, her face puffy. Yet their dying pose is really just that: a perfectly assumed and composed attitude that declares the fulfillment of the narrative pattern through conscious visual artifice. This double movement in the visual presentation vividly reaffirms the ironies of the drama.

To be effective, this tension must be made visible. This need accounts for such early apparent discrepancies as Benvolio's rapidly diminishing wound—an invention of Zeffirelli's which exists solely to draw attention to itself as artifice. Just as Shakespeare is most "artificial" at points of greatest emotional intensity, so too Zeffirelli in III.5 shows Romeo naked and romantically lit. The artifice becomes evident when we reflect that less than twenty-four hours earlier Romeo had fought at length and for his life with Tybalt, yet appears here without a single bruise or blemish. Once again, what we see is what we feel.

The decorum necessary to sustain this kind of balance comes as no surprise after *The Shrew*, and is just as important for this text, being at once so openly artificial and emotionally vivid. The camerawork is a clear response to, and visual reconstruction of, the chorically announced friction in the text between history and story. It is this tension that helps create the emotional perspective of the play and, thanks to Zeffirelli's visual sense, the film. We are visually and emotionally detached from it as history; we are visually and emotionally involved in it as story. Zeffirelli's text literally elucidates Shakespeare's, making it visible. The resulting highly stylized yet emotionally expressive naturalism gives added weight to moments like Juliet's departure from the dance, for example. Her running off is a perfectly natural thing for an over-excited young girl on her first major public occasion. It is also a significant moment in terms

of the story, since her physical dizziness represents an emotional disorientation. It is too prophetic and therefore structural moment that replaces her presentiment in II.2: "I have no joy of this contract tonight/It is too rash; too unadvised; too sudden." Here, as throughout the film, Zeffirelli creates a situation where visibility becomes feeling and feeling becomes awareness.

The entire dance sequence with its combination of spontaneous, effusive emotion and controlled, stylized expression is clearly a visual precursor to the lovers' sonnet dialogue. The choice of sonnet form and the conventional religion-of-love imagery make this dialogue formal to the point of being traditional. This does, of course, generate a pleasant tension between the strict control of the form and the powerful impulses of the emotion beneath. The formal restraint is heard in the regularity of pointing and rhyme and is implicit in such ideas as pilgrimage and saintliness. Romeo's sonnet, for he begins it, is itself therefore an aspect of a whole institutionalised and ritualised process of courtship. It is no surprise to find this sense of tradition in Romeo or Juliet. They are both children of their time and place: Juliet adopts the tribal attitude to Romeo when she first hears his name, while Romeo has already been characterised by his friends and by Capulet as of serious, rather old-fashioned demeanour. The two are heirs to a social context they ignore literally at their peril. Authentic, spontaneous behavior is a dangerous luxury.

Yet even as they conform to tradition they are breaking it. Their meeting is illicit and hidden. Romeo's comparison of Juliet with a saint brings a youthful sincerity to a rather worn convention. At the same time, the imagery of saints, pilgrims and statues brings with it notions of martyrdom, canonization, immortality and all the fabulous trappings that subtly re-emphasise the storied nature of these authentic emotions and the events they give rise to. Romeo's very sincerity of admiration in all its outdated prolixity is the simultaneous expression of the fate it precipitates. The lovers' speech may be determined by their history—their personalities, their naivete, their uncertainty of each other and their awareness of the social context they find themselves in—but it is also determined by their story. As both a human and a narrative moment, the sonnet dialogue is most effective.

Zeffirelli, however, does not let the text speak entirely for itself. In what might seem simply a concession to the need to popularise, he introduces the song. This consists of a loosely evocative collection of pseudo-Elizabethan sonnet motifs on the themes of the transience of beauty and the imminence of death. This song brackets the sonnet dialogue.

It is clear then that the song provides a storied context for the meeting that is linked with the historical and social context so carefully established in the dance sequence. As the camera locates Romeo and Juliet behind their pillar, the song modulates from being an event in the established diegesis to an extra-diegetic orchestrated soundtrack score. This orchestration persists throughout the sonnet. Naturalistically, this is absurd, since one is left wondering just what everyone else is doing. It is, of course, a film artifice that is as time-honoured and conventional as Romeo's images of saintliness. We are so used to this that it may not even be consciously perceived as artifice, so that the spectator responds to the whole dialogue-music-kiss monograph as a form of emotionally charged realism. Yet it is the artifice that amplifies the emotion, just as Shakespeare knew when he wrote the sonnet. Besides, the music is not just a vaguely emotive substitute for undramatised feeling as so often in romantic cinema; here it is already charged with the *carpe diem* theme of the song from which it originates.

Once the sonnet is over, Zeffirelli's camera moves away from the lovers' kiss and returns us to Capulet's party and the music to the diegesis. Again, the lovers' fatedness is presented to us through uniquely cinematic conventions that are both contemporary and, at the same time, complementary to the text's. The film revivifies and makes accessible through its own conventions, the conventions of the speech.

Finally, Zeffirelli concludes the song with the singer looking directly into the camera

in a clear violation of the ground rules of cinematic naturalism. The singer addresses us, as no one else in the film is allowed to do. In doing so he momentarily wrests control of visual space from the camera and comments directly on the action, like a documentary reporter. This is somehow less shocking than it ought to be, possibly because the camera angle and costume locate him firmly in Capulet's ball as part of its historicity, before Zeffirelli cuts to a close-up. At all events, the naturalistic convention is not quite broken, though the staring into the camera, like the extra-diegetic modulation of the song, stretches our sense of diegetic integrity as far as the dominant naturalism will allow. In this regard, these devices are no different from the symmetrical compositions elsewhere; they are all part of the film's emotionally charged naturalism. Here, of course, Zeffirelli is exploiting the constraints of his medium and his mode: The singer is clearly his version of Shakespeare's Chorus at the beginning of Act II. Like Shakespeare's non-diegetic figure, he takes us into the next Act. The lovers' meeting is part of his song; their poetry is set to his music.

Zeffirelli opens the film with a similar combination of image, music and text. Visually, he begins with a fade-in to a distant perspective of a city. The shadows and mistiness suggest dawn. Musically, this image is accompanied by a single sombre and cautionary note that leads into the main musical theme. At the same time the Chorus begins to speak, giving precise shape to the musical feeling through voice-over narration. The text is the first eight lines of the Chorus, so that what we hear is simply a direct announcement of the problems to come.

So far, then, it is clearly a storied world. The fade-in is a specifically film convention that introduces a naturalistic image of a town. The presence of music and voice-over are also film artifices as familiar and acceptable to us as the Chorus to an Elizabethan audience. What they announce, as we have seen, is that film conventions are to replace theatrical ones. That is one reason why the Chorus' final six lines are unnecessary.

The images with the music and speech point to the same conclusion, though in more complex ways. Logically, the opening image should be as cinematically conventional, artificial and extra-diegetic as the music and voice-over. The problem is how to do this when naturalism is the desired mode and the diegesis unestablished. Zeffirelli solves the problem in an interesting way.

He begins by modulating the naturalism of the opening shot, just as the Chorus in the theatre adjusts our sense of naturalism and authenticity apropos of the events we are to see. The historical aspect of the story is clear enough; it is an ancient grudge that breaks to new mutiny. Yet the present tense of the Chorus's account sits rather oddly with his resume of the lovers' entire life-span. Their story may be from a specific past, but it is to be retold in the present tense, "In fair Verona where we lay our scene."

The events about to unfold thus occupy a *storied* present tense where Zeffirelli takes some trouble to create in a medium whose naturalistic immediacy threatens to create merely a *virtual* present tense. The difference is crucial. In Shakespeare's Chorus, phrases like "where we lay our scene" are reminders that what we are watching is artifice, however authentic it might momentarily seem. The errors for which he apologises in advance are in this sense merely reminders of that fact, re-emphasising the need for a critical distance between spectator and spectacle. This comes as no surprise in Shakespeare; it does though, hold us off from the total empathic immersion in the events that a virtual present tense encourages. We tend to snivel in the last reel of *Mayerling* precisely because it does nothing to distance us, assuming we set aside its vulgarity. On the contrary, it positively invites us to excarnate, so that the experience becomes a form of semi-exteriorised wish-fulfilling dream. Shakespeare was not interested in such effects; nor, consequently, is Zeffirelli. However, technical errors in film, whether intentional or not, are such severe violations of screen convention that they will not serve Zeffirelli's purpose of giving visual amplification to the line quoted above. A commercial film in a basically naturalistic mode cannot, through the dictates of convention, do this. Nor is it appropriate in this case, for there is no doubt that

Shakespeare begins the play proper with a most inviting and entertaining scene.

Zeffirelli then, modulates the first image of Verona. Spread out for contemplation, romantically tinted by sunlit mistiness, it is a most evocative image. Yet its function is really to draw attention to itself as an image rather than to establish an environment for the action. Indeed, the action of this story could not take place here, for it is too ambivalent a world.

Despite the light, the accuracy of detail and the perspectives are obviously photographic, and this is reinforced by the better lit sections by the river. Yet the mist blurs the outlines and tints the image to the shade of an aging canvas. The high angle is as much a landscape artist's as a cinematographer's and the lack of motion reinforce the painterly quality. The camera pans right as if to take in the whole work, creating movement just in the way of a documentary film on some aspect of fine art. As the pan proceeds to reveal the true extent of the city straddling its broad river, it becomes clear that despite the effects of mist, angle and stillness, what we are looking at is a photograph of Verona *as it remains now* and as it was then, in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. It is the authentic city, presented with conventional photographic naturalism and a degree of photographic artifice. Hovering between snapshot and painting, documentary and fiction, it occupies an extra-diegetic space between us and the fiction. Like the Chorus, it is part of neither world, but gestures at both, reconciling our tense with that of the fiction, our ethical space with that of the film, history with story. Yet, just in case it proves too seductive, the credits over remind us that we are also watching a BHE film and that Franco Zeffirelli is laying the scene. Even so, the "historicised" lettering subtly counteracts even that assertion.

It is a delicate balance, and it announces quite clearly that the film's method will be to combine the authentic with the artificial within the context of a prevailing naturalism. The Chorus's last six lines are thus inappropriate as well as unnecessary.

If it seems strange to assert that such a carefully balanced opening image is extra-diegetic, it is only necessary to recall the very difficult image of Verona that is presented a few seconds later as the choric voice-over concludes: It is an old, small, walled Italian hill-top town, and remains so throughout the film. It is the antithesis of the opening shot. Here there is motion and bright, clear light. The low camera angle is a cinematographer's, not a painter's, for the motion draws the camera into a left pan that leads us to the first shot of the market. It is over this image, with its perfectly ordinary photographic naturalism, that Zeffirelli puts the main title.

It is a major change, for these two images of Verona are simply not compatible as scenes for the action. In fact, the change of viewpoint represents a similar shift in the viewer's emotional perspective. Just as, in the theatre, we attend to the Chorus yet swiftly become involved in the first scene, so here we are advised of the artificial, storied nature of what we are to see, yet are then taken into a highly authentic Verona. Just as these two shots are visually antithetical, so too they mark a change from an extra— to an intra-diegetic point of view. The result is that the virtual present is also the storied present; visual space is also ethical space.

We are therefore prepared for the intense, stylised and emotionally expressive naturalism that is to follow, where compositional and other effects seem to rise spontaneously from the photographic authenticity. Mercutio's remark to Romeo is equally appropriate to Zeffirelli's film: "Now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by Nature."

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Barth, *Chimera* (London, Quartet, 1977), p. 246.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Pursell, "Zeffirelli's Shakespeare: The Visual Realisation of Tone and Theme," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, VIII, No. 4 (1980).