

Nature vs. Civilization: A Review Article of Films by Luhrmann

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**Vera ZUBAREV**

### **Nature vs. Civilization: A Review Article of Films by Luhrmann**

Despite the media's constant interest and close attention to Baz Luhrmann's exotic films one important side of his cinematic achievements remains untouched by critics, namely -- the director's conceptual basis and philosophical framework. The neglect of these two matters creates a drama and arouses anger in critics and viewers who try to apply standard rules to his films, judging and reviewing them within the framework of genre categories. Luhrmann's films, however, do not belong to any particular category, although the elements of various genres can be found in them. Some of the elements are better elaborated than others, which makes critics define the niche in which his next film should be considered. The frustration starts right after the assumption about the genre is made since Luhrmann is not a director who is concerned with film categories. I postulate that he should be judged based on "director categories," i.e., as a phenomenon, not an artisan.

Luhrmann's films are not story-based or character-based. They are concept-based. Concept is what cements and puts together all the details he thoroughly incorporates in his epic cinematography. Regardless of a highly entertaining nature of his films, their goal is not to entertain, but to make one think. Luhrmann belongs to a small elite of directors/conceptualists for whom plot, characters, cinematography, and editing revolve around a solid concept and an artistically grounded philosophy. Without grasping the philosophical core the viewer risks to be "lost in translation." The goal of the review offered below is to show the common conceptual and philosophical ground of Luhrmann's two major films released twelve years apart and to see how his basic theme, "nature and civilization," attains new developments in the course of time. The first film I discuss is *Australia* -- a film that some critics designate an "epic romance" and others "a character story" -- but if one has not grasped Luhrmann's concept he methodically develops throughout his major films, one would be confused, skeptical, and even angry while watching it. Some of Luhrmann's critics also feel that way because they have difficulty putting together the romance, the aboriginal magic, the allusions to *The Wizard of Oz*, and many other overwhelming and seemingly disjointed details in his latest offering. On the meta-level, Luhrmann's films depict an epic struggle between two grand "entities," civilization and nature. *Australia* is yet another attempt to reveal that struggle.

Personal lives of the characters are intertwined with a history that is nothing but a chain of violent interventions of civilization in the Aboriginal (i.e., natural) world. This turns civilization into barbarians who invade violently the Kingdom of Nature, ruining it in the way only barbarians can do. Luhrmann creates a paradox by introducing the notion of the "barbarian" civilization versus the "civilized" Aboriginals healing and restoring the wounded world of nature. The space of action in *Australia* is divided into the kingdom of nature guided by "King George" (David Gulpilil) and civilization, aggressively pursuing its goals. The "mediators" between the two worlds are half-Aboriginal children, one of whom is the main character and the storyteller, Nullah (Brandon Walters). Nullah helps the childless Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman) regain the cattle she was about to lose because of a treacherous cattle station manager, Neil Fletcher (David Wenham). Later on, Nullah rescues the cattle, stopping the herd from stampeding over a cliff by using his magic power. After his mother drowns tragically in the water tower where both of them were hiding from the authority he becomes a son-figure for Lady Sarah. All relationships in the film have their symbolism, rich in imagery and semantics. Like her biblical namesake who gave birth to Isaac when she was ninety, Lady Sarah is barren. Her romance with Drover (Hugh Jackman), the man who assists her in transporting the cattle to Darwin, becomes "illuminated" by the presence of Nullah. Nullah represents the Kingdom of Nature, whose magic forces may help Luhrman's Sarah restore her lost ability to "be fruitful and multiply."

In the beginning, Sarah resists the world of nature. In fact, she comes to northern Australia to force her husband into selling his faltering Australian cattle station. Nothing looks more artificial and farcical in the rural Australian environment than this fashionably dressed woman with mincing manners. However, as she adapts to the natural world her behavior changes from affected to genuine and she opens herself to a true love. Her affection for Drover becomes a natural desire devoid of empty coquetry and nonsense. Metaphorically speaking, Drover is her spiritual guide "conducting" her "polluted" nature to "resurrection." His profession is symbolic since it is linked to transitioning, and so is their way to Darwin, the city named after Charles Darwin. At this point, the travel becomes a transitional stage for Sarah. She enters Darwin completely transformed and reunited with the primordial that is synonymous with aboriginal. In the end, all her close-ups reveal her natural beauty, not spoiled by a cosmetic makeover. Drover himself is a man of "two worlds" since his late wife was an Aboriginal woman. His dual nature makes him oscillate between the civilized and the Aboriginal,

and in the second half of the film he appears like a real dandy before Sarah (the scene at the party). However, their Hollywood-like romance depicted with Luhrmann's subtle sense of humor falls apart as soon as Drover rejects Nullah, saying, "He's not my son." This dangerous shift threatens to destroy the relationship between Drover and Lady Sarah -- a harmonious union between nature and civilization. Rejecting Nullah is a metaphor for rejecting the sacred world of nature -- the only source of true love, beauty, and fertility. Only after finding Nullah does Drover regain his beloved, whom he mistakenly considered killed in the bombing of Darwin. Drover rescues Nullah and other abducted children from the Mission Island, then sails back into port at Darwin where Lady Sarah is prepared to leave, believing there's nothing for her in the city anymore. Accidentally, she hears a melody and recognizes Nullah's harmonica, the one he "inherited" from Kipling Flynn (Jack Thompson). Kipling's name is associated with Rudyard Kipling, the author of *The Jungle Book* who was also known for glorifying soldiers "taming the natives." Nullah plays "Over the Rainbow," a song Sarah taught him earlier. This very tune brings them together again.

Allusions to *The Wizard of Oz* are key to the main concept of *Australia*: the image of the rainbow in "Over the Rainbow" represents a bridge connecting the two worlds in the Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent. It is a metaphor for waterholes and water as life's main resource. When Drover drives the cattle to Darwin with the team of six people, including Sarah and Nullah, all the water sources have been poisoned -- a metaphor for civilization "poisoning" the Kingdom of Nature. The group, however, survives with the help of "King George," Nullah's wizard grandfather. The name "George" alludes to the myth of St. George, who overcame a dragon nested at the spring and, thus, threatened to leave the city without water. Like St. George, "King George" "rescues" the team from the "dragons" and makes sure everyone arrives safely at Darwin (a victory of evolution over revolution). Importantly, in Luhrmann's films water is an important metaphor for nature. It gives life and conveys the spirits of the dead to their afterlife journey. It cleanses and blesses his characters who passionately kiss in the swimming pool (*Romeo and Juliet*) and in the rain (*Australia*). It also brings Nullah and Drover to Sarah. Nullah's mother dies in the water tower (a tower appears to be a symbol of a tunnel between the worlds of the living and the dead). Right after that, Sarah sings the song "Over the Rainbow" to cheer Nullah. In Nullah's world the song becomes a hymn to the Rainbow Serpent, another metaphor for living (holy) water that preserves his mother's spirit in the afterlife.

Another allusion to the *The Wizard of Oz* is linked to the tale of Dorothy's magic shoes. To return home, Dorothy should click her heels together three times and say, "There's no place like home." The clip from *The Wizard of Oz* is replayed in the film, so when its variation appears in the final scene of *Australia* the viewer remembers the "theme." Indeed, the "returning scene" in *Australia* is a deviation from the original tale of Dorothy's return. The difference is that Dorothy must wear her shoes in order to come home, but Nullah has to take them off. Shoes are a symbol of civilization. They cannot possibly bring him home because his home is the Kingdom of Nature. There, he is a real wizard unlike the wizard of Oz, who was nothing but a fraud trapped in a magic country. Nullah leaves the civilized world, but not before he is reunited with his "adopted parents." Their love for him and each other is supposed to shape the rainbow bridge, without which civilization will collapse. *Australia* ends with hope. Hope that Sarah would be blessed with children, hope that a new generation would keep building the bridge, not destroying it, hope that man and nature would speak the same language again....

Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (2006) is not another populist attempt to "translate" the "old-fashioned" story into a modern language as some viewers and critics may assume. Luhrmann has never been a populist. He is, rather, an elitist whose way of thinking is far from being simplistic. His films abound in details which, however, are not the end in itself: each and everyone is a "brick" in the complex building cemented by a larger concept that has yet to be comprehended. At a visual level, the space in *Romeo + Juliet* is divided into the space of action and the implied space. Their opposite nature creates the tension, the confrontation, and the pulse of the film. Without analyzing the role of these two spaces and speculating about what each of them may represent it would be impossible to understand fully the meaning of the conflict as well as the message behind it. The space of action is "occupied" by the inhabitants of Verona Beach -- the children of technocratic society, material and soulless. It is apparently farcical, blatant, and it encompasses all characters but Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Juliet (Claire Danes). The implied space is solely a property of Romeo and Juliet. It is elaborated to the extent of a tangible medium and it could be defined as "sacred waters." In fact, all the key scenes between the lovers appear in connection to water that is a complex symbol of life and death, beauty and purity, forgiveness and punishment. In it, the divine and cosmic are whimsically intertwined, generating a chain of wonders and helping the main characters obtain their new poten-

tials. The opposition between the two spaces suggests that the main concept revolves around the theme of "nature versus civilization" -- a leitmotif of Luhrmann's main films -- where civilization attains a negative connotation. As a metaphor for the primordial source of life, water combines the supernatural and natural, resisting all that is artificial and fake. Its depths always reflect the heights -- the parameters that are lacking in superficial technocratic civilization represented by Verona Beach. For Claire Danes's Juliet, however, water is a native home. She first appears swimming under water in her swimming pool, her eyes wide open. Looking straight at the camera, she seems to be having an eye contact with the viewers whom she watches with surprise as if they make her wonder what kind of creatures they are. Water becomes a physical border between her and the rest of the world that does not belong to her secluded kingdom. It is quiet there; no sound of the boisterous fuss upstairs disturbs her "study." Perhaps, she sees something else there, too, something hidden from the viewer. Her Nurse (Miriam Margolyes) calls for her, her voice like a trumpet playing battle alarm; everyone runs back and forth, preparing to the party. The soundtrack abruptly changes from loud to quiet as the camera switches from the mention to Juliet's underwater dwelling. Separated by the soundproof waters, she is free from the holiday rush.

There is nothing glamorous about her appearance in that first episode. Her features are slightly distorted by the pressure of waters, and she certainly does not make one gasp with surprise as Zeffirelli's Juliet (Olivia Hussey) does. This Juliet is meant to make a different impression on the spectator. She did not come to outshine the vulgar, blatant females of Verona Beach. The philosophy of her character dictates to her to be simply natural, for according to Luhrmann's concept she should be a genuine daughter of nature and an estranged step-daughter of her Bacchanalian surrounding. Thus, the association with Ancient Rome arises at once as Juliet's mother (Diane Venora) appears in the costume of Cleopatra, ready for the party. Soon after, her husband (Paul Sorvino) greets the guests cheerfully in the costume of Caesar and their nephew, Tybalt (John Leguizamo), exhibits his sexual behavior dressed like a satyr-Devil. Dazzling with lights, gold leaf and other tinsel, the party in Capulet's house celebrates the return of a wild Dionysian orgy. It is only Juliet who is not a part of the Bacchanalia. In a simple dress with angelic wings she dances with her fiancée, Dave Paris (Paul Rudd), who wears a costume of astronaut. The irony is that although both astronaut and angel relate to the skies, they still do not relate to each other. Indeed, there is no common ground between Juliet and her circle, likewise there is a very little connection between Romeo and his friends and relatives.

Romeo appears writing poetry on the shore. In Luhrmann's version this main Shakespearian character whose philosophical mind has been underestimated for centuries by critics and directors is a poet of philosophical poetry. His elegant look and physical clumsiness only reflect the awkward position of a thinker in a society of base, pragmatic interests. Romeo has not a half of his friends' adroitness and his fighting skills are quite poor, too. There is a lot of gaucherie in this character when it comes to his interaction with the physical world. He overcomes the fence to Juliet's mansion with difficulty, making a lot of noise and alarming the guards. Compared to Whiting's athletic Romeo, DiCaprio's character is a true clodhopper. The same "mal-adroitness" is observed when he tries to communicate with his close circle. His cousin and close friend, Benvolio (Dash Mihok), only shrugs in bewilderment, humming, as Romeo expresses his discontent about the feud, reciting from his recent writing. The lofty style and abstract way of thinking are above Benvolio's comprehension.

The lack of understanding between those who are supposed to be friends (or, to be more precise, the one-sided understanding) creates a very bad predisposition, considering the fact that the families are supposed to change in the end by learning from their great loss. The reconciliation seems to be unrealistic since the lovers are separated from the world by the dense wall of dullness. At the same time, there is a genuine closeness between the feuding parties. Regardless of their constant confrontations they speak the same language and share the same values. This is ironic because the conflict of mentalities results in incompatibility between the lovers' and society's values while the "likeness" of the feuding parties causes even more violence and leads the system to self-destruction.

The film begins with a scene of the fight, but, surprisingly, the fighters do not seem to be very much engaged in fighting. They are, rather, engaged in their amateur "acting," being primarily concerned with the way they look, move, and pronounce their lines. They kiss their guns affectionately which are adorned like theatrical props and set the gas station on fire, giving an overdramatic performance similar to that in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997). The whole scene is directed like a parody to a bad western that, however, is deliberately enacted by the characters whose goal is to amuse invisible viewers. Such odd behavior is puzzling, indeed: except a few terrified pedestrians, there are no wishful "spectators" around. As the film progresses, however, the mystery unfolds: all

gangsters appear on TV news, performing their barbaric act. Now it becomes clear that they were acting knowingly for the cameras that had been set to shoot the unrest.

The feud in Luhrmann's version is nothing but a part of the daily entertainment of Verona Beach whose citizens seem to be crazy about the reality TV. The TV boxes and cameras are everywhere, including cars, pools, and streets. Everyone anticipates anxiously the next "episode" of reality TV drama. Omnipotent and omnipresent, the television broadcasts on every corner of the city. Put on the chair right in the middle of the beach, a TV box rests in the sun, attracting lazy pedestrians. It has become a part of the landscape, a pet, a drug.... The unimaginative and unintelligent mob watches nothing but reality TV that easily supplanted all art-related programs. The paradox is that the reality television makes one lose his sense of reality. When not on camera, however, the gangsters lose their theatrical "glamour" and fight with the brutality of wild animals. The duel that occurs away from the public eyes strikes one with its cruelty and viciousness. The scene is directed in contrast to both the beginning of the film and the analogous scene in Zeffirelli's version. Unlike Luhrmann's mad combatants, Zeffirelli's duellists parry the blows elegantly, accompanying each thrust with a witty joke that their attacker and opponents appreciate no less than their supporters. It is a duel of wits where swords are to support the romantic image of confrontation. Although the game is still dangerous, likeness in such mentalities does create a predisposition to change and reconcile in the end since the two parties are equally sensitive to intellectual pleasures and know how to appreciate one's wit and imagination. Clearly, it is not their intention to harm each other and the tragedy occurs as a result of Romeo's unfortunate interference.

The duel between Leguizamo's Tybalt and McEnery's Mercutio is just the opposite. It is an atrocious fight between two animals blinded by fury. There is no place for reason and wit in their strictly physical assaults. Their intention is to destroy and nothing can stop them from doing so since the only restrictive factor, television, is not present. In that "reality Hollywood" there is no place for such a non-entertaining couple as Romeo and Juliet. Water that becomes their only sanctuary is also a symbol of disconnection between the civilized world and the Kingdom of Nature. Water leads Romeo to Juliet: he sees right after he dips his face into a basin to cool off and wash out the traces of intoxication. Refreshed, he notices an aquarium, and his eyes are caught immediately by the beauty of whimsical forms of the sea-world. Juliet appears before Romeo, surrounded by various beauties; but if in Zeffirelli's version the beauties of Verona resemble Renaissance painting, thus, intensifying the compatibility of the society and the lovers, in Luhrmann's adaptation they are exotic sea creatures.

Amused by the suddenly opening universe of natural forms and colors, Romeo does not notice Juliet. His "study" of the fantastic Kingdom of Nature, however, is his mental path to another secret "door" behind which the meaning of true love and genuine beauty is dwelling. The camera catches the close-up of Juliet's eye among seashells, corals, and fish. Its shape can be easily confused with another exotic fish. It takes Romeo a few seconds to realize that the peculiar creature in the tank is a girl looking at him intently through the fish tank. Water instantly "unites" them by placing their transparent, spirits-looking reflections next to their faces, thus, pronouncing a benediction over them. Waters surround them not only in the swimming pool. The waving sheets enveloping them in the morning instantly produce the image of waters concealing the lovers. In the end, the white sheets covering their bodies dissolve into the image of waters carrying away their living souls. The semi-transparent images of the lovers flash on the screen before dissolving in the bubbling waters -- a symbol of never-ending life kneaded at love.

Water interacts with all characters in the film by blessing some of them, washing out their sins (the rain falling from the hands of Jesus Christ after Tybalt is killed), and carrying them to the eternal life. Tybalt's body floating in the fountain under the rain is another reminder of water's transitional role among its other functions. The gigantic statue of Jesus Christ in front of which the duel occurs reminds one of the Stone Guest from Molière's *Don Juan*, and Tybalt's death is associated naturally with the revenge of the Stone Guest for the character's sinful behavior. It is meaningful, therefore, that the torrents of rain wash out the blood from Romeo's palms, thus implying his innocence. Indeed, according to Luhrmann's version, the death of Mercutio is not homicide but murder. Romeo does not seem to be in clear conscience when he pursues the murderer. His face is distorted by fury; he is hardly recognizable as if it is someone else who directs his gun ("direct my sail"). The angle of the camera makes the symbolism of rain connected to the gigantic statue of Christ, since waters streaming down the stony arms of that idol-like figure, appear to be evoked by him. The well-elaborated symbolism of water in the film also explains the reason why the classical scene at the balcony is transferred to the swimming pool. A trite symbol of sensuality exploited endlessly in cinema attains the meaning of spiritual intimacy in *Romeo + Juliet*. Luhrmann challenges the overused sexual cliché and

manages to turn the underwater kissing into a lust-free, sacred reunion between humanity and nature.

There is yet another reason why the balcony scene would not work in Luhrmann's adaptation. This architectural annex serves to outline an elevated position of lovers whose thoughts and feelings are not connected to anything earthly or domestic. Being a part of the house, the balcony, nevertheless, is a way out, an expansion of the domestic boundaries, a space walk; therefore, in Shakespeare's play it represents the romantic top. Zeffirelli follows the Shakespearean pattern creating his renaissance "pyramid" open to ideals. His Verona is capable of positive changes and the society has a potential to appreciate the sacrifice Romeo and Juliet made in the name of unconditional love. The film therefore ends on the renaissance note. While Zeffirelli's version conveys a belief in resurrection of unconditional values through love, Luhrmann's version leaves no hope. There is no such renaissance "pyramid" in Luhrmann's film. Romeo and Juliet cannot possibly represent the top of the profane world of Verona Beach and therefore the structure of this society is not vertical; rather, it is horizontal. The two worlds exist parallel to one other: no video camera can detect what is happening under water and likewise none of Verona Beach's inhabitants is capable of spiritual and mental awakening. The story of Romeo and Juliet has no appeal to them and no sublime value. In that profane world, the lovers acquire their nicknames, "Romejya" and "Hulietta" -- a lowered version of the classic couple as perceived by Verona Beach's society.

The deaths of Romeo and Juliet signify the end of entertainment for their world. Reality TV has nothing to broadcast anymore. The true loss for Verona Beach, however, is the loss of its fierce ring-leaders without whom the show will fall apart. As the camera moves back, the flashing blue screen gets smaller until it achieves the size of a star or a lonely blue planet that soon collapses, merging with the biblical void. With this outcome Luhrmann challenges Dostoevsky's famous saying that "beauty will rescue the world." In his version, beauty does not rescue anything if the eyes of the beholder are empty.

Reviewer's profile: Vera Zubarev teaches literature and film at the University of Pennsylvania. A scholar, poet, writer, and filmmaker, she is interested in the application of systems theory in literature and in the intersection of what literature can teach us in decision-making. Zubarev has published fourteen books including literary criticism, poetry, and prose. In scholarship, her single-authored books include *A Systems Approach to Literature: Mythopoetics of Chekhov's Four Major Plays* (1997) and *A Concept of Dramatic Genre and the Comedy of a New Type: Chess, Literature, and Film* (2002). Zubarev has also published several award-winning poems and the feature film *Four Funny Families* (2003). E-mail: <[vzubarev@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:vzubarev@sas.upenn.edu)> & <[vera@ulita.net](mailto:vera@ulita.net)>