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Revitalizing *Romeo and Juliet* Through Zombies and Love

Shakespeare is one of the most adapted writers of all time, with *Romeo and Juliet* often receiving the Hollywood treatment. One such adaptation – *Warm Bodies* – sticks out for its distinct take on the play and its melding of contemporary genres. *Warm Bodies*, directed by Jonathan Levine, transforms *Romeo and Juliet* into a horror/romantic comedy. The film follows R, a zombie, and Julie, a human. They fall in love as R seeks to protect her from other zombies and especially the mindless, skeletal Boneyes. The love that grows between the two is ultimately the catalyst for the defeat of the Boneyes and the zombies' salvation from their flesh-eating ways. Though fidelity was clearly not a priority here, the influence of Shakespeare's most famous love story, *Romeo and Juliet*, is hard to ignore. *Warm Bodies* is a unique entry into the rhizomatic network of star-crossed lovers that acknowledges its intertextuality through story, themes, and visual cues, especially through references to Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet*. I aim to explore how the film functions as an adaptation using Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, Magdalena Cieślak's "From Romero to Romeo—Shakespeare's Star-Crossed Lovers Meeting Zombedy in Jonathan Levine's *Warm Bodies*," and Neal Robert Klomp's "*Warm Bodies* in Plague and Shakespeare's "Womb of Death." I will also be considering "Rethinking Low, Middle, and High Art" by Ting Cho Lau and Robin Wood's "Disreputable Genre" because I believe that, through its adaptive techniques and transposing of *Romeo and Juliet* into a romantic comedy with horror elements, *Warm Bodies* is able to bring Shakespeare's work, now seen as high art, back to its humble roots by inhabiting genres that are often considered lowbrow.

The Zombie Problem

Adaptation, as Hutcheon describes it, is “an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works,” but before we can understand *Warm Bodies* as an adaptation, we must first address the uniqueness of a zombie/human romance and how it must combat what Cieślak explains is the issue with zombies: “zombies violate bodily norms, [and so] they “induce disgust and fear” (Hutcheon 7, Cieślak 162). Rotting corpses that feast on human flesh are not very romantically appealing. That can be a barrier for viewers, and *Warm Bodies* is aware of this, which is why it humanizes R from the start through his internal narration. We must also not ignore the “comedy” aspect of romantic comedy because this is a tool the film uses to make R a more palatable romantic character. Through comedy, like R’s “noncommittal” shrugs and his awkwardness around Julie, the movie presents “the pleasures of the carnival” to take away from the discomfort of viewers (Cieślak 162). Finally, and I think most notably, the film attempts to break down the zombie barrier “through association with Romeo” (Cieślak 160). By giving R many of Romeo’s characteristics, such as that of the “vulnerable romantic,” it allows R to “become eligible as a romantic figure and a desirable life partner,” despite his zombie status for much of the film (Cieślak 159, 160).

R: A modern-day zombie Romeo

Identity formation is central to both Romeo and R. As the film opens, R is aimless as he walks through the airport and as he internally asks himself “what am I doing with my life?” (*Warm Bodies* 00:00:26-28). As he puts it, all he wants is “to connect” but instead, he is stuck in a literally lifeless existence where is stripped of his humanity and any connection to others (*Warm Bodies* 00:00:40). Through internal narration, his collection of human things (records, clothing, etc.), and his airplane, where he often retreats to, the film depicts “R’s individuality and his exceptional tendency for isolation and reflection, likening that to Romeo’s behaviour”

(Cieślak 167). Much like R, Romeo spends a lot of time alone, especially at the beginning of the play, which Lord Montague attests to in Act 1, Scene 1: “Away from light steals home my heavy son / And private in his chamber pens himself” (Shakespeare 140-141).

During the play’s opening, Romeo, who is forlorn because of Rosaline’s rejection, isolates himself from his family and friends while still yearning for connection through romance. When speaking to Benvolio, Romeo remarks that “I have lost myself. I am not here. / This is not Romeo. He’s some other where” because he does not have Rosaline’s love (lines 205 -206). He feels unsure of who he is as a person when he does not have romantic love in his life. I have already established that this can be seen in R as well, but he especially mimics this early heartbroken Romeo, through his internal narration, when Julie leaves him; the dejected R reminds himself that “all I’ll ever be is a slow, pale, hunched-over, dead-eyed zombie” (*Warm Bodies* 00:56:44-49). Both characters feel a sense of lost identity, but the love they find also enables them to create their own sense of self, with Romeo even declaring to Juliet, “call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized” (Shakespeare 2.2.54). For R, Julie essentially baptizes him by literally bringing him back to life, which allows him to see his worth, purpose, and humanity; she also baptizes him by bestowing the name “R” on him, with this naming echoing Juliet’s speech in which she ponders “what’s in a name?” (Shakespeare 2.2.45). According to *Warm Bodies*, what can be found in a name is one’s humanity.

Narrative Adaptation in *Warm Bodies*

Warm Bodies has obviously taken many creative liberties with *Romeo and Juliet*, but the film still incorporates many of the important story beats within the play. In Act 3 Scene 1, Tybalt

is killed by Romeo to avenge Mercutio, leading to Juliet's anguish for both the death of her cousin and the banishment of her love. I believe the film handles this through Julie's now-dead boyfriend, Perry, using his death and the eventual revelation of R's role in it as a stand-in for the grief and betrayal Juliet feels when her cousin is murdered, seen through Julie's reaction at finding out the truth. She ignores and then abandons R, with her leaving acting as a kind of banishment from humanity for R. This mirrors Romeo's banishment from Verona, which he describes as being "banished from the world," / And world's exile is death" (Shakespeare 3.3.20-21). The undead R has been exiled from humanity since he became a zombie, with Julie's presence bringing healing and a bridge to the world he had been cast out from. By abandoning him, he essentially returns to the self he was at the beginning of the film, but, with this exile, there is also the threat of permanent death for R, as we learn the healing Julie has initiated in him makes him a target for the Boneys.

Like all adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Warm Bodies* includes its own spin on the iconic balcony scene, though it takes place rather far into the narrative. Of course, the danger of being caught still lurks here, with the threat of death appearing in both the film and the script. However, the scene in the film is much shorter than it is in other adaptations, with the actual moment on the balcony coming in at around a minute and thirty seconds, compared to Franco Zeffirelli's nearly seven-minute scene in his version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Though the sequence is less of a drawn out, intimate, romantic moment, which is purposefully interrupted by Julie's friend, Nora, as a way of releasing tension and advancing the plot, the scene itself continues even though the location changes slightly. While at the front door, the film brings back the same non-diegetic music – soft, romantic strings that clearly invite audiences to read it as romantic – indicating it as an extension of the balcony scene, as does the private hug they share. It is

important to note the lack of a kiss here, which is typically a defining moment during Romeo and Juliet's meeting on the balcony. One reason for this change is because the kiss is what romantic comedies tend to build up to. Additionally, the act is paramount to R's final transformation from zombie to human, as we see at the end of the film. Instead, the hug that is used in its place as an intimate gesture also works to demonstrate R's physiological changes, with Julie remarking on how much warmer he feels. It is also likely that the filmmakers felt that a kiss must only be done once it is clear R is alive so as to avoid eliciting the discomfort or disgust associated with zombies.

While I have touched on her impact on Romeo in the play, I feel it is important to discuss the exclusion of Rosaline in *Warm Bodies*. I believe this change is clever for this particular narrative because, as we've discussed, there is already a barrier to access for R because of his zombie status, so making him likeable is key to having the story and romance work. For modern audiences, the switch from pining over someone to suddenly being infatuated with another is jarring and generally scrutinized; it does not make for a character people want to root for or see "get the girl," and this would be even harder to justify when that character is a zombie. Instead, the film decides to have Julie be in a romantic relationship with Perry at the beginning, and her falling for R does not feel as frivolous as Romeo falling for Juliet because it is also made clear that her relationship is fractured and distanced from the start.

Cinematic Techniques in *Warm Bodies*

Music, primarily in the diegetic form, plays a major role in *Warm Bodies*. For R, who struggles with speech for a large part of the film, the diegetic music acts as a tool for him to connect with Julie and convey his feelings. One notable moment is when Julie shares her grief about Perry's death; rather than attempt to console her or share words of wisdom, he puts on Bob Dylan's "Shelter from the Storm," a song that embodies his wish to protect her. In this way, his use of music is reminiscent of Romeo's fumbled attempts, in the form of poetic speeches, at professing his love for Juliet. Therefore, diegetic music takes the place of those speeches for R. It is a clever way of giving words to a being who struggles using them, while also working to, as Christian Metz puts it, "say" things that could be conveyed also in the language of words" but choosing to do so in a way that aligns with *Warm Bodies*' medium (Hutcheon 3). Because of how music is used in the film, it also helps to humanize R to both the audience and Julie. We can even see this in his introduction, as the music is non-diegetic but almost feels diegetic, like it could be playing in R's head as he moves through his surroundings, and this idea is especially viable once we learn of his indulgence in music. Even the non-diegetic music acts as a kind of storytelling device, functioning as a reflection of the characters' feelings/mindsets and a way for them to say what they may not be able to for any number of reasons. The diegetic music also acts as a mimesis of human life, which R so desires, with him even telling Julie he prefers records because they feel "more alive" (*Warm Bodies* 00:33:13-18).

Lighting and colors are another important part of *Warm Bodies*, as they tend to shift as the story develops. After Julie and R escape the airport, and most importantly, after R's dream, some vibrancy and warmth start to make an appearance in the film, and this change can primarily be noticed through R's red hoodie, a constant throughout the film. There is also more sunlight, which often represents new life and new beginnings. The last scenes of the movie, specifically

those narrated by R after the cure has taken hold, are vibrant and full of sunlight. Gone are the dull colors and cool hues. Instead, the visuals are filled with warm tones; it is full of life. This is also illustrated through the decision to have many of these scenes in nature or settings with more vegetation, rather than in the city. Cities often carry the connotation of feeling cold, lonely, and lifeless, as well as places of disconnection and distance. As humanity, life, and connection has been restored, so has the light, nature, and color in the world.

Intertextual Conversation

Hutcheon believes the rhizome, meaning the interconnected network of texts, is a key part of adaptation, explaining that the “interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging” requires “an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (8). *Warm Bodies* certainly engages with the adapted works in the *Romeo and Juliet* rhizome, namely Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*.

Within *Warm Bodies*, the beating, glowing heart is a central image that indicates the first changes in the zombies – the start of the cure. We can look to Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* to see a similar motif throughout, like through “the image of Jesus with a beaming heart on Tybalt’s shirt” or “the burning heart in a rose wreath” on Romeo’s shirt (Cieślak 170). The heart motif in Luhrmann’s adaptation is so pivotal to what Cieślak describes as the film’s “key visual tone” that it can also be seen “adorn[ing] its promotional materials” (170). As Hutcheon explains, “adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new,” which is why both films use the same motif in different ways (20). While the heart in both movies still calls attention to the romance that is central to the plot, they generally function differently as visual cues, as *Romeo + Juliet*’s heart motif has more of a religious connotation, as opposed to *Warm Bodies*’ use in a more literal,

biological way. Still, *Warm Bodies* is clearly recognizing its intertextuality by choosing to use a similar image.

As Klomp explains, *Warm Bodies*' "purification of life from death is a major revision" from Shakespeare's play and Luhrmann's adaptation (48). This "purification" is visually represented in the film through water, with water representing rebirth as well. For example, after R confesses to killing Perry and Julie leaves, R walks through the rain and actually feels cold, a signal of the physical healing he is undergoing because of his time with Julie. Later, during the makeover scene, R is shown showering, the water washing over his scarred body, and the visual simultaneously calls attention to his zombie status, his humanity, and his returning life force. Luhrmann's adaptation has many moments with water as well, like the first meeting between Romeo and Juliet in which the two see one another through the fish tank. In Luhrmann's script-centered adaptation, water calls attention to the purity of the love between Romeo and Juliet and the purification it will bring to their feuding families after their death.

The most notable moments featuring water, in both *Warm Bodies* and *Romeo + Juliet*, also include a kiss between the central characters. In *Romeo + Juliet*, the balcony scene takes place by a pool, with the two lovers falling into it together, just as they are falling in love, and it is here that they share their first kiss. In *Warm Bodies*, the kiss occurs towards the end of the film when R and Julie jump off a ledge into a pool to escape the Boneys, and the two share their first kiss, which fully brings R back to life. Therefore, true love's kiss is a symbol of rebirth – the total cure – with R and Julie's kiss in water purifying the plagued body and acting as a promise of a life and future for them all. This kind of rebirth is, of course, a flip from the play and script-centered adaptations in which, at the end, Juliet kisses Romeo in hopes of getting some of the poison from his lips so that she can die with him. Interestingly, in *Romeo + Juliet*, Luhrmann

decides to make the kiss mutual, as Romeo has not died yet, and so the two seal their lips and their fates together in death. However, R and Julie's kiss functions as a way of "reversing the play's final kiss of death" into one that is lifegiving (Cieslak 172).

Film Genre, Shakespeare, and the Perceptions of Art

Hutcheon notes that "to appeal to a global market or even a very particular one," adapted works "may have to alter the cultural, regional, or historical specifics of the text being adapted," and *Warm Bodies* clearly does so by combining two popular genres, horror and romantic comedy, with zombies specifically being an incredibly popular phenomenon at the time of its release, with *The Walking Dead* being one of the most notable examples (30). Wood posits that "the horror film is the most disreputable of the genres," and I believe romantic comedies could exist in that "disreputable" category as well (46). I find it interesting that the genres that *Warm Bodies* inhabits are often looked down upon or assumed to be reserved for simplistic works. I believe that, through my analysis, I have proven that the film is not simple but rather quite intentional in the choices it is making, especially as an adaptation. Though Hutcheon is not speaking on a specific genre, she calls attention to our tendency "to reserve our negatively judgmental rhetoric for popular culture, as if it is more tainted with capitalism than is high art," and Wood similarly names "commercial opportunism" as one reason for the bad rap the horror genre gets (Hutcheon 30-31, Wood 46).

While I have explained how *Warm Bodies* works as an adaptation, I think it is also important to understand how it functions within its genres. In the film, "the plague is presented as a disaster that causes the suffering of humans, as well as zombies" (Cieślak 160). Naturally, the human perspective in the film comes from Julie. Due to the zombie apocalypse, Julie has lost her mother, causing her father, the colonel, to become even more bitter and cynical. She notices

similar traits appear in Perry after his father becomes a zombie. Essentially, Julie sees them “as people who have lost some of their humanity, and are getting more dead than alive” due to their cold demeanors and brutal, battle-focused perspective on the world (Cieślak 169). This, as Robin Wood explains in the chapter “Disreputable Genre”, is “one of the traditional functions of the horror story... [to] force[s] us to confront the worst of which humanity is capable” (46). Since *Warm Bodies* enables the zombies to heal from their affliction, effectively “undoing the aspect that makes zombies so terrifying—that the transformation is irreparable and that it annihilates the human in the monster,” I think it is fair to include them and their actions in the horrors the film wants viewers to confront, perhaps not in a literal sense but as a vehicle for considering the violence humans are capable of inflicting upon others (Cieślak 161). However, because of its romantic comedy crossover, *Warm Bodies* takes it a step further and challenges viewers to consider how humanity can come back from even the worst existence.

The film points out this genre dichotomy through the phrase “exhume the whole world,” which is used within the film to mean reviving the world and saving it from the zombie affliction, though Perry points out that the actual definition of exhume is to dig up something buried, using a dead body as an example. Despite the contradicting word choice, Julie and R do “exhume” the world through their love. They uncover the hope that has laid deep and dormant in both humans and zombies and dig through the vacant space within the zombies to restart their hearts and bring memories to the surface. The kiss at the end of the movie is the catalyst for humanity’s healing because, with Julie’s reciprocation of the kiss, “she confirms not just her love but also humanity’s culpability in the plague’s destruction” (Klomp 55). The healing continues past that moment, however, as the communal bond between humans and zombies is key to the

cure truly working long-term. Therefore, *Warm Bodies* balances out its genres by depicting the best and worst of humanity and wrapping it all up in its happy ending.

Now, with the understanding of how *Warm Bodies* operates as an adaptation and as a horror/romantic comedy film, let us consider how each aspect comes together to bring a new perspective to the rhizomatic network it inhabits. According to Ting Cho Lau's "capacity view," its "primary feature that distinguishes low, middle, and high art is the accessibility of its significant aesthetic qualities to perceivers" (432). As previously stated, the horror and romantic comedy genres do not have the best public or critical perception, and so they would often be considered low art. One critique for these genres that Wood points out is the expectation for realism, but he asserts that "it is not the artist's function to reproduce reality but to comment on it by constructing a coherent world that relates to it" (47). Horror's use of the monstrous and romantic comedy's depiction of simplified, fairytale-like romances may not be realistic, but, at least in the case of *Warm Bodies*, it still manages create meaningful commentary on humanity, its fellow adaptations, and on Shakespeare as a playwright.

To consider how Shakespeare is being conversed with through *Warm Bodies*' adaptation of one of his most famous plays, I want to call attention to two facets of Shakespeare, one influenced by modern-day perceptions, and the other situated within the historical context and perspectives of Shakespeare's time. Today, Shakespeare is known around the world and is revered as a writer, and his work is surely considered high art. If we think back to Lau's explanation of what differentiates art, accessibility, then we can see why Shakespeare would inhabit the high art world; his plays are generally considered difficult for the average person to understand without significant knowledge or guidance. But, as Lau explains, "if a perceiver works to gain the background knowledge... then they could develop the responsive capacities

that would allow them to fully appreciate these works of art” (434). Looking back to the late 1500s/early 1600s, the high art label likely did not belong to Shakespeare. This is not to say his work was not well-received or respected, but it would have been tainted by the perceptions of playhouses, playwrights, and actors at the time. Playhouses welcomed all classes but were located on the outskirts of London and were often surrounded by brothels and cockfighting rings. They were not places of prestige, as some may have assumed, and his plays were able to be understood and enjoyed by commoners and royals alike.

With this context in mind, *Warm Bodies* clearly calls attention to the interesting contradiction between the traditional and historical beliefs about Shakespeare’s work through its own opposing genre choices; they are not typically put together, and especially not when one of the love interests is a monster. The film also occupies a space as a low art film – readily accessible to the general public – which is supported by the perception of its genres, while simultaneously having “significant aesthetic qualities that make them fitting for praise,” like its “character development, humor, dramatic tension, emotional stakes, etc.” (Lau 434). Not only does the film emphasize the dichotomy between Shakespeare’s work as high vs low art, but it also allows Shakespeare, and *Romeo and Juliet* specifically, to inhabit that low art space again in a new fashion; as Cieślak puts it “[Shakespeare] returns to life in the form of bits and pieces processed by the undead” (175).

Conclusion

Warm Bodies may not be the faithful *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation many wish for or expect, but it is a strong addition to the rhizomatic network and a great film on its own through its various cinematic techniques, such as its use of music, and its references to previous adaptations, like Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*. The movie makes clever connections to

William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, namely the characterization of R as Romeo and its take on the iconic balcony, as well as necessary changes from the play, like Rosaline being cut out entirely, with all of these choices working to serve the overall narrative and help it function as a successful and creative adapted work. Though its popular, but conflicting, genres, and its low art status, it also brings in interesting commentary on Shakespeare's work through the years.

Ultimately, *Warm Bodies* may happily live as a low art film, but it elevates itself under the surface, if one wishes to recognize it.

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