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## Juliet's Run as Seen on Screen: Reinterpretation of the Past Through Camera Lenses

**Abstract:** This article analyses Juliet's famous run from the filmed ballet performance *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>2</sup> and looks at the camera as a subject in history. As the *Angel of History*<sup>3</sup>, the movie camera is an open-eyed witness, looking into the past while having its back turned to the future. But the camera is more than a witness - it is simultaneously the executor of someone else's will and the narrator of its own story.

**Keywords:** Movie Camera, Film, Shakespeare's, *Romeo and Juliet*, Ballet, Movement

### Julijin tek na zaslonu: Reinterpretacija preteklosti skozi kamerino lečo

**Izveček:** Članek analizira slavni Julijin tek iz baletne predstave *Romeo in Julija*, pri tem pa kamero razume kot zgodovinski subjekt. Kot angel zgodovine filmska kamera nastopa kot priča odprtih oči, ki gleda v preteklost, s hrbtom pa je obrnjena v prihodnost.

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<sup>2</sup> The text is based on the following videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbc41CB1r5Y&t=3775s> (1.02.15-1.03.00) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlihOXSJTvY>

<sup>3</sup> *Angelus Novus*, a 1920 painting by Paul Klee, can be seen, for example here: <https://www.imj.org.il/sites/default/files/collections/Klee%2C%20Paul%2C%20Angelus%20Novus%2C%201920.jpg>

Kamera pa je več kot zgolj priča – istočasno je izvrševalec tuje volje in pripovedovalec lastne zgodbe.

**Ključne besede:** filmska kamera, film, Shakespearova Romeo in Julija, balet, gibanje

My gaze is never vacant  
my eye pitchdark and full  
I know what I must announce  
and many other things as well

“Greetings from Angelus” Gershom Scholem

## 1 CAMERA AS AN AGENT OF HISTORY

Cinema has become a metaphor for capturing reality. Cinematic images structure our memories of past events, and the movie camera is considered a unique means of delivering them to us. By interacting with the historical narrative, viewers acquire “memories” of events they did not experience and form their subjective perceptions. Historical films, like documentaries, express the values of a particular time and frame history in the ways requested by society (Cole 2020). By expanding the boundaries of today and providing a glimpse into the past, they shape our historical consciousness and thus become part of our cultural memory of past events, blending our personal experience with collective conceptions of history (Landsberg 2004). The goal of many movies is not factual accuracy but the creation of a memorable impression that helps us visualize and memorize the historical events and their participants (Greiner 2021).

Since the beginning of the movie’s era, we perceive history as the camera “chooses” to show us. Largely, the camera reflects the non-privatized public past, which is already in the mass consciousness (Landsberg 2003) – with directors, actors, scriptwriters, and cameramen acting on often un verbalized demands from the mass-

es, who need to see the history. It should be noted that creative revision and alteration of history, an attempt to comprehend the past in the language of paintings, historical novels, or theater, repeatedly challenged historiography before the advent of cinema, when, along with the emergence of new technological forms of spectacle, ideas about perception were transformed (Röttger 2017).

Films play a central role in making history accessible to a broader audience and influence our understanding of historical events and their participants. Walter Benjamin, in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1969, 4), said that Abel Gance (French film director, actor, and producer, 1889-1981) once exclaimed enthusiastically: “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films . . . all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions . . . await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate.”

Typically, historical films try to recreate the nuances of the era. Many movies have a dramatic canvas with central heroes easy to identify with – all of that enables them to leave a unique imprint in the spectators that brings about personal involvement with the past.

But there are movies with no certainty about their relationship to history that also shape our opinions and perceptions of how things were and who acted which way, long or only recently ago.

A ballet film based on Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the excellent examples of how a seemingly non-historical historical movie can create a personalized link with the past. Since we all know the storyline – a fiction since the moment of its inception by the author – it does not add much in terms of facts to our understanding of the depicted times. Still, through ingenious work of the cameraman and a brilliant interpretation by the lead actress, it compels the viewer to fantasize about the history and leaves us with an illusion of having had a glance at a beautiful

bygone. Does this film claim to be historical? It certainly doesn't. Instead, driven by our expectations, the camera reinforces and magnifies our desire to see the past as we have "pre-seen" it in our collective [un]consciousness.

*Romeo and Juliet* is a Soviet ballet film. It was staged at the Mosfilm studio in 1954 by director Leo Arnshtam and choreographer Leonid Lavrovsky based on the ballet of the same name by Sergei Prokofiev based on the tragedy of William Shakespeare. In 1955, the picture was awarded prizes at the VIII International Film Festival in Cannes for the best lyrical film and the cinematic interpretation of ballet and the outstanding skill of Galina Ulanova.

For the sake of brevity, let us analyze a small excerpt from this film - Juliet's famous run.

## 2 JULIET'S FAMOUS RUN

Ballet has strong ties with the Great Mute since they both share the absence of the need for words, admiration for the expressiveness of the human body, a touch of decadence, the desire to rise above reality. Ballet is a language that does not require translation but is understandable to many. So, it is in this universal language that the camera tells its concise and aesthetic story.

While aesthetic cinema is often rational, thoughtful, beautiful, somewhat cold, or even sterile, harmony balances the camera's aesthetic space. The camera works with image interpretation; composition relates to psychology and editing in the frame affects the viewer. We are so carried away by what is happening on the screen that we do not notice how our emotions are skillfully created. Juliet's run is defined expressively - the camera detects the scene's intensity, and lack of color takes on texture. Due to the light, the image looks three-dimensional: it breathes lyricism. Inspired by poetry, the running scene is exceptionally poetic.

Exaggerated physical performance seen in the whole picture emphasizes the drama and emotional weight of the action. Visual styling makes the movie resonate. But while the larger story itself attracts the audience, the reason a running scene is compelling is that the character is framed, and the camera is operated to tell its own story. How exactly does it do it?

The focus of this scene is on a movement. We perceive Ulanova moving with natural freedom, and the constant change in her gestures and steps enhances this perception. In this scene, dance is not just a technique for original artistic expression. We do not look at the movement from a polite distance; on the contrary - the camera reveals secrets to us, depriving the heroine of her personal space. The line between stage and hall blurs, throwing the spectator out of his/her comfortable chair in the stalls. The unusual angle forces the viewer to look from below into the radiant face of Juliet and look directly into her heart. Doors tinted on canvas lead to the mysterious; the stage visually shrinks and then rapidly swings open. One cannot but pay tribute to the subtle sense of space that underlies all these metamorphoses. Although the techniques used by the operators are not exclusive, in contrast to the specifics of theatrical production, they become original, even innovative. While leaving a beautiful, albeit cold look, the cinematic process does not spoil either the ballet or the performance in the film. The close-up, approaching excessively close, does not lose sight of the dance and at the same time reveals what was previously hidden by shadows at the back of the stage.

Restraint of feelings and words, pronounced with the help of facial expressions and gestures, is a feature of the created atmosphere; this is a different world, the world of the stage. Rigid frameworks limit the artist's ability to convey the idea of the work to the viewer. Still, they are pretty enough to demonstrate Juliet's feelings, desire to succumb to love, deviate from the rules, and find out real life.

Shakespeare's text is much richer and more violent than what movie directors could stage on the set. But even if excessive restraint did not allow actors to depict feelings so colorfully, all the same, what we observe is art. One glance at Juliet introduces the observer into a clouded mind, makes him plunge into the depths of the heroine's soul, and understand how vital this love is. Each movement of this short scene is symbolic; there are no empty, meaningless movements. The exquisite and very mannered image of the voiceless Eros is noticeable in the folds of her clothes. There is nothing superfluous in this scene; each element complements the other. The conceptual scenery emphasizes the insignificance of the world around the heroine. Architectural structures resemble illustrations and show that the significance of their presence here is not so great; the main thing is the events taking place against their background. The character is framed when the camera is allowed to tell its story.

All other Juliets run as if behind the train. Ulanova - Juliet alone runs to her beloved Romeo. If we look at how she runs through frames, we will see her hand stretching forward, wrapped in a cloak in such a way that a piece of it - precisely the length of her arm - sways as she runs. When Juliet runs, she also sways her hand. The swaying gesture, picked up by Ulanova for this character and repeated throughout the run, shows the audience what Juliet is feeling. Juliet manages to run to the side, and again everything repeats in the opposite direction. We can disassemble frames to understand how this scene was filmed, but where it came from remains secret. The cloak is visible to everyone, but what does it hide - nobody knows. The prolonged running scene of Juliet in the black cloak is specially done for the cinema and lasts longer than in the theater. And it creates a more profound impression on the movie viewer than on the theater spectator.

What are we looking for in the first place when judging a shot? Is it balance, leading lines, golden ratio, color, light, shapes? These

are all essential ingredients in good images, but the first thing we notice is movement. Running Ulanova - Juliet moves like no other, delivering a masterclass on motions and a unique way to combine them. The movement in this scene is surprising and cinematic. Even when Juliet is silent, there is something about her appearance that attracts attention. Her face is shot from below and brightened - this is an emotional trigger that works in any film, and her run is cinematic because the frame is full of it.

And finally, there is the movement of the cut. When you follow the movement, you don't see editing—the rhythm switches when the scene ends by completing something static and then cutting straight into motion. The camera move has a clear beginning, middle, end ending. The change in the direction characterizes the two runs filmed. As Juliet runs, the movement of the cloak cuts smoothly into the angle. With her hand outstretched and her contrasting cloak swaying behind her body, Juliet makes up a holistic image. Neatly distributed motion prevents the scene from looking flat, and there are no pointless camera angles.

Viewers already know from previous experience of reading the play or watching different representations of the story what this scene is about, so here the camera tries to convey it not through dialogue but precisely through the plasticity of the movement. And silence reinforces the subjectivity of the moment to make an intense scene even more potent, to show us, love, for example.

### 3 CONCLUSION

In the case of the *Romeo and Juliet* ballet movie, the camera leaves us with such a strong memory that we unconsciously start to think about the historical time in which the protagonists supposedly lived as we have seen it on the screen. We map the emotions and the ways to express them created by our contemporaries to the figures from distant times and have the mental comfort of assuming that our ancestors

thought, moved, and felt the same way as we do. While it might be an illusion, this reinterpretation of the past given to us through the camera lenses nevertheless links us with history. Further, it feeds our desire to have a shared narrative of our movement through the sands of times.

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