



“Everyone is Romeo and Juliet!” Staging dementia in *Wellkåmm to Verona* by Suzanne Osten[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intertextual dialog between Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) and the Swedish film *Wellkåmm to Verona* (2006) by Suzanne Osten. In the film adaptation, Verona no longer refers to an ancient town in Northern Italy that tries to control its passionate youth. Instead, it is the name of a residential home for older people where the dementia-afflicted Walter, former director of the Swedish Royal Theatre, stages *Romeo and Juliet* with his co-residents. The article explores the question what the film can do to its viewers in terms of overcoming the stigma attached to dementia. It focuses on the formal strategies that the film adaptation makes use of to imagine people with dementia other than lost selves during the staging of the canonical love story, ultimately entwining Eros and Thanatos.

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Introduction: love stories of dementia

Romeo and Juliet (1595) by Shakespeare, or the moving tale about the conflict between the desire of two adolescents¹ and their families' history of rivalry, forms part of Western cultural memory. The Swedish director Suzanne Osten uses Shakespeare's play as a crucial intertext for her film *Wellkåmm to Verona*² (Hansson & Osten, 2006). In this film adaptation, Verona no longer refers to an ancient town in Northern Italy, but is the name of a residential home for older people. Walter, former director of the Swedish Royal

Theatre and resident of the home, stages *Romeo and Juliet* with his co-residents. In doing so, he hopes to seduce Virginia, a diva who aspires to take up the role of Juliet for a last time. In the end, Virginia surrenders to Walter's advances. The final performance of Shakespeare's play, however, corresponds to the death of the director in a stylized fashion, and brings the love story to an end—so far, the film plot in a nutshell. Osten not only shifts the age of Shakespeare's main characters from young to old and transforms the setting of the play, but also portrays Romeo and Juliet as people with dementia. As such, her film forms part of the series of motion pictures that, from 1990 onwards, explicitly focus on the lives of people with dementia, such as *Iris* (Fox, Rudin, & Eyre, 2001) and *The Notebook* (Emmerich, Johnson, & Cassavetes, 2004).

Wulff (2008) has argued that most of these films are melodramatic love stories in which the people with dementia and their partners are portrayed as victims of a terrifying disease that gradually causes their separation. This separation can be overcome by a love miracle the moment the healthy caretaker temporarily succeeds in giving the partner with dementia the memory of their affection back. In *The Notebook*, for instance, the demented Allie remembers sometimes briefly that she is the woman in the romance that her husband Noah reads to her in order to enhance moments of lucidity. Collective memories are the foundation of a couple's identity, which explains why the forgetting of them by one of the

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¹ *Romeo and Juliet* is considered to be a play about adolescence (Kahn, 1980), contrary to other plays such as *Othello* (1602–1604) and *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* (1599) which serve well to study modern views of age and aging (Lenker & Lipscomb, 2002; Lipscomb, 2001).

² *Wellkåmm to Verona* is available on DVD with English subtitles, distributed by Paramount Home Entertainment (Sweden) AB.

partners is such a suitable point of departure for dramatic conflict in film. Films about the violation of love by dementia, consequently, do not so much concentrate on the lives of the main characters in the here and now but tend to wallow in nostalgia over a shared past that is deteriorating. Wulff typifies such films as weepies because they in the first place aim to move the audience. Basting (2009) goes so far as to describe how the viewers, while watching *The Notebook* and *Iris*, feel “violated alongside” (p. 44) the characters that experience a “Shakespearean fall from great heights” (p. 41). With this phrase, she refers to the tragic decline of exceptional talent, intellect, and/or love, mostly of people in the public eye whose fate seems especially cruel to everyday folks.

Contrary to Wulff’s article that is more of a genre characterization, one of the assumptions of Basting’s book is that mainstream films involuntarily can contribute to the continuation of the stigma attached to dementia, especially when they are told as one-sided, tragic stories of loss. This stigma builds in our hypercognitive society (Post, 1995) on the idea that cognitive disabilities, such as memory loss, inevitably imply the dissolution of the self (Hughes, Louw, & Sabat, 2006). There are only a few lengthy accounts of what a dementia film really can do for viewers to overcome their feelings of fear and disgust. One such example is the essay of Anderson (2010) in which he testifies to his response to the biopic *Iris*. Anderson uses the metaphor of the journey to describe how he alternately identified with the writer Murdoch, losing her mastery over language and reasoning, and her husband’s sentiments of love and hatred toward her decline. In the mirroring of the complex and ambivalent feelings of the main characters, Anderson argues, the key to subverting the dementia stigma is to be found: “It is by recognizing ourselves or the potential for us to become them – that unpleasant part we have disowned and put into someone else – that might start to shift stigma” (p. 1296). Even in a film like *Iris*, classified as a “tightly told tragedy of dementia” by Basting (2009, pp. 40–45), Anderson could move beyond pessimism and find hope, care and compassion.

Osten seems to have identified the theme of impossible love as the similarity between love stories threatened by dementia and *Romeo and Juliet*.³ Her film foregrounds a pair of lovers (former artists even), but the way the story of these lovers is handled, differs from other dementia films. *Well-kåmm to Verona* is a narrative about *new* instead of *old* love. It brings into focus how older people with disabilities can communicate and interact by putting Shakespeare’s famous love story on stage, and, therefore, is a particularly inviting case study. Scholars have turned to filmic and literary accounts in order to find support for theories of personhood in dementia (e.g. Aquila & Hughes, 2006; Kontos, 2003; Leibing, 2006). Few of them have a background in literary theory, film or performance studies (e.g. Basting, 2009; Chivers, 2011; Hartung, 2009; Maierhofer, 2010) and start from the fictionality of these accounts, i.e., the way they present a world in text and images that is not to be confused with a mirror of reality. Consequently, the interconnection

between formal characteristics (form) of films and novels on the one hand, and their representation of dementia (content) on the other, remains underexposed.

Therefore, I intend to offer an in-depth analysis of *Well-kåmm to Verona*’s dialog with *Romeo and Juliet* exploring the way in which the film implements strategies to reduce the stigma attached to people with dementia. The analysis is an example of age studies that not only gives insight in the way ideologies operate in a given visual narrative but as well helps us think aging and dementia better (Gullette, 2006). The first section of the paper explains how the adaptation of Shakespeare’s prologue positions the film audience and fosters certain expectations about the story that will follow. The second section offers a diagnosis of the main characters on the basis of their identifiable neuropsychiatric symptoms and describes the relationship between the character of Walter and his daughter. The third section examines Walter’s artistic vision in relation to the famous balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet*. The fourth section analyzes the techniques that the film adaptation makes use of to imagine the person with dementia other than a lost self during the staging of the play. The fifth section concentrates finally on the film’s ending and the main character’s death.

The chronotope of the Old Folks’ Home

In the city of Verona, Romeo and Juliet are caught between the weight of their family’s history and personal longings. The audience of the play is, from the very beginning, familiar with the tragic outcome of their story because of Shakespeare’s choice of a particular framing (Davis, 2001). In the sonnet-prologue, the chorus already predicts that the young lovers will die a *healing* death because it will put an end to the long-standing feud between Capulets and Montagues:

Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross’d lovers take their life;
Whole misadventured piteous overthrows
Do with their death bury their parents’ strife.

(Shakespeare, 1997, p. 872/Prologue 1–8)

However, the greatest enemy of Romeo and Juliet is time, whose merciless progress intrudes on the moments of bliss they spent together, and contributes to a chain of unfortunate events (McAlidon, 1996).⁴ Time rushes forward toward the

³ Precisely for this reason, Gülsah Dogan’s documentary (2007), awarded in the European Boundless Media Contest, is named *Romeo and Juliet*. The film shows how Dogan’s Turkish uncle takes care of his dementia-afflicted wife who spent a lifetime caring for him.

⁴ For this reason, Derrida (1992) introduced the concept of *countertime* of which the French equivalent refers both to unfortunate timing and to an unexpected accident.

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