

Two Film Versions of *Othello*: A Twentieth-century Approach to Shakespeare's Play

María José Álvarez Faedo

Universidad de Oviedo

After the earliest known performance of *Othello*, at the court of King James I on November 1, 1604, the numerous times it has been performed ever since have contributed to the play's enduring popularity. Orson Welles (1952) and Oliver Parker (1995) directed two of the twelve film versions of *Othello*. The former starred by Orson Welles himself, and the latter, by Laurence Fishburne.

This paper will analyse the different ways those directors approach William Shakespeare's great play *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* — and how they deal with the various subjects present in it, such as the hatred and fear of the alien (provoked not just by his blackness, but by the historical implications of the military action between Turkey and Venice in the 1570s), ambition, honour and revenge.

Othello was a great success in Shakespeare's time, and since then, it has remained one of the most popular plays on the English stage. This paper will also explore the reasons for that phenomenon.

Welles approaches *Othello* in a film which aims at reconciling theatrical drama with the realism of non-theatrical spatial elements. The theatricality of constructed décor gives way to the realism of sea and sky, and to the architectural polarities of Venice and Mogador. The film also gains its special adaptive stature from Welles's cinematic language, which is fused with the dramatic energy of the play, and in Jorgens's words (1977: 175) contributes to "the cosmic sense of a fallen world".

As a guiding adaptive principle for *Othello*, Welles sought to base the film upon what, according to him, was underlying the text. That might be the reason why Bosley Crowther (1955: 27) wrote an unfavourable review of that production in the *New York Times*, in which he asserts that "The text and even the plot of the original were incidental to the dark and delirious passions enclosed in its tormented theme" and that Welles's interest is primarily in "the current of hate and villainy", which was precisely what Welles had aimed at.

On his part, Donald Phelps (1955: 32), in a much more tolerant review of the film for *Film Culture*, recognises the same Wellesian audacity and observes that Welles's commendable courage lies precisely in his attempt "not to make his film an accompaniment to Shakespeare's writing ... but to use the writing — what he saw fit to retain of it — as an accompaniment to the feeling of excited surprise with which Shakespeare apparently inspired him". For Phelps, the significance of Welles's *Othello* lies in its being "not a duplication, not a parallel, but a re-creation in cinematic terms, inspired by those emotions and images in the original to which the artist has responded."

The editing in *Othello* is so tight that scenes involving experienced actors are insistently broken up into shots from different perspectives. Eric Bentley (1995: 22) asserts, of Welles's own portrayal of Othello, that:

he never acts, he is photographed — from near, from far, from above, from below, right side up, upside down, against battlements, through grating, and the difference of angle and background only emphasizes the flatness of that profile, the rigidity of those lips, the dullness of those eyes, the utter inexpressiveness and anti-theatricality of a man who, God save the mark! was born a theatrical genius.

Bentley is essentially a theatre critic and he tends to denigrate the film for its failure to satisfy a specifically theatrical expectation. The truth of his perception here lies in the fact that Welles's understanding of cinematic space legitimately makes the actor part of the composition, or manipulated space, and not as in the theatre, a manipulator of space. The adaptation of *Othello* is achieved not merely by placing actors in a non-theatrical spatial context, but by treating both actors and dramatic space with the spatial resources of cinematic photography.

There is no doubt that Welles's intention is to move away from the conventional narrative flow to dissect dramatic action, and there is no doubt either that when Eric Bentley (1955: 21-22) complains that Welles "shows no sense of narrative, that is, of the procession of incidents, but only an interest in the ... separate moments within the incidents", he has identified the film's intention. Unlike Parker, whose objective, by following the narrative, is to make Shakespeare accessible to the audience, Welles addresses his *Othello* to an audience whose familiarity with the plot, if not with the text of the play, is assumed

If Welles tends to juxtapose black and white images and allow the resultant effect to mature in the mind of the viewer, Parker, by means of colour, and perhaps influenced by Yutkevich's film of 1955, "presents us with some unforgettable images in which natural elements — stone, sky and sea — do become a chorus in the dramatic development" (Davies 1995: 208). Especially meaningful, in that sense, are the images of the sea, which demonstrate that a motif can work as powerfully in setting as it can in poetry.

In the opening sequences, Welles establishes a major vein along which the film will penetrate into the play:

Wells intersplices the funeral processions of Othello and Desdemona with shots of Iago dragged by chains through crowds of screaming Cypriots. Guards throw him into an iron cage and haul him to the top of the castle walls. We witness the world momentarily from Iago's perspective, the cage spins as it hangs, the crowd screams, and, as long as we're with Iago, the stately rhythm of the procession is lost. In the prologue, Welles develops his temporal theme by realising the opposing rhythms of Othello and Desdemona on the one hand and Iago on the other. (Buchman 1987: 54)

Wells manages to incorporate immense oppositions into the film: the apparent disappearance of the funeral procession into darkness at the end of the opening sequence, set against the hoisting of the caged Iago into the merciless glare of Mediterranean sunlight. And there is the superbly inventive use which Welles makes of his Mogador location so that the play becomes truly filmic in its dramatisation of

space and the relation of sea, sky, stone, light, shadow and darkness to character and momentary situation. Welles's ability to keep alive motifs at important moments in the film gives the whole work suggestions of a "visual opera", like Iago's cage, the trap motif — which recurs in the shadowed bars that cut across the frame — or the pattern of links on the stone floor where for a moment the solitary Desdemona stands, a motif which culminates in the closely woven cloth stretched over Desdemona's face as Othello smotheres her on the bed.

The motif Parker uses in his production is a chessboard, a very powerful metaphor, because both Othello and Desdemona are the chess-pieces Iago is playing with whenever he appears as a narrator of what is to come, in the director's successful attempt to give him the foretelling function the Chorus had in Greek tragedies — and Shakespeare also used in other plays, as, in *Henry V*, for example. Parker's Iago can foretell Othello's fate because he controls all his figures' movements, and he plays with them at will.

Thus, where Welles was experimenting, Parker offers a conventional, but convincing and well-done film, which approaches Shakespeare's text with due respect. He avoids protagonism by means of his good, effective, though not defiant direction. There are no spectacular effects in this production, just an elegant and sober setting. It is, all in all, a well made film where nothing outstands, but everything is important: a fascinating production of the deep feelings and passions present in Shakespeare's drama.

Those feelings and passions spring naturally from the situations which explore the different subjects of the play:

Issues of race and colour were important to Shakespeare's *Othello* in the 17th century, and have remained so ever since. "Blackness had been associated with sin and death in a tradition extending back to Greek and Roman times, and in medieval and later religious paintings evil men and devils were regularly depicted as black." (Wells 1997: 245). Othello is the earliest sympathetic black character in English literature, and the play's emphasis on prejudice must have had particular impact in Shakespeare's London, which was a distinctive prejudiced society. Though Africans were present in London in some numbers beginning around 1550 — especially once the English slave trade grew in the 1560s — little distinction was drawn between North African and sub-Saharan blacks. Africa and Africans had figured in English drama from an early date; lots of 16th-century plays evoked African settings or characters, though most of them did it from a racist point of view, depicting Africans in stereotypes as idle, lustful, and likely to be treacherous.

This was the ideology of the English society as a whole, thus in 1599 and 1601 the government made an effort to deport all of the "Negars and Blackamores which crept into this realm."

Othello's place in the society of Venice plays an important, role in his downfall. As Brabantio's response to Desdemona's marriage makes clear, Venice is a closed society, racist in its distrust of Othello. There are also historical implications for this distrust. In 1570 the Turks had attacked the Venetian protectorate of Cyprus, and conquered it the following year — once more the religious confrontation between infidels and Christians —; and in the play, the rulers of the city appoint precisely a Turk as general of the Venetian forces and send him to Cyprus. Iago is the proof that not everybody in Venice agreed with that paradoxical choice.

Venice is a world influenced by inhumane commercial and political values that cannot appreciate Othello's virtues and, as a consequence, the general is isolated from the world he has married into.

Iago can convince him that Desdemona might "repent" the "foul disproportion" (III.iii.243, 238) of a mixed marriage, and Othello lacks the assurance of a respectable social position that might temper the fear of rejection that his jealousy feeds on.

The racial prejudice of Shakespeare's Venice is important. Brabantio's belief that Desdemona could not love "the **sooty** bosom / of such a thing" (I.ii.71-72) is based on the racist assumption that such love would be "against all rules of nature" (I.iii.101). Iago and Roderigo have stimulated Brabantio's rage with labels such as "old black ram" (I.i.88), "Barbary horse" (I.i.113-14), and "lascivious Moor" (I.i.126), associating race with animals, sex, and the devil, characteristically racist connotations, even today. No one disputes Brabantio's statement that Desdemona has subjected herself to "general mock" (I.ii.70) by marrying a black man; prejudice is plainly widespread in Venice.

Shakespeare certainly expected Othello to be played by a white man in make-up, and that is precisely what Orson Welles presents in his production; but in the last decade of the 20th century, the social pressures of an increasingly multiracial society are making it less likely that this will happen, as Oliver Parker proves, by choosing one of the great actors of our time, Laurence Fishburne, who plays an extraordinary, flexible and even moving Othello.

Hatred for the moor, ambition and revenge are subjects dealt with in the play, as well as three qualities innate to one of its characters: Iago. As regards the 1952 production, the camera illuminates the architecture of the play and creates relationships between character, motivation, action and the world, through that architectural articulation of space. However, only Iago's character is of major psychological interest, while the rest of the film portrays the disintegration of Othello's heroic world.

A terrible loneliness exists within him [Iago] ... Welles shows him lurking at the back of the church where Othello and Desdemona are married ... Time after time, the wind blows his hair about his face, making him look like some predatory animal ... Welles shows him repeatedly in a superior position, forever gazing down on his victims from the battlements.(Cowie 1973: 119)

According to Jorgens (1977: 176-77), there can be detected two main styles in Welles's film: the Othello style — simplicity, grandeur and hyperbole —, and Iago style — distorted perspectives, tortured compositions and grotesque shadows:

The juxtaposition of the two styles is established in the initial shots of the film, as the camera frames Othello's face on the funeral bier at a contorted angle, following this with a long shot of the orderly, elegiac procession moving across the frame from left to right. These shots are abruptly cut to reveal Iago chained and dragged as he darts through the angry crowd and is forced into the small cage. The close-up shots of Iago through the cage bars and the vertiginous shots from the cage as it swings, prefigure [...] the ironically elevated perspective of Iago's

view of the world he infects with his acutely calculated manipulation.
(Davies 1994:106)

In fact, Welles is trying to show that the line between barbarous ambition and honour — another subject in the play—, which implies civil order is very thin. Therefore, when Othello thinks his honour has been betrayed, that is, when honour disappears, he tries to regain it through revenge, which will bring about only chaos.

Influenced by Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, through different architectural styles Welles explores the relationship of individual man and his moral confidence to established cultural order:

The civilized order which holds Iago in check is symbolized by the rich, harmonious architecture, sculptures of heroic man, placid canals and the elaborate symmetrical altar at which Othello and Desdemona are married. Visually, people are dwarfed by an old and massive order which, if it cannot eliminate human conflict and suffering, can prevent gross injustice and provide a framework for happiness. Within this civilized order, Othello is completely in command of himself, moves and speaks to his own rhythms. (Jorgens 1977: 179-180)

When Othello is removed and isolated from the art, luxury and institutions of honourable Venice, he is prey to ideas which dissolve every vestige of his own earlier certainties. That change is also shown by the use of light and darkness, and the change of perspective during the filming process: when Iago delivers his discourse on the frailty of man's perception and the danger of jealousy, Othello's reactions are shot, first, from a low angle with his profile against the sky, and then with his face darker and contorted with the first signs of paranoia and confusion, from a higher camera position — suggesting his submission to Iago. "Welles's manipulation of the two men in space and in relation to the natural outdoor sunlight is part of the general strategy whereby Iago moves into oblique light and Othello into the trap of darkness." (Davies 1994: 110).

Welles arranges Othello's striking Desdemona in the presence of Lodovico and the emissaries from Venice so that Othello's hand moves across the frame to slap Desdemona's face as she approaches looking directly into the camera. It is ingenious, unexpected and effective. But it does not impress us as much as does the same moment in Oliver Parker's 1995 production, when a tender, loving, caring and passionate Othello, already poisoned by Iago's venomous words, slaps violently and unexpectedly Irene Jacob's sweet face, who cannot understand that sudden change in her beloved husband.

But Welles's film reaches total darkness with the strangulation of Desdemona. There is only the barest minimum of light in the scene, virtually shot in black-on-black, with just some glinting points of light on Othello and Desdemona. "Othello, after the discovery of the murder, is framed in long shot looking upward at the incredulous faces which stare down at him from a roof trap-door, as though he were at the bottom of a dark well of isolation." (Davies 1994: 111).

Oliver Parker's production relies on his characters when it comes to express the afore-mentioned feelings of hatred, ambition and revenge, rather than on the mastery of technical experimentalism and special effects of the 1952 production.

If Welles opened the film with the corpse of the protagonist in his burial procession, Parker opens with the happy image of Othello and Desdemona furtively hurrying to their marriage by boat along the canals.

Next we see Iago — offended because Othello has chosen to promote Cassio instead of him — peeping through the church's lattice to see with his own eyes — his heart flooded with rage and thirst for revenge — that Desdemona is really marrying the Moor — which also hints at the possibility of his secretly being in love with her. From that moment onwards, we witness how Iago's mind and intuition work overtime as he intrigues to bring about Othello's downfall. Kenneth Branagh's Iago is intense in his evil wickedness, and wonderful in his show of innocence, love and concern for his master-friend, when he is in the company of Othello.

Iago's insistence on the power of reason over passion, or instinct, is indeed a sign of his villainy. On the other hand, Laurence Fishburne's Othello radiates a world of romantic, heroic, and picturesque adventure. All about him is highly coloured. He is a Moor; he is noble and generally respected, and he is proud in the reaches of his honourable achievement. Yet, the dominant quality in this production is the exquisitely moulded language and the noble cadence of Othello's poetry. Rather than reflecting a soldier's language, his speech evokes the quality of soldiership in all its glamour of romantic adventure. It has the exotic beauty of a romantic treasure-house of rich, colourful experiences, which Desdemona is listening to — absolutely infatuated both by the storyteller himself and by the accounts of his adventures.

Othello is a compound of highly-coloured, romantic adventure — he is himself 'coloured' — and war; together with a great pride and a great face in those realities. His very life is dependent on a fundamental belief in the validity and nobility of human action [...] Othello, as he appears in the action of the play, may be considered the high-priest of human endeavour, robbed in the vestments of romance, whom we watch serving in the temple of war at the altar of love's divinity. (Knight 1995: 107)

During the action, as Iago's plot succeeds, Desdemona's essential divinity changes, for Othello, to its antithesis, that is, to something devilish. From that moment on, there is a drastic change in the Moor. Orson Welles turned him into a merciless punishing judge and executor, but Laurence Fishburne, always closer to Shakespeare's mind and to his character's heart, shows a man whose heart has been broken, a man who, deep in love, feels betrayed, but, at the same time, cannot stop loving the traitor. He knows he must defend his honour, but he shrinks at the thought of perpetrating such an awful deed against his beloved Desdemona. Parker shows that inner hesitation in a wonderful scene, where we listen to Othello's wonderful speech while we see him sweat and shudder, his heart hesitating once and again, and tears running down his desolate face.

When he finally kills her, and then finds out the truth, he commits suicide, and while he dies, he kisses his innocent martyr passionately and expires beside her. And the shot shows a beautiful scene, with the two lovers on the bed, Emilia also lying dead beside her mistress, and Iago, but he, the villain, lying at their feet. The final shot is a really romantic one, completely different from that of Welles's production, which closed with the tragic darkness the gothic image of the battlements and Othello's and Desdemona's corpses being carried in their burial procession, followed by the shot of the reflection of Iago's cage on the water, insisting on Iago's

distorting evil. In the 1995 production, a boat slowly sails towards a red sky — a symbol of the lovers' passion, but also of the dusk of their lives —, and interrupting its progress, we see the Venetians sending Othello's and Desdemona's corpses, forever joined with garlands and flowers, to the depths of the sea — as it became great generals —, in a final show of love and respect for them.

This is a play of contrasts: Iago cynicism is opposed to Othello's idealism, his intellect of Othello's instinct, his faith in reason to Othello's dependence on trust, and his dismissal of love to Othello's commitment to it. And it is precisely to the emotions generated by these contrasts — its capacity to arouse pity as well as terror through the pathetic suffering of Desdemona and the tragic corruption of Othello —, that the play owes its enduring popularity over the centuries.

What we have stated so far contributes to making Welles's *Othello* an unforgettable filmic experience. Yet, for all that, the film — even the newly restored version of 1992 — is further removed from the play in the nature of its impact than are most other Shakespeare film adaptations from their source plays. Despite the brilliance of Welles's cinematic resourcefulness, the film lacks an intensity of theatricality which the play demands.

Welles's *Othello* invites us to respond primarily to the image. Shakespeare's *Othello*, more perhaps than any other of his plays, insists that we relate — at times obsessively — with the actor and with the character, and that is precisely Oliver Parker's great achievement.

References

- Bennet, S. 1996: *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past*. London, Routledge.
- Bentley, E. 1955: *Othello* of Film and Stage. *New Republic* 3 October: 21-22.
- Boose, L. E. & Burt, R. eds. 1997: *Shakespeare, The Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV and Video*. London, Routledge.
- Boyce, C. 1990: *Shakespeare from A to Z: The Essential Reference to his Plays, his Poems, his Life and Times, and More*. New York, Delta.
- Buchman, L. M. 1987: Orson Welles's *Othello*: A Study of Time in Shakespeare's Tragedy. *Shakespeare's Survey* 39: 53-65.
- Buchman, L. 1991: *Still in Movement: Shakespeare on Screen*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Collick, J. 1989: *Shakespeare. Cinema and Society*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Coursen, H. R. 1992: *Shakespearean Performance as Interpretation*. Newark, University of Delaware Press.
- Cowie, P. 1973: *A Ribbon of Dreams: The Cinema of Orson Welles*. South Brunswick.
- Crowl, S. 1992: *Shakespeare Observed: Studies in Performance on Stage and Screen*. Athens, Ohio University Press.

- Crowther, B. 1955: Review of *Othello*. *New York Times*. 13 September: 27.
- Davies, A. 1994 (1988): *Filming Shakespeare's Plays. The Adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook and Akira Kurosawa*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, and S. Wells. 1995 (1994): *Shakespeare and the Moving Image*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Donaldson, P. S. 1990: *Shakespearean Films / Shakespearean Directors*. Boston, Unwin Hyman.
- Easthope, A. de. *Contemporary Film Theory*. London, Longman.
- Eckert, C. W. ed. 1972: *Focus on Shakespeare Film*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall.
- Hankey, J. 1987: *Othello*. Bristol, Bristol Classical Press.
- Jorgens, J. 1977: *Shakespeare on Film*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Knight, G. W. 1995 (1930): *The Wheel of Fire. Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy*. London, Routledge.
- Manvel, R. 1971: *Shakespeare and the Film*. London, Dent.
- McKernan, L. & Terris, O. eds. 1994: *Walking Shadows: Shakespeare in the National Film and Television Archive*. London, British Film Institute.
- Nelmes, J. de. 1996: *An Introduction to Film Studies*. London, Routledge.
- Parker, O. 1995: *Othello*. UK. Castle Rock Entertainment. C. 119'.
- Phelps, D. 1955: Review of *Othello*. *Film Culture* 1.1: 32.
- Rothwell, K. S. and A. H. Melzer 1990: *Shakespeare on Screen: An International Filmography and Videography*. London, Mansell.
- Skoller, D. 1968: Problems of Transformation in the Adaptation of Shakespeare's Tragedies from Playscript to Cinema. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University.
- Welles, O. 1952: *Othello*. USA, Mercury Productions, United Artists. B/W. 91'.
- Wells, S. & G. Taylor. 1990 (1988): *William Shakespeare. The Complete Works*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Wells, S. 1996 (1986): *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, S. 1997 (1994): *Shakespeare: The Poet and His Plays*. London, Methuen.