



Iago's soliloquies adapted on screen: the reworking of Iago's character in an adaptation and two appropriations of *Othello*.

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In this essay I will discuss how screen versions of *Othello* present the character of Iago, focusing in particular on Iago's soliloquies, as they are symbolic of the character's significant role in the play. I will analyse one adaptation of the play, namely Orson Welles's *Othello*, and two appropriations, specifically Geoffrey Sax's *Othello* and Tim Blake Nelson's *O*.¹ I will thus argue that the ways in which Iago's soliloquies have been reshaped in my chosen films is indicative of the way the director aims for the audience to perceive the character's motives and actions. As each film's treatment of the soliloquies varies significantly, I will show that the amount of power Iago is given varies as a result. I will also briefly discuss each movie's treatment of socio-political issues, specifically race and social status, in order to outline the power dynamics between Iago and Othello.

While Welles's *Othello* can be defined as an adaptation on account of its dependence upon the source play, Sax's *Othello* and Nelson's *O* can be considered appropriations due to their reshaping of the play, specifically through the use of modern language and the shift to different genres and settings.² In spite of the racial tensions present in America at the time Welles's *Othello* was produced (mid-20th century), Welles divests his film of most of the racial elements present in the play.³ Welles's choice to discard the racial quality intrinsic to the Shakespearean play almost completely erases Othello's otherness, and by extent allows the character to retain a sense of authority that is not significantly undermined by a perceived racial inferiority. Welles's treatment of Iago's soliloquies is consistent with his choice to foreground Othello's character and grant him authority. Soliloquies are able to generate empathy between audience and character, due to the audience being privy to the character's private reflections and emotions, and their being able to adopt their perspective. Iago's crucial role in the source play is, then, undoubtedly defined by the frequent soliloquies he delivers throughout the play. As is noted by Hatchuel, 'not a single soliloquy of Iago is left intact' in Welles's *Othello*, as they are instead cut into fragments and integrated into the dialogue.⁴ Welles's depriving Iago of his soliloquies strips the character of the connection he has with the audience in the play, bringing Othello to the fore instead. For instance, Iago's 'I hate the Moor' soliloquy is entirely reshaped, becoming 'I have told thee often, and I retell thee again and again, I hate the Moor; I'll poison his delight', followed by a dialogue between him and Roderigo. Not only does Iago's statement lack the implication that Othello has had sexual encounters with Iago's wife Emilia, –present in the play– but it is also Iago's first utterance in the film, immediately establishing the character's role as a villain.⁵ Accordingly, as the line is spoken the character's back is to the camera, giving him the appearance of a shadow, further

¹ *Othello*, dir. Orson Welles (Mercury Productions, 1951), *YouTube*, 31 January 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09NWcKA7JKw>> [accessed 7 January 2018]; *Othello*, dir. Geoffrey Sax (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2001) [on DVD]; *O*, dir. Tim Blake Nelson (Chickie the Cop, 2001) [on DVD].

² Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 26.

³ James W. Stone, 'Black and White as Technique in Orson Welles's *Othello*', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 30:3 (2002), 189-93 (p. 189).

⁴ Sarah Hatchuel, *Shakespeare, from Stage to Screen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 77.

⁵ Shakespeare, William, *Othello*, ed. by E.A.J. Honigmann (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996) I.3. 386-7 <<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781408160206.00000010>> [Accessed 10 January 2018].

enhanced by the effect of black and white filmmaking. The medium shot also enables the audience to see the character's hooded figure in relation to his surroundings, namely the inside of a church, as well as the diegetic sound of the organ, further emphasising his devilish role. During Iago's subsequent conversation with Roderigo, the camera frames him from low angle shots, giving him authority particularly in contrast with the high angle shot of Othello and Desdemona on the gondola.

Sax's British crime drama offers a striking contrast to Welles's film, as it adapts Iago's soliloquies by having the actor portraying Iago break the fourth wall and directly address the audience. This enables the character to retain a close relationship with the audience, becoming their 'candid informant and confidant', as he is defined by Cartelli and Rowe.⁶ The audience are thus captivated by the character's forthrightness, which draws the audience in and invites them to adopt his perspective. The character is effectively the protagonist of the film, as the events are mediated through his perspective: his soliloquies open and end the action, and emphasise his point of view throughout. Accordingly, the soliloquy delivered by Ben after being made aware of John's new role as Commissioner –the role that had been intended for Ben- can be regarded as an adaptation of Iago's 'I hate the Moor' soliloquy, and fully conveys the character's anger and jealousy. The moments leading up to the soliloquy are punctuated by the non-diegetic sound of bells, symbolically representing John's tragic fate, sealed by his acceptance of the job. The character is transported to a different location through a quick wipe transition, as multiple following shots trace his fast-paced walk through the police station. The quick jump cuts convey the character's rage and frustration and can be disorienting for the viewers, who experience the character's inner turmoil as he delivers his speech and physically expresses his emotions through violent and extreme gestures. This is further highlighted by the incessant –most likely only partially diegetic- sound of ringing telephones accompanied by ominous non-diegetic music. The camera alternates between straight-on and low angle shots, providing mostly medium close-ups and close to extreme close-ups, as well as a single medium long shot. The camera thus allows the audience to view the character from multiple perspectives, symbolising the audience's access to the character's unfiltered thoughts. The close-ups and extreme close-ups are specifically used to emphasise significant parts of his speech, such as 'you owe me everything', and, notably, his final exclamation: 'how could I love you now'. The audience's deep insight into the character's thoughts during the soliloquy is conveyed through the use of a claustrophobic setting that represents the character's mind.

As in Sax's *Othello*, the Iago character in Nelson's *O* becomes the protagonist of the film, as most of the events are mediated through his perspective, though his soliloquies are only present at the beginning and at the end of the film. Part of Iago's 'I hate the Moor' soliloquy in the play is incorporated into the soliloquy Hugo delivers at the start of the film. The film begins through a fade-in, and, as the camera is initially out of focus, the audience is only able to see the contrast between the colour white against a black background, anticipating the racial symbolism present in the film. Through a gradual focus in, we identify the whiteness of the image as belonging to white doves, as harmonious non-diegetic music plays in the background. The character's short soliloquy expresses his inability to 'live like a hawk', as the cause of his jealousy. Through a fade-out and a following fade-in, we are shown an image of a hawk and then an extreme close-up of Odin's face. Owing to the avian –and racial- symbolism we are then able to recognise Hugo as a white dove and Odin as the hawk, and by extent the cause of Hugo's jealousy and discontent, as his inability to 'fly' is directly paralleled to Odin's ability to do so. Nelson's *O* fully exploits the fascinating dichotomy between the power held by Odin in relation to his social status and his perceived racial inferiority. The film emphasises the ethnicity of the character by setting the action in a circumscribed environment, where he is almost exclusively surrounded by white individuals. The film thus exploits contemporary media stereotypes in depicting Odin (*Othello*) as both a

⁶ Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe, *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 124.

young and successful black athlete as well as an individual with the potential to be violent, and with a history of drugs.⁷ Therefore, the film makes use of the character's ethnicity to estrange him from his environment and identify him as 'other', while his status as a successful sports star grants him authority, kindling Hugo's (Iago) jealousy and thus setting the plot in motion. The power relations between the two characters are thus immediately established as crucial to Hugo's sense of identity, as he perceives himself directly in relation to Othello.

Observing the power dynamics between Othello and Iago in each film can therefore provide insight into the amount of agency given to the Iago characters. Welles's *Othello* doubtlessly accentuates Iago's power, and particularly that of his speech, visually displayed as capable of causing Othello to succumb to his manipulation. According to Hurwitz, Welles's Iago 'devilishly engenders the action of the play, unfolding the drama from his pointed words and phrases'.⁸ Accordingly, it is worth noting that Othello never obtains concrete evidence of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, as the conversation between Cassio, Bianca and Iago is cleverly distorted by the character to only appear as proof. Likewise, Othello is ultimately persuaded by Iago's words, ('Lie ... with her, on her, what you will') causing the character's loss of consciousness. Welles emphasises in particular the ability of Iago's speech to affect Othello, and often highlights it by foregrounding Iago during dialogues that are significant in shaping Othello's final capitulation. This is exemplified, for instance, in the scene in which Iago convinces Othello to hide so as to provide him with false evidence of Desdemona's infidelity. As Othello attempts to climb up the stairs, Iago stops him by moving closer to him and positioning himself slightly above Othello. Othello's second attempt to move is physically impeded by Iago, who is here at the centre of the frame. Through quick cuts, the camera angle shifts twice from a medium long straight-on angle shot to a close-up high angle shot that frames Iago as being literally and figuratively above Othello, showing the latter's decreasing sense of agency. Moreover, Othello looks longingly towards the light of the outside world, symbolic of the mental liberty which Iago's incessant speech –and by extent, manipulation– does not allow him to attain. The stairs in this scene symbolise the power relations between the two characters: accordingly, as Iago ceases to speak, he begins to climb up the stairs and is followed by Othello, in an emblematic attempt to retain control. The camera angle here shifts once again to a high angle shot, as Iago climbs up the stairs towards the light, while Othello is symbolically stuck at the bottom of the staircase, unable to escape Iago's manipulation. The subsequent shots offer a clear contrast between the high angle shot of Othello at the bottom of the staircase and the low angle shot framing Iago as being above Othello, thus further displaying the former's position of power over the latter. Significantly, the audience is here provided with Iago's gaze through eyeline matching as he looks down at Othello, while Othello's gaze is not provided, conveying a sense of detachment from the character mirroring the character's own self-doubt. Welles's occasional foregrounding of Iago in spite of his concern to enhance his own performance then renders Iago's authority in the film even more striking. Nevertheless, the lack of soliloquies completely reshapes the character's relationship with the audience. Rosenberg notes that Iago's soliloquies in the play prevent the character from appearing as a one-dimensional villain moving from crime to crime.⁹ The duplicitous and ambiguous nature of the character in the source text is replaced by facile wickedness in Welles's Iago, which, in conjunction with the lack of insight into his inner thoughts and emotions renders the character almost one-dimensional. Iago's fate further exemplifies this notion, as he is shown as being incarcerated at the beginning of the film, thus immediately establishing his role as a villain who will deservedly be punished for his actions.

⁷ Neil Taylor, 'National and racial stereotypes in Shakespeare films', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. by Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 276.

⁸ Gregg Andrew Hurwitz, 'Transforming Text: Iago's Infection in Welles' *Othello*', *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 13:4 (1997), 333-39 (p. 333).

⁹ Marvin Rosenberg, *The masks of Othello; the search for the identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by three centuries of actors and critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), p. 173.

While Sax foregrounds Ben Jago's character throughout most of the movie, he too is able to visually capture the power he holds over Othello. That is to say, in the scenes depicting Ben's verbal manipulation of John, we are often offered close-ups of both characters, showing respectively the power of Jago's speech, and how it is capable of affecting Othello, as his mind becomes progressively more clouded as a result of his deceit. This is exemplified in the scene in which Jago shows Othello the pictures depicting Dessie (Desdemona) and Michael (Cassio) together. Jago's faculty to shape Othello's mind is visually shown through his ability to influence his body. As he stands up to massage Othello, he physically assumes a position of control over him: John's responsiveness to Ben's touch confirms the latter's capacity to mould the former's thoughts and thus symbolises his influence on him. The camera allows for the power dynamics between them to emerge through a medium shot throughout the massage and then a close-up following shot of Ben's face as he moves his head down in order to speak directly into John's ear: this is symbolic of his ability to penetrate and thus shape Othello's mind through his words. The contrast between Ben's clothed state and John's nakedness reinforces this idea, as it emphasises the latter's vulnerability in relation to the former, as well as Jago's perceived racial superiority.

The ending of the film is consistent with Jago's role as a sort of heroic villain, as he survives to be assigned the role of Commissioner, thus ultimately being granted his wish. Smith finds this problematic, stating that Jago 'not only goes unpunished but is elevated to a position of authority from whence he can continue to promote racist policies'.¹⁰ As race is crucial to the power relations between Jago and Othello in this film, the ultimate triumph of the Jago character can be defined as going against the trajectory of the film's socio-political critique itself, or arguably extend this critique by presenting institutional racism as endemic. The main events in the film revolve around a case of violence against a black individual, and are inspired by contemporary events, specifically the negligent police investigation following the killing of a black teenager in 1993.¹¹ The culprits in the film are never brought to justice specifically due to Jago's interference in a further attempt to torment Othello, thus displaying his indifference towards the case. Regardless of the character's racist tendencies, it is inexplicit whether the character is ultimately repentant or not. His ambiguous speech to the audience after the dinner scene ('So, what do you think? I know, I feel it too. I'm almost sorry I started this. Too late now. He's up and running, it's beyond my control') once again invites them to reconsider his emotions. Nonetheless, his final revelation conveys once again the depth of his hate towards John ('Because you took what was mine'), undermining the reliability of his frequent declarations of affection towards him as well as his potential sense of remorse for his actions.

In Nelson's *O*, the contrast between the film's juvenile setting and Hugo's scandalous actions -particularly at the end of the film- makes them appear even more shocking. Aldama perceives Hugo as '[a] devious, resentful, drug-packed, scheming and maneuvering evil doer'.¹² This interpretation of Hugo's character brings him closer to Welles's one-dimensional villain, as it lacks any indication regarding the character's reasons for his actions. I would argue, however, that he is both a victim and a villain, driven to enact his atrocious plan by his father's continuous neglect and the self-loathing caused by his inability to equate to Odin. Accordingly, the character seems almost incapable of controlling his actions towards the end of the film: the ambivalence of the character's status as both a powerful villain and a helpless victim is expressed visually, particularly in the final scenes of the film. After the death of both Desi and Emily, a claustrophobic following shot frames Hugo as he stumbles backwards and

¹⁰ Peter J. Smith, 'Institutionally racist': Sax's *Othello* and tethered presentism', in *Shakespeare on Screen: Othello*, ed. by Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 83.

¹¹ James M. Welsh, 'Classic Demolition: Why Shakespeare is Not Exactly "Our Contemporary," or, "Dude, Where's My Hankie?"', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 30:3 (2002), 223-27 (p. 224).

¹² Frederick Luis Aldama, 'Race, Cognition, and Emotion: Shakespeare on Film', *College Literature*, 33:1 (2006), 197-213 (p. 204).

is thrust on the floor. He is framed from a high angle shot, which evidently shows his loss of authority as Odin towers over him and points the gun at him. Despite that, as he gets up and faces Odin the camera offers a close-up shot of the character, who notably denies Odin an explanation for his actions, stating 'from here on out I say nothing', reminiscent of Iago's words in the play: '[f]rom this time forth I never will speak word'.¹³ Subsequently, as Odin delivers his speech before committing suicide, the camera alternates between straight-on angle shots of Odin and low angle shots of Hugo, empowering him by identifying him as the cause of Odin's agony. Nonetheless, as the dialogue progresses the low angles framing Hugo gradually turn into straight-on angles, anticipating the high angles that will frame him at the very end of the film. Accordingly, after Odin pulls the trigger, we are offered a close-up with a deliberately equivocal angle of framing –halfway between a low and a straight-on angle- of Hugo's trembling figure, complemented by the shakiness of the camera and the light of the police sirens reflecting on Hugo's face. The shot is thus in direct contrast with the freeze-frame shot of Odin's suicide and the subsequent high angle shot of his motionless body. The succeeding long shot, which offers a striking contrast with the previous close-up and medium close-ups, makes Hugo appear as a shadow-like figure, similarly immobile in contrast with the moving policemen, signalling the character's final loss of his sense of agency.

Odin's death marks the start of Hugo's second soliloquy. A high angle shot conveys his lack of control as he is escorted by two police officers and forced into the police car, continuously looking back –literally and figuratively- at the consequences of his actions. The white doves present in the first scene are here shown as being inside a cage, symbolising Hugo's ultimately failed attempt to 'fly'. As he utters his final claim, the camera frames him again from a high angle shot, confirming his final loss of power. According to Howard, the fate of the Othello character in relation to the Iago character is problematic in a similar way as Sax's Othello's is, as Hugo ultimately dominates the film, in contrast to the fate encountered by Odin, who must still commit murder and then suicide.¹⁴ The end of the film reinforces the ambivalence of Hugo's double role, emphasising that his actions stemmed from his need to obtain recognition and be valued, thus emphasising that he should not be regarded exclusively as a villain. However, I believe that the foregrounding of Hugo's character throughout the film does not automatically suggest that he overpowers Odin, in spite of his survival; rather, it shows that Hugo's fate is parallel to Odin's, in that they are both ultimately unable to 'fly'.

Through the analysis of three different ways in which Iago's soliloquies have been adapted on screen, I have been able to explore how the characterisation of Iago varies as a result, also focusing on his power to verbally influence Othello. The power dynamics between the two characters have been addressed with regard to issues of race and social standing, demonstrating how the manipulation of these elements can increase or lessen Iago's sense of authority in relation to Othello. I have thus shown how Welles's Iago appears as an almost entirely one-dimensional villain due to the absence of soliloquies, while being foregrounded at significant points in the film despite Welles's enhancing of his own performance. In contrast, Sax's Iago is given almost complete power on account of his ability to directly address the audience, and ultimately achieves his goal. Finally, though Nelson's Hugo is provided with soliloquies and is foregrounded throughout the film, his sense of agency is ultimately shattered, as he is unable to fulfil his wishes.

¹³ Shakespeare, *Othello*, V.2. 301.

¹⁴ Tony Howard, 'Shakespeare's cinematic offshoots', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. by Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp. 314-15.

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