
Shakespeare, Welles, and Style: Auteur Techniques in *Othello* (1951)

Othello is a 1951 Shakespearean drama produced, directed and adapted by Orson Welles who also stars as the titular lead. It is also considered one of the greatest acting performances to be showcased by the auteur. In this essay, I will be analysing the personalized interpretation of the source material – *Othello (The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice)* by William Shakespeare – by Orson Welles for the development of the film noir genre.[1] As an "auteur, Welles used novel cinematic techniques to create an altered visualization of the text to achieve filmic effect and the richness of the aesthetic created in order to visually adapt an action-packed play. Of key interest, here, is an extract from Act V Scene II, which roughly translates to the scenes in the 1:16:16 – 1:20:30 timeframe in the movie.

In this scene, Othello is on his way to his bedchamber, ready to confront his wife over her alleged unfaithfulness with the lieutenant Cassio. He dramatically walks through the hall snuffing out the candles on his way. In the bedchamber, Othello stands over the sleeping Desdemona while debating to kill her. He bends down to kiss her one last time before he does the deed when she suddenly wakes and enquires about the mysterious presence. He tells her to prepare to die. Growing frightened, Desdemona asks her husband why he means to kill her, and Othello responds that she has been unfaithful to him with Cassio, corroborated by the "ocular proof" of her handkerchief. Othello refuses to believe her denial of the charge, saying that Cassio has confessed but will speak no more (because he is dead). Desdemona begins to weep for Cassio, which only drives Othello into further rage. He wrestles with her as she begs to be spared but Othello succeeds in smothering his wife to death.[2] This extract is possibly the best example of direct adaptation of the source text. The dialogue completely follows the source material accompanied by heavy editing and interchanging cutting on action shots. This creates a sense of distance – visually communicated through the short walk from the hall to the bedchamber, which goes on for the entirety of the monologue. In contrast, there is heavy omission of non-noir parts of the play and major dialogue along the rest of the film which lays more emphasis on Othello than Iago and creates a character-driven plot. The use of speed is used to create the suspense alongside its primary function of placing the entire monologue in the same setting. The real triumph is the feeling of fear, mistrust, bleakness, loss of innocence, despair and paranoia, communicated through the liberal use of highly contrasted chiaroscuro. The dark background puts the characters in focus that deliver their lines with chilling gravity and somberness.

According to a press release by Carlotta Films, the distributors of the latest revision of the original Welles movie, "For this second adaptation, Welles appropriates the original text to offer a personal interpretation, opting for an inventive mise-en-scène with baroque aesthetics. He takes the liberty of starting at the end of the play, and then proceeds to a flashback that constitutes the rest of the film. The precarious shooting conditions help create an oppressive atmosphere, close to madness: Welles's *Othello* is a whimsical stranger slowly pushed into an infernal downward spiral by the vile Iago. Allowing himself to make some cuts from the original play, his *Othello* reveals itself as pure entertainment cinema, with an excessiveness that is truly Wellesian." [3] As has been widely reported, the film went through a series of financial roadblocks while in production, which possibly contributed to the use cut and paste editing

resulting in a coarse visionary masterpiece mired by financial troubles. Since the production was hindered with distribution disruptions, the target audience for the film cannot be pinpointed and the shift from a traditional Shakespearean adaptation points to a widening target demographic. Upon the arrival of Othello into the bedchamber, the placement of characters in the frame is indicative of who is in power in this particular scene. The absence of the background, which at this point is a black mass, places the characters in a vacuum where the audience is not given any visual cues due to the extreme close-up angle. The framing is possibly indicative of Welles's continuing experimentation with the film noir genre as the surprise element in the scene is not entirely specified in the source material and hence can be seen as a non-diegetic device used to further Welles's attempt at auteurship. Combined with the chiaroscuro elements, this scene cements the film noir element of this movie. The characters speak in hushed voices indicating a private and intimate mood for conversation.

The intonation practiced by Orson Welles's places severity on his delivery of the monologue which when contrasted with the surprised and feminine high-pitched voice of Desdemona creates a dark and mysterious plot. The characters are in close proximity adding to the dark intimacy of the scene. In particular, Orson Welles's Othello has exceptional acumen of mise-en-scène present in the entirety of the production. Each scene is crafted with punctilious detail, sort of like a puzzle of different scenes coming together to form a visually rich output. This combined with the odd placement of the source material – the film starts with the ending of the play – creates an inherent confusion for the viewer who from the outset can expect that the plot is not going to closely follow the source material. The use of jump cuts provides both points of views and gives the audience a sense of the range of different emotions being experienced by the characters on screen.

Welles's placement of the characters is also crucial. For the most part Othello remains on the top left frame while Desdemona remains on the bottom right, which successfully keeps the power dynamics in balance and gives the audience many foregrounding cues. Expressions of bewilderment make for Desdemona's contribution to the suspense of the scene. Combined with the image of her clutching her dress in a stereotypically weakened lying position. These visual cues reinforce the themes of pessimism and fatalism, which are the overreaching themes presented in the Wellesian adaptation of an already dark Shakespearean tragedy. Building the suspense by slowly turning out the lights while walking through the dramatic arches of the fort creates a dark and menacing mood in the scene where audiences unaware of Shakespeare's text can still predict that something dark is about to happen. The build-up is long and slow with cutting-on-action shots flitting between the hall and the chamber, pre-empting the arrival of Othello into the bedchamber. There are elements of a horror movie with Desdemona questioning the mysterious presence and Othello suddenly emerging from the shadows to concede his presence, which are in contention with the overall film noir theme of the movie.

Possibly, this could be an accidental foray into multi-genre film on Welles's part. The overall purpose of this film was possibly to further the auteurship of Orson Welles and to create a new platform for dark plots and darker cinematography in 1950s cinema. It also served a dual purpose of transforming Shakespeare on film and pushing the boundaries of adapted screenwriting. During the making and distribution of this film, Welles was developing his film noir trope and audiences were introduced to this new genre of filmmaking in the preceding years. It was also speculated that Othello was a follow-up to Welles's other film noir masterpiece *The Lady From Shanghai*.

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