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"BLACK" SPACES: OTHELLO AND THE CINEMATIC LANGUAGE OF OTHERING

On Orson Welles's 1952 film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther wrote, "We wish that Mr. Welles ... could recognize that people, not walking shadows, populate Shakespeare's plays" (qtd. in Anderegg 113). Considering the dramatic chiaroscuro effect and sustained Modernist aesthetic that permeate the cinematic style of Welles's *Othello*, as well as the aura of "high" culture shadowing Shakespeare, it is hardly surprising that Crowther made such a defensive observation. This reveals an argument, however, which functions at a deeper level than mere personal taste; here is an implication that "people" and "shadows" are essentially at odds in this adaptation. In other words, the assumption appears to be that the elements of the film's diegesis (the characters, in this case) are somehow struggling for visual dominance over cinematic form (Welles's abstract and symbolic use of shadow), which is constantly drawing attention to itself. Adapting Shakespeare's *Othello* for film unearths many anxieties as to balancing the supremacy of "the text"—still marketed as a badge of respectability, as the DVD cover of Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995) proudly boasts—with the signifying powers of a visual medium that acts as mediator between the narrative and the audience. Yet upon examining the symbolic weight of shadow, darkness, black pigment, and other such "black" spaces where meaning is generated in Welles's *Othello*, there begins to emerge organic connections between the systems of signification used by text and film, by narrative and cinematic form.

Othello's racial and cultural otherness, as it is negotiated in Shakespeare's text and manifest in its complex treatment of the protagonist, has become a discourse translated into cinematic form, reconfigured rather than lost, through a visual code. Lighting choices create a particular visual configuration in relation to character. What Christian Metz refers to as the kind of filmic articulation where it is "the denotation itself that is being constructed, organized, and to a certain extent codified" ("Some Points" 68) offers a method of working through *Othello*'s blackness in film adaptation, just as the text does so through its identity discourse. Blackness and darkness, shadows and silhouettes in film set up a visual system of signifying *Othello*'s otherness in two ways: black as difference, and black as absence or lack, as a space open to mimicry and normalization. It is this marginal yet fatally assimilable position that Welles rearticulates through *Othello*'s shadowed, displaced, and "empty" spaces. The play's racial discourse is thus not so much minimized as an issue, but reconfigured into film *syntax*: the constituents of a film's mechanism that generate supra-textual meaning, such as lighting, shot type, and montage. Rick Altman helpfully coins the phrase "meaning-bearing structures" (557) in defining filmic syntax; Metz refers to them as "cinematographic signifying figures that constitute specialized codes" ("Problems" 73). Even prior to the Modernist and *film noir* traditions that Welles's style stems from, this correlation between the mechanism behind the image and the diegesis was

strong. André Bazin identifies this interdependence from the onset of German Expressionist Cinema. Though critical of Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) for its over-fondness for the baroque, Bazin links its cinematic language to Weimar filmmakers Fritz Lang and Robert Weine—to when, in the absence of sound, the “expressionism of montage and image constituted the essence of cinema” (44). Composition carried the burden of narrative to a great extent, with light and darkness operating simultaneously as signifier as well as the signified. In the expressionist cinema, the chosen language was visual, and Welles's *Othello* is no exception to the many manifestations of this organic link between the visual and the narrative in filmmaking. The use of black as a visual code shows the issue of race can be abstracted in adaptations of *Othello*, for this allows its treatment in the play to continue *through* filmic signification.

Key to this negotiation is that Othello goes from being the mediator of his own racial and cultural difference to the sign of difference itself. He is pressured by Iago's racist discourse to “understand difference as a liability and to read himself categorically and derogatorily as a Moor” (Bartels, *Speaking* 181). This transformation is a dynamic necessary to the play, and it requires translation, however obvious or subtle, onto the stage or screen whenever *Othello* is adapted. This dynamic is carried within the performativity of blackness in Stuart Burge's 1965 film version of John Dexter's 1964 stage *Othello*. “Blacking-up,” and its highly racialized significance, adds another layer to this visual code—one that pinpoints blackness as a performative *construct*, as a self-effacing, malleable phenomenon that can be normalized if mimicked. Othello's ultimate othering is from himself; by the time he tragically asks “[T]hat's he that was Othello?” he has fallen prey to Iago's misogynistic discourse, assimilated by and “written in among Venetian ‘cuckolds’” (Bartels, *Speaking* 183). Othello is unable to “dis-own” the identity imposed upon him in the liberating sense Slavoj Žižek uses it: under a variety of pressures, he is unable to become “‘subjectified’ via the realization that one has been an object [and thus] leaving behind the masks that constituted oneself as that object” (56). Hence Iago's manipulation renders Othello *not different enough*, weaving a simultaneously othering and normalizing discourse that draws from the racial, cultural, and domestic. The processes of cinema can track this complex narrative of othering through the formal tools at its disposal, abstracting its core ideas and (re)presenting them visually.

As the camera pans from the entrance of Desdemona's (Suzanne Cloutier) bedchamber to pause on a stone wall in the foreground, the shadow of a murder-bent Othello (Orson Welles) ominously grows recognizable. To call this moment from Welles's 1952 *Othello* visually meaningful may seem inconsequential, considering how nearly every shot in this film is metaphorically rich. However, this frame, consisting almost solely of the interplay of light and shadow, merits acknowledgement of its generating meaning on behalf of the narrative. Diegetically, there are few markers to signify the direction of the story at this given moment; the frame (Fig. 1) is essentially one of absences, colluding to create a narratively expectant present. Desdemona herself is not visible, but the door to her bedchamber looms out of the middle-ground. This is an intensely private space, yet one quite unprotected

against a threat from one with access to the same domestic space. Othello himself, at this point, is denied us, yet his shadow upon the stone wall is zoomed into at a suspenseful pace. Michael Anderegg remarks that Welles's "*Othello* can be described as a film of shreds and patches at the same time that an overarching coherence works against the local incoherence of specific moments and scenes" (102): an apt observation for this cinematic moment. Such an intensely charged yet undeniably *empty* shot utilizes a remarkable



Fig. 1. Othello approaches Desdemona's bed-chamber (*Othello*, Orson Welles, 1952)

visual code, coupled with a prophetically somber non-diegetic sound, to propel the story. Deliberate and revelatory moments in the use of shadow such as this cannot be assigned to the mere aesthetic romp of an *auteur* with a stylistic agenda, as Crowther's review implies. Even defenses of *Othello*'s stylized camera work somehow still contain the assumption that the discourses generated by Shakespeare's text, and their film counterparts grudgingly allowed in accompaniment, are thankfully forever separate. Philip C. Kolin, for instance, assures us, "Welles's emphasis was not on characterization but on cinematic imagery, which was his major contribution to interpreting and expanding Shakespeare's verbal text" (60). Questions of authorial intent aside, Kolin's implication that the visual can expand the meaning of the verbal has merit—yet why his chosen phrasing places characterization in opposition to cinematic imagery is a puzzle. For, the above being only one example in an array of supporting sequences, there is a sustained and organic relationship between characterization and the visual qualities of Welles's *Othello*.

It may seem obvious that the juxtaposition of light/dark imagery would be inevitable, and thus easily dismissed, in a film shot in black and white, but Welles goes beyond the obvious by making this juxtaposition neither simplistic nor accidental in *Othello*. The visual vocabulary of light and dark follows the characters, the storyline, the settings of Venice and Cyprus, and even the emotional nuances of Shakespeare's text. To clarify via the film semiotics previously touched upon, these elements would be the ways in which a film is *semantically* understood: through the narrative itself, and the components of its diegesis. Welles makes use of a semantic signal—such as Othello's being black, which, in the text, opens a discourse on racial and cultural difference—in order to address a *syntactic expectation*. This expectation is that cinematic imagery, employed in translating who Othello is onto film, needs to construct his difference through the syntactic structures of signification at its disposal: composition, lighting, montage, and so on. These create a certain visual continuity, indeed a system, of signifying blackness as difference. In this way, the very functions of black (both the pigment and a lack of light) become

visual denotations of difference, and thus translate a discourse on othering, indispensable to the *Othello* text, into filmic language.

Welles's opening sequence is striking in its variety of cinematic approaches; Anderegg enthusiastically dubs it an exercise in "modernist, avant-garde and even postmodern cinematic practice" (71). The dramatic contrast of black and white, tilted camera angles, and disorienting dissolves are stylistic choices often attributed to *film noir*, so perhaps avant-garde this sequence may not be, though Modernist it certainly is. In outlining the pictorial techniques of *noir*, for instance, J. P. Telotte is practically describing this very opening sequence: "unbalanced compositions, irregular spatial arrangements, chiaroscuro lighting, emphasis on vertical lines over the horizontal ..." (17). These jarring



Fig. 2. Othello's face shadowed and upside down (*Othello*, Orson Welles, 1952)

visuals function as a vocabulary. This vocabulary already denotes a process of othering whereby difference is constructed only to be laid open to assimilation. Most tellingly, the establishing shot is both extremely intense, for it solely features Othello, and extremely impersonal, for his face is shadowed and upside-down, refusing the audience identification with the protagonist (Fig. 2). The darkness surrounding Welles's face has consumed everything but the barest markers of what identifies this as a face; Othello is reduced

to his blackness. It is almost an inversion of that "expressivity intensified by blank backgrounds" (Downing and Saxton 113) in facial close-ups. This claustrophobic shot of *Othello and his blackness* destabilizes our notion of space and time in a typically *noir* manner, just as the cinematic framing of this scene lacks a horizon line and a vanishing point, making for the disorienting perspective. In its striking use of style as metaphor, the opening sequence articulates the crucial moment at which Welles's film *does* engage with, even work through, racial difference; it reveals that Iago's othering discourse has rendered Othello a figure overwritten by his blackness. We see Othello and Desdemona from a high angle: in all likelihood, from Iago's point of view. The sequence is one of painfully stark contrasts in black and white; this is a cinematographic articulation of Iago's victory, for it has been secured through a twofold racial othering and normalization. As Emily C. Bartels identifies, throughout the play, Iago repeatedly emphasizes "the incriminating transparency of blackness to negatively color what the Moor perceives and how he is perceived" (159). Showcasing a "poetics of difference, built on the premise of incompatible absolutes" (134), we are here invited, from Iago's spatial perspective, to survey his work: a world re-oriented into black and white, the two figures who momentarily trespassed as distinctly separate once more. Having been drawn into this highly stylized perspective, we have been introduced to some of the crucial dynamics of Shakespeare's play. This

sequence dispenses with Shakespeare's opening scene, but it cinematically translates his dramaturgy from the first. It reveals that there is a tragically skewed collective perspective here, one that condemns, with its essentializing discourse, even the Moor of *Venice* to see himself as irredeemably other.

In Act III, Scene 3, Iago expresses his doubts regarding Desdemona's fidelity through opening a heavily racialized discourse: "Not to affect many proposed matches / Of her own clime, complexion and degree, / Whereto we see, in all things, nature tends - / Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank, / Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural" (3.3.233-37). In refusing those of her own race, Desdemona shows an irredeemable abnormality in her nature. "Species" could even be substituted for "race" here; Iago impresses upon Othello often enough that racial difference is fundamental to the organization of nature. It is hard to imagine that the Othello of Act 1 would overlook this discriminatory jibe; as Bartels identifies, when called forth to explain his elopement Othello is "a self-possessing subject who has as much power to circumscribe Venice as Venice has to circumscribe him" (150). Othello does not yet derogatorily read himself as black, but neither is race a non-issue at this stage. There is anxiety here, and this plays out with great transparency on film. In the face of Venetian authority, Othello does not minimize his racial difference but *narrativizes* it. He weaves exotic locales and hints of his cultural background into a safely contained space complimenting Western Orientalisms, then places them into the context of an accepted and expected bit of pre-marital wooing. These are the calculations of a man who knows this is not the first nor the last time he will be accused, covertly, of being black. Othello's defensive tactic is to weave the strange and the familiar, the heathen and the Christian, his past and his present into a testimony from which he can then extricate himself. As the situation turns into one of racial politics, he comfortably positions himself "of here *and everywhere*" (1.1.135) in order to bypass it.

In Welles's film, Othello moves in and out of differently lit areas during this scene. The lack of background and ambient light makes the subject merge then separate in fluid movements; the high contrast on the surface of his face—some parts complete shadow, others overexposed—sets up an interpenetrating plane of white and black. Considering the metaphorical weight of these two elements to the play, the cinematographic language here denotes Othello identifying himself with *and* beyond the dichotomy he is presented. No matter what the cause or context, it will be Othello's blackness that shall define and condemn him unless he himself opens up that discourse, on his own terms, first. At times, Welles's performance seems so intent on sidestepping any and all potential alignment with Western black stereotypes that we get an Othello "self-contained and self-sufficient, above the normal needs of average humanity, wrapped up in his own sense of self" (Anderegg 110). At a later point in the film, this self-conscious negotiation of white/black is thrown off balance. When Iago's racist discourse evokes self-doubt rather than defensive anger from Othello in the text, the corresponding moment of Welles's film shows Othello's racial anxieties *within* the shot itself.

Othello's face, merging with the silhouette of the iron bars and the crisscrossing patches of background darkness, creates a shot predominantly dark, and the subject almost one with it (Fig. 3). The strength of black as an



Fig. 3. "What sense had I of her stolen hours of lust?" (*Othello*, Orson Welles, 1952)

all-encompassing visual presence here mirrors the growing function of black as the incriminating sign of difference. As Othello comes to read himself as other, he becomes one with black filmic space, even up until and including a complete substitution of self with sign; for instance, the absent-yet-present-subject in the form of his own shadow (Fig. 1). Gaining his recognizable shape only insofar as it is non-light, Othello's visibility on screen eventually receives definition only in relation to

what it is not. This allows for a simultaneous *assimilation* of his difference.

Even while Othello is reduced to his blackness and his blackness comes to mean otherness, a kind of self-erasure is depicted as well. Although Walter S. H. Lim rather outdatedly once argued "the harder Othello tries to entrench himself in Venetian society, the more rigidly he consolidates his identity as Venice's ethnic Other" (117), this observation is a useful springboard if the undercurrent of essentialism is laid aside. For it is only through this "entrenching," or enforced cultural assimilation, that Othello's othering is complete. In the play, upon witnessing a paranoid Othello strike Desdemona, Lodovico asks, "Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient?" (4.1.264). He may indeed be sorry to see Venice's "noble Moor" much changed, but even before his turn for the worse, Othello was perceived as the Moor who should be differentiated as the noble (not the usual) kind. "Moor" alone, then, the signifier of his difference, is *a priori* a negative term. It is not only negative in the sense that it is meant to be degrading, but negative as in incapable, in itself, of signifying things like nobility. Now that "he is much changed" (4.1.269)—or, under the pressure of Iago's racist discourse, he has come to read himself solely as "Moor"—Othello's fully racialized identity is open to reinscription. There was previously no constant need for Othello to affirm for himself his rightful place in Venetian society. He took no pains to hide his exoticism when he spoke of his travels, and he could both be Christian *and* believe in a handkerchief's occult (pagan, "heathen") powers. He is right, literally and metaphorically, when he says that only marriage to Desdemona could his "unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine" (1.2.26). Othello's domestic assimilation is inextricable from his racial othering. As a dichotomized discourse is imposed upon him, putting his culturally fluid identity into "circumscription and confine," so is his

“free condition” finally housed, contained. His socio-ethnic heterogeneity is managed, and finally neutralized; in his new position of self-othering, Othello’s assimilation is almost complete.

It is once again via the visual systems of signification utilized by film that this complex process finds clear articulation. As discussed, black as a visual code functions as difference in Orson Welles’s *Othello*, but importantly, it also functions as *absence*. Discussing the *noir* genre, Stephen Neale argues, “part of the very function of genres is to display a variety of the possibilities of the semiotic processes of narrative cinema while simultaneously containing them as genre. Hence ... the film noir, with its display of the possibilities of chiaroscuro lighting, *frequently unmotivated, diegetically impossible ...*” (31; italics mine). However, are formal choices like lighting not a part of the signification processes of cinema, both containing within and contained by these “semiotic processes of narrative” running alongside? Thematic or narrative issues previously exclusively textual are often translated into formal systems of signification in film: character relationships hinted at through montage, an emotional pitch in the story compounded through close-ups. We have seen how the lighting schema of Welles’s *Othello* encodes black as a signifier of difference; this abstracts, and in doing so, contains the narratively fundamental othering that Othello undergoes in the text. This is the point from which we can examine how black encodes absence, and consequently Othello’s assimilation. The one who owns space, who creates and occupies it, is empowered in a way not unlike the one who owns “the gaze” in a film. The spatial orientation of a subject in a shot is often that which first denotes him/her as indeed the subject of the shot, rather than a part of the *mise-en-scène*. Hence, it is quite telling that the composition of the scene where Michael MacLiammóir’s Iago racializes Othello’s selfhood is one that imbalances the supremacy assigned the subject. In this frame, just as Othello hears the words that condemn him for his racial difference (“Not to affect many proposed matches / Of her own clime ...”) he is simultaneously erased from his status as the subject, and othered from himself.

Formally, this is not to say such a shot (Fig. 4) only serves as a metaphorically charged moment: it is also distinctly Modernist in its composition. Important, though, is the link between this metaphorical intent and this filmic style, for “traditionally, character provides the narrative with a kind of social construct with which we are encouraged to identify; it securely ‘places’ us in the narrative world” (Telotte 20). Being at a loss as to which character with whom we are meant to identify takes away that which is usually a stabilizing



Fig. 4. Iago (Michael MacLiammóir) sowing the seeds of doubt (*Othello*, Orson Welles, 1952)

influence. This disorientation, manifesting both at the formal and narrative levels in this shot, is doubly pertinent for it mimics the self-erasure and re-writing Othello is subjected to at this point in the story. Is Iago, almost centered in this frame, the subject here? What of the title character, who is reflected in the shot, yet physically absent? The mirror creates a fisheye effect, a blurring and an elongation, a stretching of the face beyond the point of familiarity (Stone 190). Our spectatorial position, too, comes to feel estranged and off-balance. The viewer is no longer the master of what he gazes at, but a divided subject of trauma, as well as a subject desiring mastery over that division, in much the same dilemma as Othello here. Significantly, Parker's 1995 film has Othello (Laurence Fishburne) looking into a mirror in this scene as well, though the frame composition is more conventional. Nonetheless, looking at one's reflection in a mirror is an enforced identification with a position *other* to us, which is what Othello's narrative at this point is taking a turn towards.

It is not just the formal qualities of Welles's film we can look to here; the dynamics of blacking up, and black as a color pigment rather than the absence of light, signify this simultaneous process of othering/assimilation as well. In Stuart Burge's 1964 film, Laurence Olivier's Othello further alters the dynamics of black in its function as signifier. Black is now the means to other oneself; it is interesting how its visual code is once again the malleable tool *of* and *for* constructing difference. For a white actor to undergo an imagined self-loss in order to mimic a black character becomes a site of erasure that reaffirms black as a signifier of absence. Through this mimicry, there plays out what Barbara Hodgdon identifies as a dissembling of "the complexity of power relations between black and white bodies into the satisfying wholeness of an ultimate cultural impersonation" (194). Painted onto the (white) body, blackness can be normalized, becoming a manageable theatrical construct like make-up and costume. Of course, one only has to graze the surface of Olivier's performance to encounter white stereotypes of blackness: his red rose of animalistic lust, his occasionally effeminate gestures, and his bombastic shows of emotion. Even without further unpacking these attributes to point out the obvious, here is a spectacle of signifying difference so as to normalize it. The manipulation and mimicry of the signifying potentialities of blackness actually show that "imagined self-loss conceals its opposite: a ruthless displacement and absorption of the other" (Greenblatt 51). The application of black pigment onto white skin becomes an act of containment and neutralization, all the while showcasing difference.

This tension demonstrates how something purely visual can signify so many facets of a textual issue: "How black" is Othello? Is he a "tawny" Afro-Arab, or a Sub-Saharan African? How does he being one or the other affect his character or the function of black as the signifier of difference? Bartels argues that in Welles's film "the experimental lighting universalizes and neutralizes the color of his (and everyone's) skin" (160), but it is too reductive a reading to suggest Welles evades race in this way when, as we have seen, Othello's process of racial othering is so visually embedded in Welles's cinematic language. It is useful, however, to push further this idea of "neutralizing" color. It implies, once again, that blackness is somehow

an absence, a site awaiting (white) definition, just as in filmic composition a strong backlight helps clearly separate a subject in the foreground. Neale points out “darkness not only signifies concealment, invoking an unknown and unseen presence within it, it is also a figure of absence and lack” (43). It would not be a stretch to map what darkness signifies onto what blackness signifies, especially as their common signification functions cross-medially in *Othello*s. Blacking-up enacts difference, yet all it does is invoke and reassert the unseen presence of whiteness. This articulation finds its echo in Shakespeare’s text; there is no overlooking the parallel between how blackness visually comes to signify absence, and how Othello’s “free and open nature” (1.3.397) apparently beckons his assimilation. This translates in Iago’s racialist lexicon into the colonial metaphor of land ripe for exploitation, which rings with the historical moment of Shakespeare’s play—imperial expansion under Elizabeth I and the acquisition of so-called “unused” land. Colonialist discourses of native land as “empty” land, and blackness as a *tabula rasa* upon which to impress Europeaness, is an important subtext of *Othello*. The price Othello pays for this assimilation into white culture is his transformation into the agency through which the patriarchal and colonial values of Venetian culture get enacted and materialized. He is both incriminatingly different and not different enough. Black, as the signifier of this othering and assimilation, functions in the text and on screen with the narrative and visual articulacy able to represent this complex process.

When approaching *Othello*, be this via the text of the play, stage adaptation, or film, it is easy to render it a grand, overarching narrative on jealousy and human nature. Combined with Shakespeare’s unique position within Britain’s national identity and her cultural exports, the play teeters on the edge of being considered a universalizing metanarrative on man. The irony is that *Othello* is crucially about this process of reduction: about how, upon manipulative social and cultural pressures, racial difference comes to signify the embodiment of Other, and subsequently how this Other is rendered a space upon which “a dominant culture’s illusive and elusive finished and whole subjecthood” (Little 21) is exercised. Although the text can be construed as “a highly significant document in the historical constitution both of racist sensibility and racist political ideology” (Bristol 182), the process realized in the narrative presents this documentation alongside a nuanced complication in the form of Othello’s *self*-othering. Difference, and self-complicity with this othering; it is hard (but necessary) to read this in *Othello*, whatever one’s theoretic approach, for the illusion of Othello’s nobly suffering innocence renders conceptualizations such as race static, while we must crucially see them as otherwise. Blackness is an unstable dynamic in the play, for it is the site of this dual process of othering/assimilation. Through all the instances where white actors in this play’s performance history have blacked-up, what is already a phenomenon requiring negotiation in the text gains an added layer of signification: blackness as an artificial and performative thing, “at once imitable and inimitable” (Jones 14).

This negotiation has extended, too, into film, even a film such as Welles’s *Othello*, which in its Modernist influences seems most liable to aestheticization

and metanarratives. Welles adapted *Othello* within formal constraints that demanded as well as allowed an expressionist, highly fragmented address to the questions posed by Shakespeare's text, and it is within the use and role of black in cinematic language that these questions can be articulated. Indeed, the formal signifying processes of cinema are inextricable from what the *narrative* signifies, though physically "absent" their elements may be. The play's thematic and cultural resonances regarding otherness and racial politics are regenerated through cinematic language. These discourses are encoded within, and always signified by, screen *Othellos*, even and perhaps especially on a formal level often more communicative through its "black" spaces.

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