

Intermediated Bodies and Bodies of Media: Screen *Othellos*

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Screen media both appropriate and remediate *Othello*. Appropriation brings Shakespeare into dialogue with adaptors and audience; evaluating a performance as an appropriation weighs adapted text and origin text as independent artworks, each of which uncovers something hitherto unnoticed about the other.¹ In *Remediation*, Jay David Boulter and Richard Grusin argue that the specific material, technological, and user-centered capabilities (the ‘affordances’) of a so-called ‘new’ medium build upon but also attempt to erase the media that preceded them. Thus photographers adopted and adapted the conventions of painting, even as they argued that photography could represent the world more realistically than painting could; television ‘variety shows’ remediated music-hall or vaudeville; e-texts remediate both medieval scroll and printed book.² Following Friedrich Kittler, media scholars have suggested that so-called new media don’t replace old ones but nudge them into a different niche in a particular ‘media ecology’;³ similarly, appropriations or remediations of Shakespeare do not *replace* Folio or Quarto texts or modern printed copies of the text but reframe aspects of even their perceived content as medium-specific. Jens Schröter suggests that we consider using the term ‘intermediality,’ rather than the words ‘remediation’ or even

¹ I extend thanks to the editors of this volume for their comments and suggestions and to Katherine Rowe for the titular phrase.

Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer, *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 1999), ‘Introduction’ and *passim*.

² Jay David Boulter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Boston: MIT Press, 2000).

³ Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks: 1800-1900*, trans. Michael Meteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

‘mediation,’ so that we can account for the persistence of prior affordances within new media not as failures of imagination on the part of the creators but as reflections of the rich significance of art objects. He asks whether such an intermedial art object needs to belong to a particular, defined medium, or whether we can only define such media *post facto*, by ignoring an immanent intermediality within the art object. Extending Saussure, Schröter suggests that we define a medium through differentiation — by contrasting it to what other media at that time are NOT. Thus photography might consist of rectangular pictures that are indexical, rather than iconic, that point to objects in the real world rather than representing them schematically or by analogy — until the advent of film, when photography is redefined as made up of rectangular pictures that are indexical, yes, but *static*. Each new medium or intermedium has to use metaphors developed from earlier media in order to describe and define itself. Schröter therefore speculates that ‘Maybe all of this means that we have to recognize that it is not individual media that are primal and *then* move toward each other intermedially, but that it is intermediality that is primal and that the clearly separated ‘monomedia’ are the result of purposeful and institutionally caused blockades, incisions, and mechanisms of exclusion.’⁴

Media extend the reach of the human body and its senses; Hamlet’s wax tables, like common-place books, desk diaries, dictaphones, and smartphones, extend memory just as the television (even in its macaronic name, tele-vision) allows us to ‘see at a distance’ and the telephone allows us to hear sound beyond its reach. The body itself, moreover, transmits

⁴ Jens Schröter, ‘Four models of Intermediality,’ in *Travels in Intermedia[lity] : Reblurring the Boundaries*, edited by Bernd Herzogenrath (Hanover, NH : Dartmouth College Press, 2012), pp. 15-36, 30.

information about itself and about its environment intermedially through its various monomedia of speech, facial expression, gesture, even odor. The actor's performing body, a 'communicative medium,' in Robert Weiman's phrase, unites print, speech, gesture and sensation in the service of story or represented experience.⁵ The 'primal' intermediality of the actor's body is broken up into the 'institutionally caused blockades, incisions, and mechanisms of exclusion' that enforce race, gender, class and other social or institutional taxonomies on screen. Simply put, we have to ignore ('exclude,' if we retain Schröter's terminology) certain qualities of the actor's body and all its hyper-, trans- or intermedial sensory richness if we want to perceive that body as gendered, raced, ranked, disabled, or otherwise socially classified. Seeing a multiply-coded human body at play on screen — at a double remove — accentuates that activity of exclusion. The screen screens the actor from the audience and the audience from the actor: it both displays and conceals the body's ability to communicate by establishing it as an intermedium even as it accentuates its monomedia qualities.

Screened performances screen out the qualities of 'liveness' – immediacy, unpredictability, ephemerality, spatial proximity, danger – to varying degrees according to their media, contexts, and audiences. As Philip Auslander has argued, 'liveness' itself is intermedial; in order to characterize a performance as 'live,' we contrast it to a 'mediatized' version of itself and to seek in it an imagined, lost 'authenticity.'⁶ A fruitful discussion of the Canadian television series *Slings and Arrows* by Laurie Osborne suggests, 'Shakespeare

⁵ Robert Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, esp. 4-17.

⁶ Philip Auslander, *Liveness* (London: Routledge, rev.ed. 2008), 23-38, 62.

thrives now through the creative use of intermedial performance differences' (in the case she discusses, through the interplay among multi-season television series, festival performance, and repertory theatre).⁷ In this essay I will investigate race and intermediality in bodies of media: *Othellos* on film, television, web, and Shakestream, the hybrid format that broadcasts 'live' stage performances of plays in cinemas worldwide. I will aim to show that, while these performances assert their status as 'new media,' the way they represent other media reinforces what Schröter calls 'ontological intermediality.' Moreover, these bodies of media and mediatized human bodies threaten to screen out the lived experience of race for performers and audience.

1. Film

Early silent films, as many have noted, both deploy and satirize the conventions of Victorian melodrama and are therefore intermedial performances. If we define old media through a process of differentiation or distinction, then we might also ask how early film represents live theatre, printed matter, and manuscripts on stage as media or intermedia? Douglas Lanier has investigated the effects of intermedial representation in the *Othello*-inspired feature films *A Double Life* and *Men Are Not Gods*. He deftly argues that these films use representations of the stage and the live theatre to offer viewers access to high-status cultural activities but also to satirize or critique accepted conventions of classical theatre, (including, for example, the portrayal of Othello by a white actor wearing black-face make-

⁷ Osborne, Laurie E. 'Serial Shakespeare: Intermedial Performance and the Outrageous Fortunes of Slings & Arrows.' *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 6. 2 (2011): <<http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/cocoon/borrowers/request?id=783090>>, p. 22 of .pdf.

up), histrionic delivery, and gesture.⁸ Blackface in television and feature films of *Othello* ranges, for example, from the insensitive impersonation of Laurence Olivier's almost-purple blackness in Stuart Burge's filmed stage-production (1966) to the well-intentioned obfuscation of Anthony Hopkins' tawny skin in Jonathan Miller's BBC Television Shakespeare (1981) to the clever understatement of Orson Welles in black-and-white (1952). Dmitri Buchowetzki's silent *Othello* (1922) formally exposes the clash between media conventions in order to present its hero as one who is unable to comprehend a modernity that Iago skilfully controls and manipulates. Judith Buchanan notes that the moment at which Krauss's Iago expresses mimed disgust as he wipes the brow of the heavily blacked-up Jannings turns Iago's 'disgust at coming into contact with his general's feverish sweat' into a critique or commentary, through parody, of blackface itself, of 'the very performance tradition of which it forms part.'⁹

Buchowetzki's film surprised even contemporary reviewers with Emil Jannings's outdated or melodramatic presentation of the titular hero, in contrast on the one hand to the more naturalistic style of acting coming into vogue at the time and on the other to Werner Krauss's gleefully vicious and self-conscious Iago. If Jannings was, perhaps, seeking a visual equivalent to the ornate rhetoric of Shakespeare's hero, such a subtlety escaped the critics of his day and present-day critics alike.¹⁰ Film scholars today complain about the 'overloaded...inserts of intertexts' that, R.S. White accurately observes, fail to 'respect the

⁸ Lanier, Douglas, 'Murdering *Othello*,' in *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation*, edited by Deborah Cartmell (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 198-213.

⁹ Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (Harlow, England: Pearson-Longman, 2005), 246.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 241.

visuality of film.’¹¹ The intertitles also, however, indicate how the intermedia of silent film can incorporate stage performance and print narrative. The film begins with a list of characters presented on screen, as do the *dramatis personae* in a printed play-text, or the playbill at a stage-play. Inter-titles both allude to and supersede the Shakespearean text, and they owe less to Shakespeare than to Cinthio or even (at least in the English versions we still have, tailored for U.S. release) eighteenth-century versions of Othello as impulsive and ‘ardent in his affection,’ as in Samuel Johnson’s notes on the play.¹² Jannings’s Othello is first described as ‘intellectual, tender, lofty; warlike, impetuous’ and moreover as descended both from an ‘Egyptian prince’ and a ‘Spanish princess,’ that is to say from a magical ancestor and from unquestionably royal blood. As ethnic categories, ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Spanish’ preclude this Othello’s being recognizably African, although Jannings’ make-up, his exotic and luxurious robes, and the savagery he shows at the loss of the handkerchief all evoke early twentieth-century conventional beliefs about Africans and blackness.

The film itself interpolates then-new techniques of film in order to superimpose Othello’s fantasy of Desdemona and Cassio embracing in the top left of the screen while Othello remains in the foreground, tortured by his jealous thoughts. Buchowetzki’s film establishes a cinematic tradition of this imagined erotic interlude that is then continued in many other films such as Oliver Parker’s *Othello* [1993], Tim Blake Nelson’s modernized high-school setting, *O* [2001], Zaib Shaikh’s television film *Othello: The Moor* [2008] and even Volfrango De Biasi’s unlamented Italian ‘Shakesteen’ movie adaptation *Iago* [2008]). Buchanan suggests that Buchowetzki’s interpolated fantasy contaminates Desdemona’s

¹¹ R.S. White, ‘Sex, Lies, Videotape -- and *Othello*,’ in *Almost Shakespeare: Reinventing his Works for Cinema and Television*, edited by James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 86-98, 89.

¹² Samuel Johnson, ed., *Othello* (New York: Lewis and Geary, 1840), 880.

purity for the viewer even though Buchowetzki attempts to recuperate her during the murder scene through the ‘cathedral’-like setting of Desdemona’s bedchamber and her presentation, ‘brightly, almost spiritually, lit’ beneath ‘a statuette of the Virgin Mary.’¹³ This shot, which displays Desdemona as her own funeral monument, cannot be a point-of-view shot in any literal sense because it does not correspond to Othello’s sight-line. This Othello cannot see Desdemona as the audience sees her, any more than he can see through Iago’s plot.

Buchowetzki deploys what would become the grammar of film —alternating images of Desdemona’s fear with Othello’s fury — during the murder of Desdemona, but where later films used a shot followed by a reverse-shot to indicate an exchange of glances, the shots of Desdemona do not correspond to Othello’s sight-line but instead to an unknown, omniscient observer – the viewer, or perhaps the reader who is aware of Othello's own comparison of Desdemona's white skin to "monumental alabaster" (5.2.5). We can therefore learn the thoughts of Jannings’ Othello only through the archaic syntax of intertitles. Desdemona’s angelic death makes her murder a ‘sacrifice,’ in accordance with Othello’s wishes in the play (5.2.67), but the film has to have him declaim via intertitle, ‘she shall expiate even in her own bed!’, an adaptation of Iago’s urgent desire to have Othello strangle Desdemona in ‘even in the bed she hath contaminated’ (4.1.200-1). The new medium of cinema makes possible sudden jumps between fury, terror, and sanctity, but only the viewer -- not Othello himself-- can access the spiritual vision of Desdemona.¹⁴

Buchowetzki’s film screens its Othello from modernity through both cinematic technique and the actors’ choice of delivery. The two performance styles of Jannings’s histrionic

¹³ Buchanan, 247.

¹⁴ Quotations from *Othello* come from *The Oxford Shakespeare: Othello: The Moor of Venice*, edited by Michael Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and appear within the text as parenthetical citations.

Othello and Werner Krauss's spritely and mocking Iago contrast enough to suggest an Othello befuddled by newfangled methods of communication – by new media, we might say. Iago's wit, speed, and ability to know things at a distance reflect the affordances of the new medium of film, which seems to extend human experience and perception. Iago controls this new medium and its techniques, but Othello cannot make sense of them (just as a stage-Othello cannot understand the stage-managing of Iago during the eavesdropping scene, nor the engineering of the handkerchief).

Thirty years later, Orson Welles's *Othello* could comment upon and transform the stage-convention of blackface and the film convention of using shot/reverse-shot to indicate point-of-view or reaction, in order to screen out the difficulties of having a white actor portray a black man. Welles decided to film his *Othello* in black-and-white not merely for financial but also for artistic reasons, and not only to evoke the disorienting world and corrupt underpinnings of *film noir*, but also to make (as Buchanan and others suggest) his blackface make-up both less obvious and more convincing. Kenneth Rothwell argues that Welles combined a visually distinctive approach to the film and a narrative transformation by beginning in flashback to the lovers' funeral procession. Welles starts us off in the '*locus classicus*' of the cage with the punished Iago, and then uses lattices, grids, webs, and other figures of entrapment throughout the film regardless of the chronological sequence of events.¹⁵

Once more, film technique connects Iago to modernity and Othello to a flamboyant medievalism. Dan Juan Gil describes in an exemplary essay how Welles unsettles the conventional grammar of film -- the use of shot-reverse shot to indicate the exchange of

¹⁵ Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 78.

glances, of montage to evoke the passage of time, of long-, medium- and close shots to convey varying degrees of intimacy between viewer and actor, the pace and rhythm of sound and visual editing to convey urgency or malaise -- in order to evoke an 'asocial' sexuality. Gil observes that the shot-reverse-shot dyads are slightly off-kilter, angled so that our sight-lines do not ally exactly with the point of view that, conventional film grammar would suggest, we are adopting. Moreover, writes Gil, Welles in *Othello* uses montage to reconstruct the passage of time not just on a global narrative scale but also during individual sequences, and uses long shots to normalize the grandly distant social relationships of Venice. Shot-reverse shot – off-kilter or face-to-face – in Welles's film 'is radically transvalued to signify social deviance or dysfunction.'¹⁶ Perhaps Welles also represents then-standard practices of film narrative, such as using a shot-reverse shot unit, as archaic — perhaps even as an old medium. Extending Gil, we can argue that Welles's technique forces us to realize that in conventional film we generate a stable, viewing, subject-position retroactively — only after seeing the reverse-shot do we realize that we are following a character's gaze.

In this way Welles offers us a visual 'objective correlative' to the 'preposterous' or back-projected identity that Joel Altman has suggested underpins *Othello*. According to Altman, both *Othello* and Iago construct their sense of self after-the-fact.¹⁷ Scholars have identified Iago as a 'sociopath' or a 'paranoid psychopath'; perhaps Altman's greatest achievement is to find a solid historical and rhetorical grounding for the psychoanalytic and psychological

¹⁶ Daniel Juan Gil, 'Avant-Garde Technique and the Visual Grammar of Sexuality in Orson Welles's Shakespeare Films.' *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 1.2 (2005). <<http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/781447/display>>, p.4 of.pdf. Last access: December 6, 2013.

¹⁷ Joel Altman, *The Improbability of Othello*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

readings of this play and its central partnership in the rhetorical and religious canons of Shakespeare's time.¹⁸ Altman convincingly argues that Iago succeeds in 3.3, the so-called temptation scene, in destroying Othello's prior sense of self — one based on honor, soldiery, and valor - so that, inchoate or formless, he turns instead to the historically worded self created and offered to him by Iago, now his lieutenant or place-holder in military, spatial, and rhetorical terms. Welles's treatment of 3.3 creates a spatial analogue to this sense of the inexorable limits of rhetoric and identity that confine Othello. Strolling on the battlements, Iago and Othello literally and figuratively go over the same ground again and again, as if trapped in physical space and time just as Othello is about to be mentally ensnared by Iago. The lattices, grids, bars, and networks that fragment our sight-lines in the film intensify its claustrophobic effect.

Critics disagree about the degree to which such technical innovations enhance or detract from Othello's racial isolation in Welles's film. James Stone argues that the film minimizes race in favor of an overarching aesthetic of chiaroscuro that turns away, literally and figuratively, from Othello's face. 'Race is reduced to a mirror-trick, an image that does not reflect the ego's ideal image of itself since the camera lens looks awry,' writes Stone of the scene in which Othello looks into the mirror, encounters Iago's gaze on the words 'clime, complexion, and degree' and drops his eyes on the word 'complexion'.¹⁹

I am not sure, however, that the film 'reduce[s]' race as much as it uses cinematic techniques to display the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, socially isolating forces

¹⁸ Edward Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1999), p. 62; Fred West, 'Iago the Psychopath,' *South Atlantic Bulletin* 43.2 (1978): 27-35.

¹⁹ James Stone, 'Black and White as Technique in Orson Welles's Othello,' *Literature/Film Quarterly* 30 (2002), p. 190.

that inexorably draw the three main protagonists, Othello, Iago, and Desdemona, towards tragedy. Welles' tragedy hinges upon the impossibility of loving, human communication in the context of the Venetian conventions that circumscribe whom one should love, and under what circumstances. A cluster of scenes surrounding the intimacy of Othello and Desdemona can serve as examples. In the scene at the Sagittary, the script alters Brabantio's angry epithet for Othello, 'such a thing as thou' (1.2.71) to 'such a thing as *that*,' a change that on one level simply modernizes the text in order to register the same level of contempt that Shakespeare's Brabantio displays for the Moor. Literally, grammatically, the use of the demonstrative adjective instead of the personal pronoun demonstrates how the intersection of race and sexuality (Othello's marriage to Desdemona) has broken the friendship between Othello and Brabantio. The film also uses silhouettes or shadows to represent human figures indistinguishably at moments that ought rather to connote human individuality and intimacy. Othello and Desdemona's shadows come together as one inchoate shape to consummate their marriage.

Even when we do see Othello and Desdemona touch, on Othello's words 'I will deny thee nothing' (3.3.77) as Desdemona pleads for Cassio's reinstatement, their faces are hidden. Iago's envious, disgusted gaze frames their embrace, surrounding their love with contempt. Some of the obfuscation derived from financial and practical exigencies: Welles experimented with no fewer than three actresses, Italian, French, and American (Lea Padovani, Cécile Aubry, and Betsy Blair) before deciding upon Canadian Suzanne Cloutier. Virginia Mason Vaughan implies that Welles "sought a substitute female body": it did not matter to him *who* played Desdemona, because the character exists mainly in order to trigger

the eroticized hatred between Iago and Othello.²⁰ (Figs. 1 - 3).



Figures 1-3. Screen captures from Orson Welles' *Othello* (1952). Iago (Micheál MacLiammóir) resentfully observes Othello (Orson Welles) and Desdemona (Suzanne Cloutier) embrace on Othello's words, 'I can deny thee nothing.'

There is literally no place in space or time for these lovers, or for a husband who is unable to perform his expected role in the marital bed; Welles is on record as having considered Iago to be 'impotent' himself and therefore to have been consumed by destructive envy.²¹ Just as

²⁰ Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 204.

²¹ Micheál MacLiammóir, *Put Money in Thy Purse: The Diary of the Film of Othello* (London: Methuen, 1952), p. 26 *et passim*.

Iago can only see the lovers awry, so Othello himself is forced by Iago's speech, 'In Venice they do let God see the pranks/ They dare not show their husbands' (3.3.205-6) to see Desdemona as if in a mirror, reflected back to him mentally through the words of a supposed native informant on the women of Venice. In an interpolated scene after Othello flings away Desdemona's napkin, in which Desdemona briefly re-enters before Emilia finds the napkin, Othello gazes upon Desdemona, who is reflected in the mirror behind him, while his own reflection, his *alter ego* in the mirror, as it were, glimpses her framed in the staircase as if in another mirror, in miniature (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Othello looks directly at Desdemona, but his mirrored self glimpses her framed as if

in a mirror.

Gil writes that the climax of this film ‘puts the spectator in a strange position’ and encourages what Kathy Howlett has called a ‘sadistic’ scopophilia.²² The screen screens out normal social life and humanity for the spectator as well as for its characters.

2. Television

Welles’s *Othello*, I have argued, comments intermedially upon cinema by subverting its supposed affordances or advantages over stage-play: breadth or mise-en-scène, enhanced verisimilitude through location shooting, and face-to-face intimacy. Auslander observes that television has traditionally been supposed to offer even deeper ‘intimacy and immediacy’ in contrast to film, even as television directors have deployed the conventions (multiple and mobile cameras to simulate a viewer’s wandering gaze, location shooting, and post-production sound editing) of cinema. H.R. Coursen and others have further distinguished Shakespeare on television from Shakespeare on film through its conventions, rhythm, and scale. Television, writes Coursen, shrinks the world to the confines of a ‘living’ room’.²³ Something about Iago in particular appears to trigger intermedial commentary. Even in a film as conventional and popular as Oliver Parker’s, Kenneth Branagh’s Iago talks directly to camera, as does Ian McKellen’s bluff Lancashire soldier in the television film (1990) based on Trevor Nunn’s production of *Othello*.

Iago likewise breaks the ‘fourth wall’ in the two television adaptations I discuss

²² Gil, p. 15 of .pdf.

²³ H.R. Coursen, *Watching Shakespeare on Television*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1993, p.14.

below. Geoffrey Sax's production of Andrew Davies's television play, *Othello: a modern masterpiece* (Granada, 2001), uses a moving camera to unsettle our expectations of television Shakespeare and to assert the pernicious dominance of institutional racism in British life. Zaib Shaikh's Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television film *Othello: The Tragedy of the Moor* (2008) ostensibly foregrounds the play's concentration on religious, rather than racial, differences, but its humorless and psychopathic Iago and the clever use of the restrictions of commercial television turn what could have been a societal tragedy into a study in individual pathologies.

Davies transposes *Othello* to the London of the early twenty-first century, focussing on the fraught racial politics (and high-level denial) of the Metropolitan police. The Afro-Caribbean John Othello (a passionate and thoughtful Eamonn Walker), is promoted over his senior confidant and mentor Ben Jago (an inspired Christopher Eccleston) in the aftermath of race riots. Tricked by Jago into believing the results of a faked DNA test and the purported whereabouts of a silken dressing-gown, Othello murders his 'posh' white wife Dessie (Keeley Hawes). Barbara Hodgdon has written at length about the spectacularization of Dessie's body in this film, and Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe have commented upon the film's brilliant parody of the then-dominant genres of its medium - documentary, newscast, reality show- through its intermedial interpolation of fragments of documentary or news film, and of still photography.²⁴ Cartelli and Rowe also note that Dessie is a journalist, a writer and photographer who jokes about the creeping archaism of her profession and about herself as a 'blank sheet of paper' to be written upon by John Othello (in one of the many

²⁴ Barbara Hodgdon, 'Race-ing *Othello*, re-engendering White-Out, II,' in *Shakespeare, The Movie, II: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, Video, and DVD*, ed. Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 89-104

close paraphrases of Shakespeare deployed by Andrew Davies's script).²⁵ This film's Cassio does not merely admire Desdemona from afar (as Shakespeare's, Buchowetzki's, Zeffirelli's and Shaikh's Cassios arguably do) but overtly propositions her, in a departure from the Shakespearean source that unsettles us despite Dessie's spirited refusal.

Welles disoriented his viewers through slightly off-kilter shot-reverse shot pairings, so that it seemed as though dialogue was impossible. Sax disorients us by giving Ben Jago a series of confidential, unself-conscious monologues delivered straight to camera in the style of the video diary familiar from so-called reality television or from the Shakespeare-inflected British television series *House of Cards* (1990; re-made, with notable differences, for US television in 2013), in which the devious Chief Whip Francis Urquhart (Ian Richardson) frequently addresses the camera directly in order to point out others' obtuseness and his own canny plotting. Where such monologues usually use a fixed camera to capture the speaker within an intimate, private space, however, Eccleston's Jago walks frenziedly through corridors, facing a camera that tracks him through his frenetic, compelling, ferocious ('vertiginous,' is Cartelli and Rowe's word) speeches. Spitting with rage, he explodes, 'I hate the Moor' even as he insists, in a phrase repeated at the beginning and the end of the film, that 'it's about love'.

The film uses, I suggest, intermedial components to emphasize the relationship between race and its shocking ending: Ben Jago *wins*. The final shot reproduces an old medium, a publicity photograph, of Jago in an archaic dress-uniform. In its gritty British context, Jago's triumphant smile and dress-uniform screens contemporary viewers from any kind of catharsis or redemption because they contextualize *Othello* as a tragedy of race. This

²⁵ Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe, *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (London: Polity, 2007), p. 122.

tragedy foregrounds not the distance that present-day institutions stand from the historical confines of race but the ways in which such institutions continue to screen out racial minorities.

Shaikh's television film departs from Shakespeare's play most notably in emphasizing Othello's status as a 'Muslim' (a word that replaces Rodrigo's racialized slur, 'thick-lips,' in 1.1). Re-titled *Othello: The Tragedy of the Moor*, the film exploits the extra-diegetic performance history of its Othello (Carlo Rota, from the popular Canadian television situation comedy *Little Mosque on the Prairie*) both to domesticate and to make exotic the Moor and his extravagant setting (an unspecified but glamorous, vaguely Colonial Morocco). The ambiguous ethnicity of the Duke, Iago, and Bianca (all are dark-haired and olive-skinned) minimizes Othello's racial isolation in favor of his religious difference from those around him. This film's Bianca likewise wears ambiguously ethnic clothing: multiple necklaces with dangling brass coins, an elaborate head-dress, and harem pants. Shaikh's film cuts most of Othello's and Iago's major speeches (and many of the women's lines, including the willow scene), and frequently fades to black to accommodate commercial breaks. The performances of the actors themselves are understated, and the film prefers domestic, interior, studio shots over grand, exterior locations. The film, however, turns the frequent breaks necessitated by commercial television broadcast into advantages. It uses these enforced pauses to pace individual scenes imaginatively and also to transform the 'establishing shot' that traditionally re-sets the scene after a commercial break into an interpretive decision.

Othello's final speech, in voice-over, frames the entire film as a flashback. The film opens with a crane shot of the dead bodies of Emilia (on the floor beside the bed), and of Othello and Desdemona on the bed, before it repeatedly pans and tracks over vivid red

bloodstains on the sheets. An interpolated marriage-scene displays Desdemona removing a golden cross from around her neck and replacing it with a crescent-and-star pendant, even as she garlands her new husband in turn with a cross. In Othello's jealous fury, he will later snatch the crescent from his wife's throat. In a recollection of Welles, we cut to the perspective of Iago and Roderigo, watching from behind a lattice through which we can also spot Cassio.

Othello and Desdemona display their religious pendants prominently throughout the film, their shirts open to the neck, the silvery metal flickering even in bedroom scenes dimly lit by candles. Cinematic cuts connect these religious symbols, especially Desdemona's crescent, to the handkerchief and by extension to Othello's belief in her infidelity. In one sequence, Iago, gloating over the gift of the handkerchief, flings Emilia down on the bed as if for rough sex. The film cuts to the innocent Desdemona, the crescent shining around her neck, and then to the tortured Othello, leaning against a wall, as he imagines his wife with Cassio, a vision that the viewer, too, shares through the use of a digitally inserted clip of the supposed lovers which appears in the upper part of the frame, almost like the 'thought bubble' in a comic strip. When Othello demands the handkerchief of Desdemona and she claims to have mislaid it, cross and crescent catch the camera's eye. As Desdemona insists she is 'not a strumpet — as [she is] a Christian,' and her husband accuses her of whoredom, he tears off her crescent. Immediately before Othello enters to murder her, we see Desdemona anxiously attempting to repair the torn clasp on the crescent-necklace, until Emilia gently removes it from her.

The film's marriage-ceremony also includes a ritual in which Othello adorns his wife with a *hijab*, the headscarf (literally, the *screen*) of an observant Muslim woman. The film

could have used the scarf (as Jayaraaj's *Kaliyattam* [1997] does with Thamara's/Desdemona's *patta* or modesty-scarf) to replace or evoke the handkerchief. Notably, however, Shaikh's Desdemona does not retain the hijab throughout the film, and even during her wedding she wears it in the relaxed style of an urban professional, freely showing her hair and her neck, rather than concealing them. Nor do we ever see Othello or Desdemona kneel to pray towards Mecca, or even unroll a prayer mat; the hijab and the necklaces thus appear to connote symbolic cultural identity and domestic, romantic border-crossing rather than devout or exclusive religious belief.

Enhancing this domestic, rather than political, focus is the judicious use of cutting. Othello's rapid conversion from love to jealousy in 3.3 can seem implausibly sudden. Shaikh reconfigures this so-called temptation scene not as a single interlude but as a series of encounters, editing together discontinuous clips in a montage to give us the illusion that time is passing. The scene opens in a military office, where a map of Cyprus and Turkey dominates the background. The scene then cuts on 'What dost thou think?' to what is clearly a later encounter, as though Othello has been brooding for several days or even weeks. This second temptation scene occurs within a beautiful *mise-en-scène* of domestic food preparation with heaped fresh produce -- red, yellow, and green glistening mounds of potatoes, peppers, onions, chillies, and grapes -- in focus at every level of depth. Iago brings ingredients to Othello, and Othello wields the knife to cut the fruit, dramatically impaling it on 'What dost thou mean?' Rota's Othello shakes his head involuntarily even before he responds to Iago's words, as though he already mistrusts Cassio and can intuit what Iago is about to say. When the camera zooms onto Othello's face with Iago's words, 'look to your wife,' we see the blood beating in his temple before he quietly confesses, 'I am bound to thee

forever' and imagines his wife with Cassio in a naked clinch. This imagined encounter reappears at a later point to torment Othello; its reappearance also restores the film's intensity for a viewer at home whose attention might have dissipated after the commercial break.

On the one hand the kitchen setting domesticates or depoliticizes the play, but on the other it exploits the currency of food as a marker of religious prohibition or ethnic difference. Extra-diegetically, actor Carlo Rota's association with food might evoke for a Canadian viewer one of the many episodes of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* that present dietary conflicts comically (such as 'Baber is from Mars, Vegans are from Venus' [Season 3, January 5, 2009]). Because we have associated Othello with the sustenance and life-giving warmth of the kitchen, we are shocked when an amazing piece of sound- and video-editing takes us from Emilia's diatribe against men, who are 'stomachs...[that] belch us' to the sound of Othello's knife hitting flesh on the word 'belch'. Othello is back in the kitchen, but he swings an enormous cleaver to dismember the bloodless (halal?) carcass of a lamb. Othello slaps Desdemona before that blanched and butchered body, supporting the suggestion of some feminist Shakespeareans that the play figures Desdemona herself as sacrificial lamb for consumption.²⁶ Othello wields a kitchen knife for the last time when we see his shadow, knife in hand, fall on the sleeping Desdemona as he mutters, 'It is the cause'.

Commercial television necessarily breaks up the narrative with breaks, each of which is traditionally followed by a re-establishing shot. But what's reestablished here is not the same set or characters or situation as before the break but the shifting or contingent grounds

²⁶ Louise Noble, *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Stephanie Moss, 'The Paracelsan/Galenic body in *Othello*,' in *Disease, Diagnosis and Cure on the Early Modern Stage*, ed. Kaara L. Peterson, Stephanie Moss (London: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 151-70.

of Othello's (and, in this production, Iago's) selfhood. We can return to Altman's explanation of the compelling power of 3.3 as a process of mutual unmaking undertaken by Othello and Iago. Without the rhetoric that constitutes Othello's ethos, chaos is come again; for Othello, not knowing 'what to think' means not knowing what or how to be. Recall that, according to Gil, Welles' *Othello* disorients us through its mismatched shot-reverse shot sequences; these sequences interfere with a viewer's usually intuitive sense of who is looking at whom. I suggest that these mismatched sight-lines create in the viewer and for the characters a *post facto* sense of self that constitutes itself moment-to-moment, shot by shot, because we have to imagine a fictive self that is looking along that sight-line, next to but not identical to the characters shown in shot-reverse shot. In this way, Welles exploits cinematic technique and Shaikh manipulates the establishing shot just as Iago's rhetoric influences Othello's post-rhetorical ethos.

Unlike the political rage and wider world of Davies's contemporary, London *Othello*, Shaikh's film presents the 'tragedy of the Moor' as the tragedy of Othello himself, and screens out the tragedy of what it might mean to be a Muslim in a Christian world. Post-9/11, however, a domestic, personal tragedy arguably makes its own political argument, one that asserts the rights of immigrant Muslims to serve and to sin, to judge and be judged, as individual, flawed human beings rather than as representatives of their faith. Rota's *Othello* is more than 'The Moor'.

3. Web-series

The 'web-series' produced by Ready Set Go Theatre queries not just the conventions of the early modern stage, of feature film, and of television broadcast, but also the

expectations of traditional twenty-first-century film and television casting, such as having actors share the gender of their characters. The hastily-composed shots, extreme close-ups, and occasional blurred focus connect the series to the self-made and uploaded YouTube Shakespeare videos of *Othello* that Ayanna Thompson and others have discussed.²⁷ YouTube or digital video blog (vlog) hypermediates personal subjectivity through a kind of recorded ‘liveness’ that brings us closer and more frequently than ever into the lives of others despite what may be vast physical distances. These social media connections reinforce a primary narcissism for the viewer. Classic film scholarship argues that subjects cathect the larger-than-life figures viewed in darkness on the big screen, but with mobile media we can carry these screen presences with us and subordinate their performances to a range of multimedia distractions. Even stationary, not mobile, digital screens such as computer monitors or NetTVs can foster such a narcissism by putting film into competition with the other screens and windows that a viewer can simultaneously access. A viewer glancing at the corner of a screen is a curator; she has added *Othello* to a collection of multimedia objects that reinforce her own importance as organizing principle.

The series breaks the play into twelve ten-minute ‘webisodes,’ which were released sequentially, like a traditional television series, but are now available for viewing all at once. As in a television series, each instalment was given a title, and began and ended with music and credits. Many episodes used an alt folk soundtrack (by singer Lora Faye), and the music registered in increasingly intermedial and meaningful ways as the series developed. The series was shot in Brooklyn and the West Village by graduates of the New School for Drama

²⁷ Ayanna Thompson, ‘Unmooring the Moor: Researching and Teaching on You Tube,’ *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61.3 (2010): 337-56.

over a period of a month, funded by a Kickstarter campaign supported by ‘family, friends and even customers at Dizzy’s Diner in Park Slope, where both [John] Hurley and [Sue] White [founders and actors in the company] work.’²⁸

The webisodes break up the rhythm of the play but also make it into a web-series, as if much more time is passing and we are binge-watching (if we watch it all together) or as if it’s happening in real-time (as if the characters were tweeting it on social media or uploading video logs to YouTube). The so-called ‘double time scheme’ of *Othello* has no effect here, because watching the story unfold in instalments at regular intervals makes it seem as though we are watching through windows into episodes of a long-standing relationship and as though off-camera events have influenced what we are seeing in ways we cannot know. The present-day setting and clothing recall other web-series such as *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a modernized *Pride and Prejudice* shot for the internet as a vlog. Both reality television and vlog prove very apt platforms for Iago, who stages/scripts his play while making it seem as though it is reality.

Although this production showed signs of amateurism (a wobbling hand-held camera; inconsistent sound-editing; some delayed or partial focus; continuity errors; some mispronunciations; occasionally careless dramaturgy), it gained in sophistication through the webisodes. The shaky hand-held camera of the opening sequences was replaced for the most part by stable shots that still retained an allusive, active, mobile setting, as in episode four, in which a remorseful and drunken Cassio (Lauren Boyd) lolled in the subway while the camera

²⁸ Meena Hart Duerson, ‘Brooklyn theater company turns Shakespeare’s ‘Othello’ into a web show broken into 12 episodes,’ *New York Daily News* (September 14, 2012), online <<http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/brooklyn-theater-company-turns-shakespeare-othello-web-show-broken-12-episodes-article-1.1158910#ixzz2mhxIYeUk>>, last access: December 6, 2013.

faced Iago (Cory Lawson) as he walked along the platform during his soliloquy. Iago moved in and out of frame constantly, the camera tracking him. Although we could see Cassio languishing in the subway, the character could not hear Iago's words. These televisual, documentary-style techniques allied Iago's soliloquy to reality television, an analogy heightened by the quotidian setting of the New York subway, the natural lighting throughout, and Iago's muted voice.

The series cast female actor Lauren Boyd as 'Michel' Cassio, a decision that could have been interesting but that was hard to parse because the script changed its pronouns inconsistently, adapting some references but leaving others. (It also cross-cast Shannon Stewart as Montano, but without any change to the character's name.) Thus Desdemona refers to 'Michael Cassio, who came a-wooing with you,' although the credits reference 'Michel'; Iago anticipates 'she'll be...full of quarrel' when he plies Cassio with drink in episode 3; and Desdemona refers to Cassio as 'a man that languishes in your displeasure'. It is unclear whether the variations were deliberately intended to challenge the notion of binary sex difference, whether the dramaturge and actors simply overlooked them, or whether we were meant to imagine Cassio as Shakespeare's Cassio still, a man's part played by a female actor (although in that case, why change from 'Michael' to 'Michel' in the credits?). Without a clear indication of where to place this Cassio on a gender continuum (as male, female, homosexual, heterosexual, trans- or cisgendered, or genderqueer), or of *whether* to place her on a gender continuum (whether sex or gender was intended to be 'read' as a theatrical sign at all), heteronormativity reasserts itself. Othello's jealousy emerges to viewers as a violent homophobia, a murderous rage triggered by his wife's imagined same-sex love-affair. In the contemporary United States, the ugly extra-diegetic belief in African American homophobia

on the one hand and Black male violence on the other can overwhelm the performance if not addressed in some way. My students certainly assumed that the sex of Desdemona's lover both triggered and exacerbated Othello's sexual jealousy, and that his race determined the violence of his response. The production thus screened at large the intersection of sexuality and race because it screened out a diegetic explanation for Cassio's gender.

Episode Six of the web-series beautifully intermediates music, the history of cinema, and classical stage convention to indicate that the handkerchief, that 'trifle, light as air,' has already determined the ending. This episode concludes with an acoustic cover by Lora Faye (and unnamed female backing singers) of 'Do Not Forsake Me, O My Darlin', also known as the 'Ballad of *High Noon*' immortalized in the classic Western of that name. *High Noon* (1952) notoriously adheres to the unities of place, action – and, through the loud ticking of the clock and its countdown to former sheriff Will Kane's climactic encounter with the criminal Frank Miller – time. This musical interpolation evokes heroism, time running out, and lovers who forsake 'clime, complexion, and degree' (Kane's Quaker bride Amy shoots Miller, saving her husband, despite her deeply held pacifism). In a play where the betrayal of Othello by Iago often attracts most attention, a woman's voice pleading musically with her husband not to 'forsake [her]...on this our wedding day' returns us to Desdemona.

4. Shakestream

Auslander pointed out that history and context determine 'liveness,' so perhaps we should not be surprised to see the Royal National Theatre, Shakespeare's Globe, and the Royal Shakespeare Company describing what are usually playbacks of recorded performances as 'live' experiences. Such playbacks constitute a hybrid medium, a medium in

its own right, or rather, an intermedium that combines the ephemeral, occasional, and social experience of playgoing with the recorded, repeated, and private consumption of projected film. The ‘NTLive’ broadcast and projection of Nicholas Hytner’s *Othello* (2013), set in present-day London and an unspecified Middle Eastern military base for the Cyprus scenes, was obviously a play -- it was performed on stage with live actors, and the screencast displayed not only the limited ‘box’ set but also audience members, their responses, the noise of the crowd before, during, and after the intermission, and the curtain call. After the curtain call, however, it scrolled its ‘credits,’ feature-film style. The gimmick of NTLive is supposedly that these broadcasts include aspects of feature film by using multiple, variable-focus, moving cameras that can focus on characters’ faces, even down to the sweat trickling down Othello’s (Adrian Lester’s) brow, and to the gasping supposed corpse of Emilia on the bed. The broadcasts also make use of television conventions such as a presenter, commercials for other NT live performances, and an interpolated documentary about the ‘making of’ the production and its military consultant screened during the mandatory intermission.

We expect our eye to be guided in auteur-driven film; such productions are shot out of temporal sequence, and the performance only happens when the director shouts, ‘Action!’ In a filmed stage production, the camera directs our attention like the intrusive narrator in a novel by Thomas Hardy or George Eliot, omniscient but insistently guiding. It tells you where to look and what to look at closely, and screens out the experiences of others even though we know – and this is a crucial distinction between filmed ‘live’ stage production and feature film – that the action continues off-camera in a performance space just out of sight. For example, the startling moment in the first mixed-race *Othello* in apartheid South Africa,

Janet Suzman's ground-breaking 1989 production starring John Kani — when Othello's tribal-seeming necklace turns out to sheathe the dagger with which he will kill himself — arguably loses some of its effect on the massively distributed videotape of this historic performance. Although we follow the action of the dagger as it transforms from decorative to deadly object, we cannot — as we almost certainly would if we were able — glance quickly at Cassio or Gratiano to see whether they are surprised, sorrowful, or resigned.

As in Oliver Parker's, Jonathan Miller's, or Trevor Nunn's filmed *Othellos*, Hytner's production screened at large a domestic tragedy and screened out, through its use of close-up, an explicitly political one. Hytner's Othello, unlike Sax's, was not the only black character in his environment; the soldiers under his command came from various ethnicities and both genders. Rory Kinnear's Iago was overwhelmed with sexual jealousy and given this consistent motive throughout to explain his behavior. This Iago's motive is to instill in his general the tortured sexual jealousy that he himself experiences with regard to his wife, and he lacks Iago's characteristic delight in designing duplicitous schemes and seeing them performed. The close-ups of Kinnear's face — even down to his twitching lips and tic-like spasms — pinpointed the suggestion that this was not a play about race but about psychology, including Othello's affronted dignity and sense of self. This production again supports Altman's suggestion that Othello constructs his sense of self rhetorically and after the fact. Once Othello starts to doubt assumptions he has taken for granted (in Altman's terms, once the balance between the 'probable' or provable and the 'improbable' or unprovable has been upset), he sees no alternative but savagery. As has always been true in the text but as we note afresh in this performance, Adrian Lester's Othello initiates the motion from uncertainty to murder; Kinnear's Iago seems startled or even overwhelmed by the events that he has set in

motion.

All the domestic *Othellos* share a sense of claustrophobia, enhanced by the Shakestreamed hyper-mediacy of Hytner's production. The NT production featured smaller 'sub-sets' (Richard Forsyth's useful term) that literally boxed in the violent action of the fight scene.²⁹ The sub-sets reinforced the extreme insularity of the Cyprus setting at a military base. Aside from the regular melodic interruptions of the call to prayer, the production screened out the Middle Eastern setting of the world outside the base (to the extent that I wondered where Bianca lived and what kind of clothing she was wearing and who were her clients). In both the brawl and the murder of Desdemona, the confined space – a box or sub-set on the large stage and then another box (in the Shakestream broadcast or recorded projection) on the cinema screen -- emphasized 'the pity of it' (4.1.190): the utter contingency or willfulness of this tragedy, as if the world keeps shrinking even to the size of the bed. Donne's lyric 'The Sunne Rising' joyfully imagines the lovers' 'world contracted' to the bedroom and then the bed itself: 'This bed thy center is, these walls thy sphere,' but these lovers' bed-sheets become their winding-sheets, as Desdemona anticipated.

5. Conclusion

Each of these screened *Othellos* screens out a different aspect of the play, often in order to screen (to magnify) another. Buchowetzki's film screened out Othello's Black African origins and foregrounded the clash between Othello's chivalric medievalism and Iago's cinematic modernity. Welles's film screened out the possibility of human love in order

²⁹ Richard Forsyth, 'NT Live: Othello and Shows Coming Soon,' Players-Shakespeare.com (blog), <http://players-shakespeare.com/nt-live-othello-and-shows-coming-soon/>, last access January 28, 2014.

to broaden the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender. Sax's television broadcast screened out the cathartic or purifying experience of tragedy and amplified the persistent institutional racism of contemporary London. Shaikh's television film screened out the association of skin color with race and emphasized the 'tragedy of the Moor' or Muslim. The web-series screened out Cassio's gender but ultimately magnified contemporary associations about race and sexuality. Hytner's NTLive production screened out Othello's racial isolation but emphasized the claustrophobia of soldiers on a base far from home.

In all of these intermediated performances, what's excluded is the Real and the unpredictable -- the lived experience of race for the actor, the real bodies of the actors in the same physical space as the audience, the possibility (however unlikely) of unexpected personal catastrophe on the one hand and inappropriate comic resolution on the other. In this way screen *Othellos* magnify human, breathing, suffering bodies even as they conceal, protect, and withdraw from us from the lived truth of race in the world. The screen screens.

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