



THE TEMPTATION SCENE IN ORSON WELLES'S AND FOLIAS D'ARTE'S ADAPTATIONS OF *OTHELLO*

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RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é comparar e contrastar a representação da chamada cena da tentação no filme de Orson Welles intitulado *Othello* (1952) e na produção teatral de *Otelo* pelo grupo Folias d'Arte, que estreou em São Paulo, no ano de 2003, ambas adaptações da peça de William Shakespeare. A cena da tentação é considerada um momento crucial da peça, já que se refere ao momento em que Iago astutamente reúne todas as suas forças como estrategista para influenciar os pensamentos de Otelo com a ideia de que Desdemona está traindo o Mouro com Cássio – e Iago atinge seu objetivo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Orson Welles; Folias d'Arte; *Othello*; Cena da tentação.

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to compare and contrast the portrayal of the temptation scene in both Orson Welles's film adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1952) and Folias d'Arte's theatrical production of the same play, which premiered in 2003 in São Paulo, in order to identify and analyze the depiction of Iago's manipulative schemes towards Othello. The temptation scene is considered a crucial moment in the play in which Iago cleverly gathers all his strength as a strategist to influence Othello's mind with the idea that Desdemona is betraying him with Cassio—and Iago achieves such obstinate goal.

KEYWORDS: Orson Welles; Folias d'Arte; *Othello*; Temptation scene.

INTRODUCTION

It seems that throughout the years William Shakespeare's works continue to inspire theater directors, as well as film directors to adapt Shakespeare's plays. Each theatrical production and film adaptation of Shakespeare's works offers a different reading and a unique interpretation of the plays, especially regarding some specific scenes that are considered crucial to the narrative and the building of the characters.

The temptation scene in Shakespeare's *Othello*, a play which was highly influenced by Giraldo Cinthio's short story, can be considered a vital moment in the play which reveals Iago's abilities as a strategist. Barbara Heliodora in *Falando de Shakespeare* claims that such passage in *Othello* is the "cena central da peça".¹ E. A. J. Honigmann in the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Othello* endorses the importance of this passage when he points out that the temptation scene is one of the most impressive episodes of the play.² This particular passage in *Othello* is located in act 3, scene 3, and represents the decisive moment when Iago puts into practice his schemes towards influencing Othello's thoughts. During the temptation scene, Iago poisons Othello's mind with the idea that Cassio is having an affair with the Moor's – that is Othello's – wife, Desdemona. From that moment on, Othello never recovers himself again, becoming deeply disturbed by jealousy, and a chain of unfortunate events escalate in the play. The aim of

this article is to draw a comparison between one scene from Orson Welles's film adaptation of *Othello* and Folias d'Arte's theatrical production of the same play, more specifically the temptation scene. The analysis of this particular scene will consist in identifying and investigating the portrayal of Iago's manipulative schemes against Othello through the cinematic and theatrical devices.

OTHELLO'S MAIN SOURCE: GIRALDI CINTHIO'S NOVELLA

Before embarking on the analysis of scenes, it is quite significant to explore the fact that Giraldo Cinthio's short story strongly influenced Shakespeare's *Othello*. As Honigmann mentions, "The principal source of *Othello* is the seventh novella in the third decade of Giraldo Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (1565)".³ Honigmann explains that Cinthio's third decade stories are quite connected and related to the themes of "infidelity of husband and wives".⁴ For instance, the sixth story tells the tale of a husband that seeks revenge for being betrayed by his wife, and therefore kills her and makes it look like an accident. The seventh story, the one that is closer to Shakespeare's *Othello*, brings the same issues as in the previous tale.⁵ Such themes would be later refined in *Othello*.

Other aspects of Cinthio's seventh story can be observed in Shakespeare's *Othello*. One of them regards the main characters, such as the ones in Cinthio's story, the Moor,

1. HELIODORA. *Falando de Shakespeare*, p. 122. The play's central scene. The translation into English was provided by the authors of this article.
2. HONIGMANN in SHAKESPEARE. *Othello*, p. 104.

3. HONIGMANN. Cinthio and minor sources, p. 368.
4. HONIGMANN. Cinthio and minor sources, p. 369.
5. HONIGMANN. Cinthio and minor sources, p. 370.

Disdemona, the Corporal, and the Ensign. They are in fact quite similar to the characters in Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, Desdemona, Michael Cassio, and Iago, respectively. However, Shakespeare cleverly added a new character in his story, and that would be Roderigo. Cinthio's Ensign could be considered the blending of Iago and Roderigo, since in his story, the Ensign is in love with Disdemona and at the same time is considered a true villain, as it can be observed in the following passage of Cinthio's seventh story, extracted from the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Othello*:

The Moor had in his company an Ensign of handsome presence but the most scoundrelly nature in the world. He has in high favour with the Moor, who had no suspicion of his wickedness; for although he had the basest of minds, he so cloaked the vileness hidden in his heart with high sounding and noble words, and by his Achilles. [...] The wicked Ensign, taking no account of the faith he had pledged to his wife, and of the friendship, loyalty and obligations he owed the Moor, fell ardently in love with Disdemona, and bent all his thoughts to see if he could manage to enjoy her; but he did not dare openly show his passion, fearing that if the Moor perceived it he might straightway kill him. [...] Turning over in his mind divers schemes, all wicked and treacherous, in the end he determined to accuse her of adultery and to make her husband believe that the Corporal was the adulterer.⁶

Thus Shakespeare's Roderigo is the character that would represent the Ensign's feelings for the wife of the Moor, leaving enough room for Iago's evilness to gradually develop in the story. By the addition of Roderigo, Shakespeare creates a more unscrupulous villain in Iago, a character that has somehow intrigued and captured the attention of the most various audiences throughout the world.

Another similar aspect regarding Cinthio's story and Shakespeare's *Othello* is related to some details of the plot itself. The Ensign and Iago are solely focused on creating schemes to deceive their main targets, and do not mind if they hurt or even kill whoever crosses their paths. The Corporal and Cassio, as well as the Moor and Othello, become imminent targets of both villains, and the whole scheme eventually culminates in the death of various characters, including Disdemona and Desdemona. The handkerchief is also treated as the false proof to implicate that the Corporal and Disdemona, as well as Cassio and Desdemona, would be having an affair.

Shakespeare greatly applied Cinthio's seventh story as a source material in many ways, but he has also added other elements into *Othello*. For instance, in terms of plot, Iago does not help Othello to kill Desdemona, as it happens with the Ensign and the Moor. Besides that, perhaps in order to enhance the tragedy in the story, Othello does not deny

6. Quoted in HONIGMANN. Cinthio and minor sources, p. 373-374.

that he has killed Desdemona in front of the Venetians, and kills himself, as opposed to the Moor who denies the crime that he had committed and is later killed by Desdemona's relatives. In addition Honigmann points out that "apart from Cinthio, many other writers and sources contributed to *Othello*".⁷ Thus, Shakespeare, inspired by Cinthio's short story and other sources, wrote an astounding tragic play, in which he created new characters and details in the plot, and added other elements. He has built the characters in a more complex manner in which contemporary adaptations, either in theatrical plays or films, continue to experiment as much as possible with different creative processes in order to portray their intrinsic relationships. Honigmann adds some final words on how Shakespeare has detached *Othello* from Cinthio's story, for instance, by bringing a greater complexity to the characters and using the handkerchief as a significant element in the plot with heritage ties to Othello:

But Shakespeare's greatest effort went into characterization, converting Cinthio's stereotype men and women, who exist only as plot mechanisms, into individuals interesting in themselves. Shakespeare's imagination also seized on many details, some of them barely hinted at by Cinthio, and conjured gold out of dross (the threat form 'the Turk', the imagery of sea and water, a generalized sexual antagonism). The handkerchief becomes crucial exhibit in the play's treatment

of 'chance' and also brings with it glimpses of the Egyptian and sibyl, and of Othello's father and mother. [...] Anyone who thinks of Othello as a short story blown up beyond its capacity should keep in mind that Shakespeare packed into it much miscellaneous reading as well as something not far removed from research, his perusal of very recent books on the Mediterranean world, on north Africa and on Venice.⁸

THE ANALYSIS OF IAGO'S MANIPULATION IN THE TEMPTATION SCENE

In 1952, Welles released his film adaptation of *Othello*, which was acclaimed by the critics. Anthony Davies in *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* praises Welles's film by commenting on the successful fusion of theatrical and cinematic spaces in the visual construction:

The techniques of *Othello* are considerably more refined. The theatricality of constructed décor gives way to the realism of sea and sky, and to the architectural polarities of Venice and Moga-dor. For the first time [...] we are faced with a film which aims at reconciling theatrical drama with the realism of non-theatrical spatial elements. The sustained insistence with which the film achieves this reconciliation, and its integration or architectural realism not simply as a justification for cinema but as a thematic statement, is the major distinction which distances Welles's *Othello* from every other major Shakespearean film.⁹

7. HONIGMANN. Cinthio and minor sources, p. 387.

8. HONIGMANN. Cinthio and minor sources, p. 387.

9. DAVIES. *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 100.

Paolo Mereghetti also comments on Welles's film by stating that the inventive *mise-en-scène* was a clear sign of his departure from Hollywood's standards of realism:

Othello, the product of years of work and financial wrangling, became for Welles the means by which he could assert, with total conviction, his decision to reject Hollywood's facile dependence on cinematic realism. The richness of Shakespeare's text, the variety of readings and interpretations it offered, enabled Welles to reject naturalism and opt for a more creative *mise-en-scène*. [...] His *mise-en-scène* is imposing and majestic, as the film's opening and closing scenes clearly demonstrate; 'his' Othello—a towering, tragic figure—is an instinctive and uncultured individual at war with a civilization from which he feels hopelessly excluded.¹⁰

In Welles's *Othello*, the initial part of the temptation scene is filmed in what Davies calls a long tracking shot, which in the film lasts eighty seconds.¹¹ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in *Film Art: An Introduction* explain that in a tracking shot “the camera [...] change[s] position traveling in any direction along the ground—forward, background, circularly, diagonally, or from side to side”.¹² Also, Bordwell and Thompson define the concept of long take as “lengthy shots”.¹³ Thus in Welles' film the long tracking shot works as a long take as it is presented on screen for an extensive period without interruptions. The camera then follows Othello

(Orson Welles) and Iago (Michéal MacLimmóir) while they are walking along the parapet of a castle in Cyprus and having a conversation, which in this case corresponds to the initial part of the temptation scene in the play.

One result of filming the initial part of the temptation scene in a long tracking shot is that this filmic device helps emphasize the notion that Iago skillfully uses his manipulative abilities on Othello. This particular passage of the play, as well as the long tracking shot, start in the film right after Desdemona (Suzanne Cloutier) leaves the scene, as she was previously talking to Othello. Iago and Othello then start walking along the parapet (see fig. 1). At first, Othello gives the impression that he is very confident about his relationship with his wife, and he is even smiling. As Iago starts his moves to distort the reality of Othello's relationship with Desdemona by incriminating Cassio (Michael Laurence), Othello's facial expression changes to uncertainty, which hints that Iago is starting to succeed in his plans of influencing Othello. Welles then manages, using the long tracking shot, to intensify the impression that Iago is a despicable fellow, who coldly and quickly calculates his way to destroy Othello's happiness. Besides, it is possible to observe the rapid effect of Iago's arguments in Othello's facial reaction, which highlights the naiveté of Othello as the grand general who succumbs to the words of his ensign. In addition, in

10. MEREGHETTI. *Masters of Cinema: Orson Welles*, p. 62.

11. DAVIES. *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 109.

12. BORDWELL; THOMPSON. *Film Art: an Introduction*, p. 195.

13. BORDWELL; THOMPSON. *Film Art: an Introduction*, p. 208.

relation to the end of the long tracking shot, Davies comments that Iago “walks abruptly forward out of the frame and the camera stops its tracking movement to isolate Othello in the frame, standing still. Iago has abandoned him at a moment calculated to leave him overbalancing on the threshold of curiosity and doubt [...]”.¹⁴ Therefore, with the aid of cinematographic devices, Welles cleverly succeeds in portraying the idea that Iago is a cold strategist that can effectively influence and manipulate Othello’s mind.



FIGURE 1

14. DAVIES. *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 110.

FIGURE 1
The long tracking shot frames Othello walking beside Iago.
Source: WELLES. *Othello*, 1952.

In relation to Othello and the camera movement in the film, Louis Giannetti in *Understanding Movies* points out that there is a change from an energetic photography of Othello in the beginning to a static portrayal of the character by the end of the film due to the poisoning of Iago’s schemes in his mind:

Orson Welles exploited the mobile camera to suggest the title character’s dynamic energy in *Othello*. Early in the movie, the confident Moor is often photographed in traveling shots. In the ramparts scene (the temptation scene), he and Iago walk with military briskness as the camera moves with them at an equally energetic pace. When Iago tells him of his suspicions, the camera slows down, then comes to a halt. Once Othello’s mind has been poisoned, he is photographed mostly from stationary set ups. Not only has his confident energy drained away, but a spiritual paralysis invades his soul. In the final shots of the movie, he barely moves, even within the still frame. This paralysis motif is completed when Othello kills himself.¹⁵

Furthermore, the dialogue during the entire temptation scene in Welles’ version was streamlined, a common practice, according to Alan Dessen in *Rescripting Shakespeare*, in the majority of Shakespeare’s adaptations.¹⁶ Welles’s dialogue in the temptation scene probably went through the

15. GIANNETTI. *Understanding Movies*, p. 119.

16. DESSEN. *Rescripting Shakespeare*, p. 2.

process of “rescripting”, a term proposed by Dessen that has to do with the changes in the playscript because of “a perceived problem or to achieve an agenda”.¹⁷ Dessen gives as an example of rescripting the cutting of speeches and scenes in order to streamline the playscript and therefore save running time, as well as the removal of characters and passages that do not seem appropriate in relation to the concept of the production.¹⁸ Another term proposed by Dessen is “rewriting”, which is related to “situations where a director or adapter moves closer to the role of the playwright so as to fashion a script with substantial differences from the original”.¹⁹

Dessen also calls attention to the fact that rescripting and rewriting decisions should take into account the appropriate “trade-offs”.²⁰ Such term refers to the idea that if something in the original playscript is changed, it is necessary to balance such alteration. In other words, the evaluation of both “pluses and minuses” of rescripting and rewriting decisions is required.²¹ For instance, in Welles’ adaptation of *Othello*, Iago’s soliloquies are entirely cut from the narrative. Iago’s soliloquies are an essential device for the audience to perceive his malignant temper. Thus the long tracking shot in the initial part of the temptation scene could be considered an asset in the

film, through which it is possible to notice the intensity of Iago’s coldness and his effectiveness as a manipulative character. Perhaps this could serve as an element in the film that would help compensate for the absence of Iago’s soliloquies.

In 2003, the Brazilian theatrical group Folias d’Arte staged in São Paulo a production of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, in this case, *Otelo*. The staging, set in contemporary times, was acclaimed by critics in Brazil and Portugal. *Otelo* received the 2003 APCA (Associação Paulista de Críticos das Artes) award for Best Play and the 2003 Prêmio Shell awards for Best Director and Best Scenography. This production was directed by Marco Antonio Rodrigues, and had the original text especially translated by Maria Sílvia Betti, who works as a professor at Universidade de São Paulo. The producers were Patrícia Barros and Alexandre Brazil.

Mariângela Alves de Lima in “Folias d’Arte oferece as outras faces de Otelo” comments on the performance of Otelo, played by Ailton Graça. According to Lima, Graça carefully emphasizes the idea that Otelo is a respectful and sensitive character. Besides, Lima approves Otelo’s silence and pauses when he is being instigated by Iago.²² In fact, concerning Graça’s portrayal of Otelo, it is possible to observe a balance between the two categories of performance

17. DESSEN. *Rescripting Shakespeare*, p. 3.

18. DESSEN. *Rescripting Shakespeare*, p. 3.

19. DESSEN. *Rescripting Shakespeare*, p. 3.

20. DESSEN. *Rescripting Shakespeare*, p. 3.

21. DESSEN. *Rescripting Shakespeare*, p. 3.

22. LIMA. Folias d’Arte oferece as outras faces de Otelo, p. D7.

pointed by Honigmann. The critic mentions that actors tend to portray Othello either as a “thoughtful, noble, (and) tender” character or as an “explosive” one.²³ Graça’s Othello would then represent a balance between these two aforementioned groups of actors.

Lima also comments on the performance of Iago, played by Francisco Brêtas. The critic points out that Brêtas portrays the ideal villain, controlling words and gestures for his own benefit. In addition, regarding the interaction of both characters Othello and Iago, Lima mentions that there is an equilibrium between the extensive verbal efforts of Iago and the general silence of Othello.²⁴ Another feature of Brêtas’s portrayal of Iago that can be pointed is that Iago is quite an explosive character in this production. His horrendous laughing at Othello’s disgrace seems to intensify Iago’s villainy.

Beth Néspoli in “Um Novo Olhar Sobre a Tragédia da Traição” for *O Estado de São Paulo* praises some aspects of the production. Néspoli enthusiastically comments that “A julgar pelo ensaio presenciado pelo Estado, vem aí uma excepcional montagem de Othello”.²⁵ Foliás’ production, as the critic argues, prioritizes the political context of the play, and the visual aspects of *Othello* have a striking impact on the audience. Concerning the performances of Graça and Brêtas, Néspoli highly praises both actors by stating that their acting

can be considered as notable depictions of Othello and Iago. Graça finds the perfect balance between moments of tranquility and desperation of his character, and Brêtas masterly reveals Iago’s several personality traits.²⁶

As Welles makes use of cinematic devices, more specifically the long tracking shot, Foliás d’Arte’s *Othello* also relies on creative theatrical elements in the portrayal of the temptation scene. One relevant aspect of the temptation scene in *Othello* is the fact that the seats for the audience are arranged in different places. While Othello and Iago are having a conversation at the beginning of the aforementioned scene, the crew moves the seats closer to the stage, with the audience still sitting on them (see figs. 2-3). Unavoidably, the audience is positioned very near the stage, which creates the opportunity for people to follow closely the manipulative moves of Iago and Othello’s reactions to them. Néspoli in “Palcos mutantes atijam criatividade” comments on the challenges of the arrangement of the audience seats for the artists. The critic points out that the possibility of moving seats in the audience motivates artists to overcome several problems, such as the lack of adequate space for theatrical performances. On the other hand, as Néspoli mentions, artists are creatively motivated by this challenge of performing on such a different type of stage.²⁷

23. HONIGMANN in SHAKESPEARE. *Othello*, p. 94.

24. LIMA. Foliás d’Arte oferece as outras faces de Othello, p. D7.

25. NÉSPOLI. Um Novo Olhar Sobre a Tragédia da Traição, p. D1. Based on the rehearsal session in which *Estado* was present, this is going to be an exceptional production of *Othello*. The translation into English was provided by the authors of this article.

26. NÉSPOLI. Um Novo Olhar Sobre a Tragédia da Traição, p. D1.

27. NÉSPOLI. Palcos mutantes atijam criatividade, p. D3.



FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3

FIGURES 2 AND 3
Folias' crew moves the seats during
the performance.
Source: RODRIGUES, 2003.

Another significant aspect of Folias d'Arte's temptation scene is the suggestion that the character Otelo has vision problems. He wears glasses during practically the entire temptation scene. Honigmann comments that a possible impaired vision of Othello could generate a dependency on Iago, as he states, "Shakespeare seems to suggest that Othello sees less clearly than Iago, that he depends on Iago's eyes".²⁸ The critic continues by giving examples: "Othello asks 'But look, what lights come yond?' and Iago tells him 'Those are the raised father and his friends'. A moment later he asks again 'Is it they?' [...] Iago sees (Brabantio) first and reports 'It is Brabantio; general be advised'".²⁹ The addition of glasses in Otelo surely implies more than a certain advance in age, that is, the fact that the character cannot see for himself and blindly relies on Iago's vision of the world. In Folias' portrayal of the temptation scene, Otelo's use of glasses could represent an element that favors the influence of Iago's manipulative arguments, since Otelo would depend on Iago's perspective on the circumstances.

One final aspect of the analysis of *Otelo's* temptation scene is the performance of the character Iago by Brêtas. Initially in the production, Brêtas reveals Iago as an explosive character, laughing loudly and screaming in certain occasions. In the temptation scene, his pattern of voice is altered and Iago transforms himself in a humble and gentle

servant in order to deceive Otelo. Patrice Pavis in *Analysing Performance* calls attention to the voice of actors on stage. Intensity of voice,³⁰ pauses, and breathing are some of the elements that should be taken into account in a performance.³¹ Brêtas, in his portrayal of Iago in the temptation scene, presents a calm tone of voice that implies simplicity of character and servitude. He also includes, as Graça does, pauses in his speech, which gives the idea that Brêtas is not only in control of the character, but also that Iago is thoughtfully concerned about his master. In addition, concerning what Honigmann calls stage imagery, which he defines as "objects and actions shown on stage",³² Iago for a moment in the temptation scene looks quite like a fragile and simple-minded figure, pressing gently with his fingers the bottom part of his jacket (see fig. 4). In fact, Iago is acting and pretending to be a good servant to Otelo, so that he can be more effective in his malignant purposes. Honigmann endorses Iago's abilities as an actor, when he states that "the temptation scene [...], perhaps the most breath-taking scene in the whole of Shakespeare, has been prepared for by the gradual revelation of Iago's outstanding dramatic talents [...]".³³ Therefore, the controlling of voice and bodily actions of Iago in the temptation scene of *Otelo* demonstrates that he is undoubtedly a cold hearted and skillful manipulative character.

28. HONIGMANN in SHAKESPEARE. *Othello*, p. 19.

29. HONIGMANN in SHAKESPEARE. *Othello*, p. 19.

30. PAVIS. *Analysing Performance*, p. 134.

31. PAVIS. *Analysing Performance*, p. 139.

32. HONIGMANN in SHAKESPEARE. *Othello*, p. 86.

33. HONIGMANN in SHAKESPEARE. *Othello*, p. 37.



FIGURE 4
Iago manipulating Othello.
Source: RODRIGUES, 2003.

FIGURE 4

CONCLUSION

Both adaptations of *Othello*, Welles's and Foliás d'Arte's, present elements in the temptation scene that help emphasize Iago's manipulative skills and influence over Othello. Welles works with a long tracking shot, in which the time exposure of the characters on screen encourages the notion that Iago is a good strategist and that Othello easily believes in his lies. Foliás d'Arte's temptation scene includes elements such as the proximity of the audience due to the moveable

seats, which encourages the audience to attentively follow Iago's schemes, as well as Othello's use of glasses, signaling his dependency on Iago's ideas. Besides, Brêtas's modulation of voice and stage imagery put Iago in control of the situation, and reveal that he is aware of what course of action he should take in order to manipulate Othello's thoughts. Such a complex character invites adapters to experiment diversity in his portrayal, since Iago is one of the most intriguing villains in Shakespeare's works. The power of rhetoric will always be one of Iago's strongest features, and filmmakers and theatrical directors can make use of an array of both cinematic and theatrical devices in order to enhance this characteristic on screen and on stage.

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