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Framing Shakespeare on Film

Kathy M. Howlett

OHIO UNIVERSITY PRESS
ATHENS
Chapter Two

The Voyeuristic Pleasures of Perversion

Orson Welles’s *Othello*

As Barbara Everett observes, Shakespeare’s *Othello* is a tragedy that “turns on ‘looking on,’ on voyeurism, on proof” provided by “a mere handkerchief.” Orson Welles’s 1952 production of *Othello* is an adaptation that emphasizes this voyeuristic impulse within Shakespeare’s play. Although the film sacrifices a great deal of Shakespeare’s language, narrative is replaced by visual relationships that require the involvement of the spectator in creating a coherent whole from the fragmented and oscillating perspectives of the camera. Welles emphasizes the viewer’s sense of fragmentation through the excessive use of point of view shots. The film is tightly edited so that scenes are broken up into shots from different perspectives, frequently offering the spectator a “narcissistic doubling” of shot and reverse shot exchanges so that the spectator oscillates between the object choice and identification. Yet, as Peter Donaldson comments, in Welles’s film “reversals of point of view are seen in relation to a sequence in which connection is sought but not found.” The editing style continually suggests to the viewer that he has missed something, has failed to glimpse all the action, much as Shakespeare’s play depicts Othello puzzling over events he too has missed. A broken sequence of camera shots continually disrupts the viewer’s understanding of events, creating a “‘deliberately jerky’ rhythm,” which introduces, as James Naremore observes, “a slightly illogical ellipsis between some of the cuts.” This “gap” or imagined space of action between a scene’s cinematic framing and “the look” or point of view creates what Welles has called “the voyeuristic pleasure of pain.”

The Voyeuristic Pleasure of Pain

Some critics argue that Welles’s stylistic intention emerged from the necessity of shooting his film over a period of four years, encumbered by debt and repeatedly making fundraising forays so that shooting could resume. Barbara Leaming reports that “the sporadic manner in which Orson filmed *Othello* is reflected in its fractured texture.” It is certainly arguable that the need to interrupt filming to raise money for his project—and to deal with his disintegrating marriage with Rita Hayworth—determined not only the “fractured texture” of *Othello* but also the film’s decided emphasis upon “the voyeuristic pleasure of pain.” The psychological tensions replete in Welles’s personal and professional life appear to discover their correlative in his imaginative excesses in theater and film.

One particular incident provides an illuminating glimpse into the Welles of this period. During the four years that Welles spent to complete *Othello* he undertook a variety of projects to help finance his film, though the larger project was never from his mind. Barbara Leaming reports that Welles went to Paris to star in his adaptation of Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* with Micheal MacLiammoir (his Iago in the unfinished *Othello*) as his Mephistophilis. During the casting of *Dr. Faustus* Welles met the young Eartha Kitt, whom he decided to cast as Helen, and dismissed Suzanne Cloutier (Desdemona in *Othello*), to whom he had originally given the part of Helen. The onstage dynamic between Welles’s Faust and Kitt’s Helen suggests how her passivity (her desire not to let the audience perceive the events onstage despite her obvious pain) made her an ideal counterpart to Welles’s impulse to enact “the voyeuristic pleasure of pain”:

Miss Kitt played a young student who, seeing a statue of Faust in a museum, falls in love with him. The action that unfolds is the daydream she has about the statue’s coming alive. As the spotlight falls on Orson he begins suddenly to move.
“And he stretches his arm out,” Miss Kitt recalls. “The girl gets up on the other side of the stage. As she [Kitt] gets to Orson he takes her in his arms and he says, ‘Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.’ He’s talking to the audience [emphasis Kitt’s], and as he says, ‘Helen, make me immortal with a kiss,’ he pulls me up to him, he kisses me, but he bites me [emphasis Kitt’s] at the same time. I mean that he bites me to such an extent that it was very painful.” Miss Kitt suspected it was the conspicuous presence in the front row of an older gentleman friend of hers from the States that triggered Orson’s jealous outburst: “I asked him later and he said that he was jealous. He said he got excited.”

Watching the gentleman in the audience watching him, Welles defends himself against his unconscious voyeurism by using his exhibitionistic tendencies. His fantasy is stimulated in catching the gaze of the older gentleman but his actions reveal the sadistic impulse evident in voyeuristic pleasure at the expense of the objectification of the image of woman.

Welles’s oral erotics transform the oral pleasure of kisses into the excitement of sadistic jealousy. Kitt did not struggle when Welles’s teeth dug into her lip; although she was in pain, she did not want the audience to know what was happening. Besides, she added, “I couldn’t get away from him because he was too strong.” Later, she discovered blood dripping from her mouth and spotting the white apron she had to put on for the next scene. As the show continued, and she sang before the audience, Kitt recalled that “my face was getting bigger and bigger and bigger.” At the final curtain, when approached by Kitt to explain his behavior, Welles “sort of pushed me [Kitt] aside and said, ‘I got excited.’” As Welles’s Faustus is transformed from a passive stage-presence (the statue) to a desiring agent, he simultaneously transforms Kitt’s Helen from a desiring agent to a passive female object and possession inscribed within the male’s desire. His erotic pleasure is determined by looking at the other person as object, but that pleasure is challenged by the spectator within the audience. Pleasure (kissing) becomes jealousy and excitement (biting) and later guilt (pushing Kitt aside and averting his gaze) when Welles discovers his own unstable position in the viewing process.

To look closely at Welles’s production of Dr. Faustus is to see how much in mind he always had his larger project, how in the very formulation of his play he was working out the issues of his film Othello. With MacLiammoir as his Mephistophilis/Iago, Welles recreates the psychological tensions evident in his Othello within another dramatic vehicle, one created to finance and sustain his filmic masterpiece. By substituting Kitt for Cloutier, Welles infuses his adaptation of Dr. Faustus with the racial difference that informs Othello. As the black Helen that Faustus yearns to possess, that symbol of female beauty and adultery so powerful that men bent on possessing her would destroy an entire civilization, Kitt becomes in Welles’s adaptation a vital and active participant, whose desire stimulates the statue of Faustus into being. In this scene it is the frozen statue of Faustus, the monumental alabaster to which Othello compares Desdemona now made “concrete,” who is gazed upon and imagined as returning the gaze of erotic desire. In his Dr. Faustus Welles inverts the imagined dynamic between black man and white woman in Othello to one of an active black woman whose desiring gaze stimulates desire within white male object. In turn, Welles as Faustus attempts to control the imagined desire of his Helen by kissing and biting her. Ironically, he bites her because he imagines he cannot control her imagined desire and because he imagines himself jealous. In biting her he succeeds in rendering her passive because she refuses to break character (determined by the gaze of the audience). Her pain, in fact, determines her position as controlled object who desires and is desired. Her pain is inscribed as blood upon an apron, much as Desdemona’s is inscribed as red strawberries upon a handkerchief. Yet the very emblem of their pain—the white cloth spotted with red—has “magic in the web of it,” for it is the talisman that preserves the threatened male self. The rich imaginative associations between Welles’s theatrical production of Dr. Faustus and his film Othello illuminate the ways in which he sought to explore the voyeuristic pleasure of pain.

In his 1978 documentary Filming Othello Welles would later describe his Othello as a man whose narcissism leads him to the “perverse pleasures
of jealousy.” Welles has called Othello “a perfect male type” who “kills Desdemona adoring her.” In fact, as Welles’s Othello comes more and more to see Desdemona through Iago’s web of lies, he also finds himself aroused by the voyeuristic pleasure of seeing through the woman’s eyes, the eyes of his victim and her imagined erotic gaze. The method by which he murders Desdemona makes explicit his need to be absorbed by an imagined desire. In her death scene Welles visually recreates Desdemona’s objectification within the cinematic frame through Othello’s erotic contemplation of her. However, the camera unexpectedly reverses the relationship between her presence as an object of curiosity and control to reveal, through a sequence of shots using the subjective camera, the connection between voyeurism and sadism, when the erotic impulse becomes fixated into perversion.

In the film’s representation of Desdemona’s death, Suzanne Cloutier is cool and still as any alabaster monument while Welles’s Othello quietly contemplates the features of her beautiful, sleeping face (figure 2.1). The camera reveals Desdemona within the gaze of Othello’s repressed desire, in which Othello sees, and thereby controls, the erotic gaze and desires of his sleeping wife. The fact that Desdemona remains prone and passive as Welles’s Othello prepares to suffocate her reinforces his illusion of control. As Welles’s Othello presses the gauze tight over Cloutier’s face, the camera records her brief struggle from Othello’s point of view as he contemplates with strangely erotic and perverse satisfaction Desdemona’s distorted and transparently veiled face. Because Othello kisses Desdemona’s lips as he strangles her in a grim parody of sexual desire, Jorgens suggests that “Othello kills her [Desdemona] not out of a sense of justice but out of a blend of twisted desire (he kisses her as he strangles her) and hatred for her inhuman perfection.”12 However, the scene’s intense focus upon the instrument by which Othello attempts to control his wife’s desires—the very sheets that she supposedly has contaminated—reveals how Othello’s sadistic need to control her (all too human) sexuality operates within the structures of Othello’s own desires, alternating between an idealizing exaltation of love (the frozen, idealized image) and a ritualized torture of his human female victim.

As he suffocates her, Desdemona’s gaze is unremittingly focused upon Othello. But the subjective camera also reveals Desdemona’s perspective as she perceives the grim resolve of the husband who kills her. The juxtaposition of the shot of Desdemona’s veiled and distorted face—the object of Othello’s erotic gaze—with the subjective camera shot of Desdemona’s gaze upon the man who murders her underscores the relationship between masochistic and sadistic impulses explored by the gaze of the camera.

In Filming Othello Welles describes his Othello as “monumentally male and his story is monumentally a male tragedy.” While the experience of the “male tragedy” as explored in Welles’s film suggests the narcissistic direction of male desire that must be aroused through the eyes of the woman, as in the example of the method of Othello’s murder of Desdemona, the film also explores a homoerotic subtext through the fetishistic aspect of the film apparatus. In other words, the film reduces images of a person’s sexuality that might be perceived as a threat and thus fetishizes by the pleasure of seeing the body in pieces.13 As Janet Bergstrom
demonstrates in her analysis of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the camera implicates the viewer in its voyeuristic and sadistic relationship to the image it fragments. In several interesting respects Welles's *Othello* also explores the relationship between voyeurism and male aggression in a scene not unlike Hitchcock's now-famous shower scene. The spectacle of the naked body, glimpsed but briefly and in fragments by the male who gazes upon it, and the sequence of rapid shot/reverse shot exchanges between the murderer and his victim, are devices used by both Welles and Hitchcock. In Welles's film, the murderer Iago also stalks his naked victims in the steamy baths, although Welles locates this scene of voyeurism and aggression in the Turkish baths of Cyprus rather than in the Bates Motel. However, in Welles's film the fetishized object of the camera's gaze is not the female presence, which in *Othello* becomes increasingly "cold and denying" as Peter Donaldson observes, but instead focuses upon the naked male presence as spectacle.

The personal history between MacLiammoir and Welles accounts, to some extent, for the way that Welles chose to shoot the murder of Roderigo in *Othello*. Welles had met Hilton Edwards (Brabantio) in Welles's *Othello* and Micheal MacLiammoir, the co-directors of the Dublin Gate Theatre, in his youth, and rapidly became a star in the theater in which he debuted as an actor. But, as Welles tells it, "From the first he [MacLiammoir] was insanely jealous of the handsome young newcomer in whom his lover Hilton Edwards seemed to have taken special interest." When the young Welles experienced sudden success in their shows "Michel worked on stirring up Hilton's jealousy about the young American's having stolen the show." Learning reports that after one evening of heavy drinking between Welles and MacLiammoir, MacLiammoir "abruptly and mysteriously turned to Orson and said 'Never trust us!'" That same night MacLiammoir would define the Irish character to Welles as "malice." In fact, these tensions between Welles and MacLiammoir, his later Iago, continued into the filming of *Othello*. Welles complained that MacLiammoir "was always on—ferociously on ... not to show his jealousy about Hilton, you see. Because Hilton loved me—I think Hilton genuinely did—at the moments when he was not under Micheal's influence." The casting of Hilton and MacLiammoir in his *Othello* illuminates the way Welles shaped his film to reinforce the patterns of fascination that existed from the first in Welles's early acting career. The fantasy of desire and malicious jealousy projected upon Hilton and MacLiammoir allowed Welles to play out an illusion of voyeuristic separation.

Arriving in Mogador on the northern coast of Morocco to shoot the first scene—the killing of Roderigo in a Turkish bath—MacLiammoir "discovered among the local population a great many masculine forty-five- and fifty-year-old men to his liking." According to Welles, MacLiammoir was always attracted to "vigorous nonhomosexual types . . . good family men . . . and, ideally, members of the police force." The defining feature of MacLiammoir's homosexuality is that he "narcissistically loves the phallic attributes of other male bodies." MacLiammoir's activities even reached the attention of the governor of Mogador, according to Welles, who "insisted on giving me every day the report of everybody's behavior in Mogador the night before." "At first I pretended that I didn't want to see it. But when I told Micheal that I knew what he'd done the night before, and saw what delight it gave him, then I read it like a newspaper!" Welles "pretends" that he does not wish to "see it," perhaps because, as Laura Mulvey suggests, "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" and "is reluctant to gaze upon his exhibitionist like." But Welles discovers the pleasures of the voyeuristic narrative because MacLiammoir's exhibitionism is made ideally passive through the medium of the official governor's reports, the police surveillance that privileges Welles's voyeuristic pleasure. MacLiammoir's obvious pleasure as well enables Welles to read the potentially threatening homoerotic look "as if it were a newspaper," neutralizing the guilt associated with voyeuristic pleasure by assuring himself of his voyeuristic separation from the activities reported. Yet, curiously, Welles's fascination catches him in the moral ambiguity of looking, the police narrative entwining him within the homoerotic display of desire, although he persists again in the illusion of voyeuristic separation.

Welles sets the scene of Roderigo's murder and Cassio's mutilation and attempted murder in a steamy Turkish bath. Obviously, the change in setting from that of the play is significant, and Welles offers a rather amusing
and now well-known explanation for such a change. He tells of arriving in Mogador, Morocco, where the crew was to shoot Othello's Cyprus scenes and of discovering that the Italian backers who were to supply the money for the costumes had gone bankrupt. While Welles scrambled to find new backers to pay for the needed costumes, he had a large crew and cast with nothing to do. So, as Welles explains, he hit upon the idea that the killing of Roderigo was a scene that could be filmed without costumes—with a cast of naked men in a Turkish bath. The actors wear only towels, except, interestingly enough, Iago. Iago wears the Carpaccio-style costume Welles had dictated for this costume-drama. Fully clothed, he glides furtively among the naked men in clouds of steam, gazing from darkened corners at his intended victims. The handkerchief of Shakespeare's text is transformed in Welles's filmic imagination into the towels that the naked men grasp around them. Whether towel or handkerchief, the characters cling to these fragments of cloth as if they too would magically preserve the wholeness of their manhood while under the gaze of the voyeuristic spectator. In the chaos of Cassio's attempted murder and Roderigo's attempted escape, the camera follows the naked bodies of the scattering men as they cling to these remnants of cloth amid the swirling steam of the bath and the call of alarm (figure 2.2). The scene suggests the role of castration fear in the formation of male spectatorial pleasure, and the handkerchief/towel's function as a sort of talisman against that fear.

The fragmented editing of this scene again creates those "gaps" between action and point of view shots that prevent a coherent narrative and leave the viewer gazing upon the fragments of male bodies glimpsed momentarily in the swirl of the dense stream of the bath. Roderigo's bungled murder of Cassio provides an example of the way Welles uses a slightly illogical ellipsis between the cuts in this film. As Cassio lies naked and sweating in the bath, the naked Roderigo, grasping the towel around his waist with one hand and a dagger in the other, creeps up to his prone form. We see Roderigo fumble and drop something (we suppose it to be the dagger when we hear the heavy thud of metal on the wooden planks), as he moves out of the cinematic frame to the right. The camera instantly cuts to the object upon the floor as a man's hand and arm enter the frame (although it is confusing whose arm it is). As one hand grasps the object on the floor, now revealed as the knife, the audience glimpses beside the knife a blurred object—Roderigo's dog—that rapidly disappears from the frame (figures 2.3-2.5). However, at this moment the dog is glimpsed only briefly, intruding upon the action before the scene cuts to Roderigo's attempted escape and the struggle between Cassio and Roderigo before a door frame. The distance traversed by the actors from the struggle on the floor to the struggle before the doorway suggests a brief lapse in time between these shots and a moment in the struggle obscured from the spectator's view. The jump from a subjective shot (from either Cassio's or Roderigo's perspective) to a shot of both men before the doorway creates an illogical ellipsis or gap between action and point of view, and the jerky movement of the camera gives the spectator the sensation, much like that of the men struggling in the bath, of the motion of bodies and swirl of steam that permits only a fragmented perspective of the entire action.
The Turkish bath scene in Welles's *Othello* frames the male body as spectacle, but this scene is also haunted with sexual ambivalence and the threat of castration or feminization. As the naked Roderigo cowers beneath the slats in the floorboards and calls Iago's name, we see Iago unsheathe his silvery sword above him and thrust it through the slats at the trapped and vulnerable Roderigo. Much as Desdemona is killed by controlling her fetishized image, Roderigo's body lies contained by the slats of the floorboard and shafts of light that illuminate slivers of his naked form. Entrapped, enclosed, and subject to the controlling gaze of Iago, Roderigo's body is literally fragmented by the sword thrusts through the floorboards, in a scene that illuminates the relationship between voyeuristic pleasures and the sadistic impulse.

In *Filming Othello* Welles describes his understanding of Iago's character as the "malice of impotence." He envisioned Iago as a man suffering from impotence, although as Naremore emphasizes, "the malady is never specified in the actual performance, which retains many of Shakespeare's ambiguities, but it becomes a 'subtext' for Micheál MacLiammóir's behavior." MacLiammóir himself believed "there must be no 'passion' in Iago," and wished to emphasize "the secret isolation of impotence under these soldier's muscles." MacLiammóir's performance may reveal no "soldier's muscles," but much in his performance suggests a predatory savagery, particularly in this Turkish bath scene and in Roderigo's murder. As Davies points out, the impotence suggested by this scene lies more in the moral impotence of watching one's own self-destruction, in that the camera reveals the point of view of the victim's terror and immobility. Welles's camera records the blade's slashing through the slats of the dripboards of the Turkish bath while, as Davies points out, "the movement of the camera also makes it partly a subjective shot of the sword's movements," so that the audience achieves Iago's perspective as the sword enters between the slats and the body of Roderigo.

Welles complicates this murder by the addition of a perspective other than that of the murderer and his victim. Roderigo's terrier, which Welles describes as a type of "lap dog used by dandies in all the Carpaccio paintings," innocently views the struggle to kill Cassio and Iago's sadistic murder of Roderigo. Antony Davies argues that the
small, fluffy dog that appears constantly with Roderigo is a revelatory detail regarding Roderigo's foppish characterization and impotence. When Roderigo is murdered, argues Davies, the appearance of the dog as a witness to this murder is but another comment upon the character of Roderigo:

The dog's commentary on the character of Roderigo reaches its climax in the prelude to the murder scene in the Turkish bath. Its uncertain but trusting trot along the boards in the bath-chamber prepares us for the neurotic and puerile distractions of its master as he sits drawing love-graffiti on the wall, then fails in his half-hearted attempt to kill Cassio; and finally cowers under the boards trying to solicit Iago's reassurance.

Indeed, the small dog is a constant presence in the Turkish bath scene, its tiny presence alert, wide-eyed, and anxious, and frequently looking at something the viewer cannot see. The dog is beside the dagger as Roderigo attempts to kill Cassio, and hovers nearby while Iago stalks Cassio. Impotent to act, the dog's gaze haunts this scene in such a way as to be more than a mere comment on Roderigo's foppish character. Because the dog appears at strategic moments when the spectator has an incomplete view of the action, its presence allows the viewer to identify with its reactive gaze before the camera cuts to a close-up shot of Iago's satisfied stare. It is with some irony that the murdered Roderigo cries out from beneath the floorboards "O damn'd Iago, O inhuman dog," because in this scene Welles allows the viewer's humanity to be expressed through the perspective of an innocent dog.

Carpaccio's "Eyewitness Style"

The visual inspiration for Welles's Othello has been the subject of some critical speculation. Jack Jorgens has detected Eisenstein's cinematic influence, and Barbara Hodgdon concludes that Welles's "stylistics derive from silent film, more especially from Carl Dryer's 1928 La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc." Yet critics have tended to ignore Welles's own admission that the visual inspiration for his film was discovered in the art of the Venetian Quattrocentro painter Vittore Carpaccio. Both Welles and Micheal MacLiammoir repeatedly acknowledge the film's indebtedness to Carpaccio in costuming. Yet a comparison between Welles's Othello and Carpaccio's paintings and sketches suggest that Welles was indebted to Carpaccio for more than the clothes his actors wore (figures 2.6-2.7). A cursory glance through Carpaccio's works gives one the sense that even Welles's casting decisions may have been influenced by them: Desdemona (Suzanne Cloutier) resembles the slender blonde saint of Carpaccio's Life of St. Ursula; the courtesan Bianca (Doris Dowling) bears an uncanny resemblance to a courtesan in one of Carpaccio's sketches; the film's Michael Cassio (Michael Lawrence) looks like Carpaccio's portrayal of a man in a red hat; and the small dog in Welles's Othello resembles the Maltese terrier used in a number of Carpaccio paintings, including the cycle Miracles of the True Cross. Not only is the terrier used in Welles's Othello strikingly similar in appearance to the small dogs frequently seen in Carpaccio's masterpieces, but it functions within the cinematic frame much as does the terrier within Carpaccio's paintings.

A study of Carpaccio's paintings suggests Welles's intention in making the gaze of the terrier in Othello such a pervasive part of the murder of Roderigo. One revealing example, in Carpaccio's painting of St. Augustine in His Study, c. 1502, in Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice, depicts St. Augustine at his table in a large and detailed room (figure 2.8). Critics have noted the "theatrical properties" or multiplication of objects that surround St. Augustine, which "tend to distract attention from the vision of the saint." However, "Carpaccio the stage designer," as art critic Norbert Huse calls him, fails in Huse's estimation to achieve in the finished painting what his sketches were able to do:

The room becomes a place for the exhibition of what on close inspection is a highly artificial arrangement of costly and interesting objects. The lack of overall relationships that isolates the objects shown to the point of alienating them is, however, probably involuntary, for in preliminary sketches Carpaccio had not only attempted but succeeded in supplying such relationships in light and atmosphere...
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FIGURE 2.6. Two men await the ship in Carpaccio’s “Life of St. Ursula.” (Courtesy of Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice)

FIGURE 2.7. Iago and Roderigo await Othello’s ship in Welles’s Othello. (Courtesy of Castle Hill Productions, Inc.)

FIGURE 2.8. Carpaccio’s “St. Augustine in His Study” (c. 1502). (Courtesy of Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice)

FIGURE 2.9. Sketch for “St. Augustine in His Study.” (Courtesy of The British Museum, London)
objects] are there for the viewer, not their owner. He [St. Augustine] too was presented more convincingly in the drawing, which showed him pausing in concentrated work, than in the finished picture, which is supposed to show his vision but finds no proper object for his gaze.”

Huse concludes that the final effect of Carpaccio’s painting—the “lack of overall relationships that isolates the objects to the point of alienating them”—was unintentional, Carpaccio’s failure to turn a successful sketch into a successful painting. Yet in the finished painting of St. Augustine in His Study one “object” in particular attracts our gaze (“there for the viewer, not their owner”). Our gaze falls upon a small, alert, and upright dog on the floor at a short distance from the figure of St. Augustine. The dog in the painting is also conceived quite differently in Carpaccio’s preliminary sketches, as a prone and ferret-like creature, whose presence is undistinguished from the other objects in the room (figure 2.9). However, in the final painting the detail of the dog diverts our attention from the larger figure of the saint.

Teresia Pignatti describes the quiet observer in Carpaccio’s painting as a “Maltese puppy in the middle of the floor, the only living being besides the saint himself in this almost aquatic silence. The little animal is motionless, his fluffy coat almost incandescent in the dazzling light; he seems to be gazing up at the fine cloud of dust particles floating down the shaft of light as it pours in from the window.” In Carpaccio’s painting the small dog gazes upon its master and what preoccupies the man. Its small, light figure contrasts with the weightier and darker figure of St. Augustine, the entire painting cast in low, horizontal, rectangular formats. The angle of the gaze of the dog and St. Augustine’s gaze outside the large window are in the same upward direction. Although the object of the saint’s contemplation lies outside the purview of the spectator, the perspective of the dog’s upward gaze suggests that it sees both the saint and the object. The viewer’s attention is caught by the dog whose gaze seems to capture all that the viewer cannot see, and whose small physical presence within the painting pulls our attention away from the larger figure of the saint himself (figure 2.10). The theatrical arrangement of the scene emphasizes the small dog’s role as “sole supporting actor” in a moment of considerable consequence, for his presence, as Brown notes, “provides the real clue that we are viewing something more exceptional than simply a scholar going about his daily tasks by the light of a window.”

FIGURE 2.10. Dog in “St. Augustine in His Study.” (Courtesy of Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice)

Turning back to the Turkish bath scene in Welles’s Othello, one finds a number of similarities between the way Welles films Roderigo’s dog and the way Carpaccio portrays the terrier in St. Augustine in His Study. The dog in Welles’s film appears incandescent as it stands in the dazzling shafts of light that strike its furry coat and head in the shadows of the Turkish bath. It is the innocent observer, a corollary to the innocent gaze of Desdemona who observes her own murder. The dog’s gaze is haunting in this sequence of shots, because it sees clearly what we cannot see and signals to the viewer, as does Carpaccio’s dog, that we might...
be glimpsing something exceptional. A series of shot and reverse-shot exchanges reveals Iago's arm holding the sword and slashing at the body of Cassio, and then Cassio's collapse in pain. The subjective camera allows us to experience the vulnerability of the male body and the violence done to it as the viewer watches Cassio's crouching form, not unlike its experience of Roderigo's slaughter as Iago's blade penetrates through the cracks in the floorboards. In the midst of this series of exchanges the camera focuses upon the lone figure of the little dog looking up at the violence we cannot see. Its gaze is intense and unblinking, the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator whose vision is unpai red and constant, and whose innocent gaze is a marked contrast to the perverse pleasure of Iago's gaze and the horror of Cassio's and Roderigo's. Through the gaze of the dog we view the physical degradation of the male body and its literal dismemberment, and yet sustain the illusion of voyeuristic separation.

In the death of Roderigo we see increasing fragmentation of the victim's body, in which the illusion of Renaissance space is reduced to the metonymical representation of the sword, the slats, and the gaze of the dog. In effect, the viewer is subjected to the sort of "lurid metonymy for murder" into which Othello's logic is locked in the play, which connects "blood," "sheets," and "blot" as the visible signs of his wife's pollution. The viewer of Welles's Othello similarly discovers his understanding of events reduced to a few discernible images or objects, a fracturing of vision that recalls Carpaccio's "eyewitness style," in which selected objects within a scene capture our imagination but fail to illuminate their relationship to the protagonist or to the narrative as a whole. Deprived of explanatory purpose or cause-and-effect relationship within the painting, the viewer must make his own connections between the objects and the narrative, much as a broken sequence of camera shots and reversals of point of view in Welles's Othello require that the spectator seek his own connections. The correspondences between this scene in Welles's film and Carpaccio's Vision of St. Augustine suggest that Welles discovered within Carpaccio's painterly vision a strategy of representation for translating the scopophile tragedy of Othello to the cinematic screen.

Carpaccio's paintings offer an alternative view of truth that tempts the spectator to conclude something that is beyond his power to see. It is a "truth" that Welles's imaginative genius readily grasped as central to the story of his Othello. Much as Carpaccio's paintings challenge traditional concepts of objecthood and observer, the narcissistic doubling of shot and reverse-shot exchanges that characterizes the filmic stylization of Welles's Othello relentlessly challenges the viewer's point of view and undermines his ability to see relationships between characters and objects. The fragmented editing style, characterized by a broken sequence of camera shots, leaves the spectator straining to glimpse the sequences not seen, the relationships not revealed, only surmised through the voyeuristic gaze of another. Our view lingers on the tiny figures of Carpaccio's terrier or Roderigo's dog because, like Othello, we fail to achieve a vision beyond a fragmented truth.

"Tis a pageant / To keep us in false gaze"

Carpaccio's theatrical representation of the problematics of display and spectatorship recalls the struggle facing the Venetian Council in the first act of Shakespeare's Othello, in which the assembled statesmen are denied a secure position by which to judge the intentions of the Turkish fleet. Their attempts to grasp the "truth" behind the Turkish fleet's erratic movements reveal the dangers implicit in spectatorship; conflicting reports frustrate attempts to impose order or meaning, for "There is no composition in these news, / That gives them credit," and information suggesting the number and direction of the Turkish advance are "disproportion'd" (I.iii.1–3). Nevertheless, the Duke claims "it is possible enough to judgement," although events soon reveal that this is bad judgment. The movements of the fleet are mere theatrical display, "a pageant, / To keep us in false gaze" (I.iii.9, 18–19). In this brief scene Shakespeare encapsulates the problematics of spectacle visually demonstrated in the large-scale narrative paintings of Carpaccio and replicated in the cinema of Orson Welles.

Carpaccio's works involve a visual strategy that presents a "pageant" that keeps the spectator in a "false gaze." In a series of paintings Carpaccio
displays a confusion of competing events and objects, diverting the
viewer's concentration from the central narrative while inviting
him· to
make judgments based upon events and relationships that are obscure. The
spectator fails to see any relationship or ordering by which to interpret the
scene, no "composition" by which truth might be discovered through the
objects and their relationships, only a "pageant" or theatrical spectacle, a
"false gaze," by which men interpret and judge, sometimes tragically so.

Most significant of Carpaccio's large-scale narrative paintings is his
Life of St. Ursula, the earliest surviving cycle of the eyewitness school.
Carpaccio painted the eight narrative scenes based on the life of St.
Ursula for the Scuola D. Sant' Orsola when he was only twenty-five
years old, establishing his artistic reputation at about the same age that
Welles established his. In a series of long, horizontal canvases Carpaccio
unfolds the story of a beautiful and martyred St. Ursula in images that
clearly suggest the reworked objective reality of cinematic images. The
low, horizontal and rectangular formats of Carpaccio's paintings present
a perspective to the spectator not unlike the breadth and dramatic
sweep of the unfolding cinematic screen. Indeed, as Patricia Fortini
Brown remarks, critics have often associated Carpaccio's Life of St.
Ursula with the experience of viewing film: "As others have observed,
the effect [of the composition] is one of unfolding: a sequence of gestu­
tures of a single movement as if recorded in a strip of movie frames."44
Carpaccio's visual narrative of the tragic Saint Ursula, in a series con­
structed with conceptions of space and perspective analogous to that
found on the cinematic screen, provided Welles with the ideal model
for a cinematic version of Shakespeare's story of tragic love and death.
A close examination of the introductory and closing sequences of
Welles's Othello reveals the extent to which his film is derived from the
sequence of images portrayed in Carpaccio's Life of St. Ursula, and, from
one particular painting in this cycle, The Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and
Funeral of St. Ursula, c. 1493 (figure 2.11).

In the late 1940s Vittorio Moschini established that the narrative
sequence of Carpaccio's paintings on the walls of the Accademia Galleries
originally followed a clockwise arrangement, which begins and ends with
The Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and Funeral of St. Ursula.45 This is the recon­
structured narrative sequence that Orson Welles would have seen in Venice in
the 1950s as he prepared for the shooting of his Othello. Carpaccio's cycle
depicts the most important stages in the life of the saint, including the
arrival in Cologne that made Ursula a martyr as well as the martyrdom and
burial. The arrangement of the paintings on the south, west, north, and east
walls of the chapel suggests the circular structure of the narrative, beginning
and ending with the funeral of the saint. So, too, the much-observed circu­
lar structure of Welles's Othello opens and closes with the funeral of Othello
and Desdemona.46 Although Shakespeare's play begins with villains hidden
in darkness and concludes with a demand for truncated funeral rites, Welles
chose, instead, to parade the spectacle of tragedy and death before his view­
ers. In fact, ceremonial entries and exits are integral to Carpaccio's and
Welles's conceptions of the narrative of their martyred protagonists. Their
narratives are conceived as a series of greetings and farewells, in which the
funeral procession—the martyred woman's farewell to the worldly stage—
is the event that invites the viewer to enter the scene of the narrative.

The Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and Funeral of St. Ursula depicts a solemn
funeral procession, with the body of Saint Ursula carried by soldiers and
mourners (figures 2.12-2.13). The painting displays the dead body of the
young, blonde Ursula carried on a funeral bier before a fortress, above
which banners wave as the distinctive profile of the holy men follow in the
procession. The fortress walls are cast in relief against the brilliant sky as banners on the fortress wave in the breeze. Carpaccio’s theatrical imagination casts this particular scene almost upon a stage. His painting provides a full view of the landscape from a perspective well above the heads of the people and at some distance from the crowd, although the funeral procession that carries the body of Saint Ursula seems to be moving slowly from our view. In the opening sequence of Welles’s film the camera captures a view similar to that revealed in the funeral of the saint, from an elevated perspective of a funeral procession that moves past the viewer. As in the Carpaccio painting of the funeral of Saint Ursula, Welles’s Othello places the solemn processional and funeral immediately and significantly within the spectator’s view (figures 2.14–2.15).
Spectators are an essential part of the pageant in Carpaccio’s paintings and in Welles’s film. In fact, Welles’s film imitates various poses and activities in which Carpaccio’s Life of St. Ursula captures its spectators—climbing staircases, playing trumpets, or pressing against the crowd to glimpse the procession that passes before them. In the opening funeral sequence Welles, like Carpaccio, captures his spectators in mid-gesture as they watch the funeral processional, their gaze registering for the viewer the significance of the events that seem to be exiting the frame and passing from view. Carpaccio’s painting details the small figures below who observe St. Ursula’s funeral procession, whereas Welles’s camera pans across the faces of the audience below, including men such as Cassio and Ludovico, who have been spectators to this tragedy. Their gaze, like that of the small dogs who observe the murder of Roderigo and the vision of St. Augustine, determines our own position in the viewing process, providing “mirrors of ourselves” and “reflecting back upon us our demeanor and attitudes as we pause before the panel” and as we gaze upon the cinematic screen.  

The opening funeral sequence in Welles’s film owes its considerable dramatic effect to a precise articulation of temporal pace and spatial form. Ponderous and ritualized movement is conveyed through the rhythmic placement of solids and voids—of mourners, marchers, biers, and sky—and is reminiscent of Carpaccio’s articulation of temporal pace and forms in the funeral procession in The Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and Funeral of St. Ursula. Carpaccio understood the dramatic effect achieved through the interplay of space and the placement of forms: “Unlike most of his contemporaries,” Brown observes, “he knew what to leave out.” Carpaccio conveys the ponderous movement of ritual through “an acute sense of interval, of gesture, of cadence, and of the rhythmic placement of solids and voids,” carefully structuring his composition so that “the caesurae between his figures play a role fully as important as the figures themselves.”  

In Carpaccio’s arrangement of figures the spectator experiences a caesurae between forms that recall the “gap” or imagined space of action created by the broken sequence of camera shots that introduces the procession at the beginning and end of Welles’s Othello. Welles’s multiple fragments interpret cinematically the sense of movement and form that Carpaccio creates through association of forms and space. However, in Carpaccio’s painting the defining rhythm of the funeral procession is jarred by the rapid and violent tempo of the events adjacent to it. Brown observes:

In the proleptic sequence of The Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and Funeral of St. Ursula, the narrative action unfolds across the front plane, and the most significant events are no longer deliberately obscured in the background. Another violent act is about to happen right before us. But the descriptive details remain to draw away our attention.

The ponderous and ritualized movements of the funeral in Carpaccio’s painting act as a visual “reference point to clarify and organize a confusion of competing events and objects,” in which simple, ritualized gestures are used to measure the explosion of violence within the frame. Welles employs a similar strategy of contrasting rhythms in his filmed
funeral sequence, using the ritualized movement of the procession as a means to measure the frenzied violence of Iago's capture.

In The Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and Funeral of St. Ursula the spectator's gaze travels from the slaughter of the virgins to the soldiers poised for violent action in the foreground of the painting, and finally to the funeral procession as it appears to be leaving the borders of the painting. Similarly, in Welles's film we witness angry soldiers drag the tethered Iago through a turbulent crowd and shove him into a cage, which swings wildly as it is hoisted above the tower (figures 2.16–2.17). However, moments later, the details of the funeral procession again draw the audience's gaze away from the violence of Iago's capture (figures 2.18–2.19). In the solemn funeral procession, shot from the perspective of the tethered and caged Iago, we witness "the film's first reversals of the expected relation between spectator and character."51

Particularly in the opening sequence, in which Welles intersplices the funeral processions of Desdemona and Othello with shots of Iago dragged by chains through a crowd of onlookers, we sense the temporal and spatial fragmentation that is the dominant experience of this film.
Lorne Buchman observes that Welles uses “the dominant rhythms of the processions to establish a sense of coherence and order early in the film,” which is then shattered by Iago.52 The alternation between rhythmic coherence and confusion, so significant in Carpaccio’s Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and Funeral of St. Ursula, is the central experience of Welles’s Othello, in which the viewer experiences “an ambiguous sense of time—ordered and chaotic, constant and fragmented.”53 In fact, the opening scene of the film establishes the pervasive camera technique in this film. The spectator sees the action through a subjective camera technique, which is immediately followed by a shot that reveals whose perspective the spectator has shared, in this case, Iago’s. Jorgens has termed the unremitting oscillation of point of view in these opening scenes as the “Iago style” of an oppressive consciousness conveyed through dizzying perspectives, tortured compositions, grotesque shadows, and mad distortions. Davies observes that Welles frequently places Iago in an elevated position to characters around him, from which to view “the world whose collapse he has wrought.”54 In the final moments of the film the spectator discovers, however, that he has shared in the brutality of Iago’s gaze as eyewitness to the tragedy unfolded below him.

Although one might expect the circular structure of the film to unify its narrative, the final effect of having the viewer share Iago’s perspective is fragmentation. The formal procession that begins and ends the film underscores Welles’s interest in the way the viewer experiences the plot, so that “the way the plot unravels takes precedence over the surprises of narrative.”55 Iago’s piercing gaze upon his victims below conveys to the viewer the oppressive consciousness of the “Iago style” as a sense of imprisoned space, in which the barred angle shots of Iago’s face remind the viewer of Roderigo’s savage murder in the Turkish bath. Davies notes that “the film becomes increasingly enclosed” as those around him become a victim of Iago’s “style” or perspective.56 By repeating this sequence of shots at the end of his film, Welles comments on the perverse voyeurism of the spectator, who shares Iago’s “style” of perspective, imprisoned by his desire to see the forbidden and left only to gaze.

The “Iago” style of perspective has its counterpart in Carpaccio’s The Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and Funeral of St. Ursula. In this painting the narrative action is divided spatially between the martyrdom and the funeral. As the spectator’s gaze moves from left to right, from the martyrdom in the front left plane to the funeral on the far right side (figures 2.20–2.21), one notices three central figures suspended in the space between the two events: a knight withdrawing his sword from his scabbard, an archer directing his arrow at the heart of a kneeling virgin, and a trumpeting, turbaned Moor on horseback. The caesura in the rhythms of the narrative created by their presence, and their pivotal placement within the strict geometric patterns of the painting, encourage the spectator to view these figures in connection with the two major events flanking them.

The controlled demeanor of the knight in the center of this group contrasts with the romanticized, albeit greatly diminished, figure of the Moor on horseback in the background of the painting. The knight’s central position and his controlling gaze over the events in the left of the frame convey the impression that this knight, like Iago, has orchestrated the slaughter before him. He surveys the frenzied communal destruction of countless female victims, even as the trumpeting Moor signals an
impossibly idealized image of the same event. These two figures reveal the narrative pattern of the composition as the presentation of two versions, the one suggesting an idealized image of heightened emotion and suspended desire, the other featuring the mechanistic destruction of female victims.

In the immediate foreground and to the right of the knight stands a bent archer. His relationship with the other two figures is obscure. He is suspended in violent mid-gesture, and faces away from the viewer, his body tilted forward, bow bent and arrow poised at the virgin who kneels quietly before him. The effect of slightly inclining the archer’s form conveys a sense of his precariousness and transitional existence, captured on the brink of murderous violence. The virgin’s calm resignation contrasts sharply with the aggressive male figure who directs the phallic shaft at her body. However, the viewer finds himself turning from the murderous spectacle to a fetishistic disavowal of that knowledge, the spectator’s gaze arrested momentarily by the archer’s bent form. The archer’s buttocks, displayed toward the audience, announce the male body as spectacle and fetishized object, and enable the viewer to momentarily suspend his awareness of the slaughter. His gaze captured by the objectified image of the male body, the spectator discovers himself caught in the morally ambiguous position of looking.

As the spectator’s gaze moves from the center to the right of the painting, the alignment of the image moves diagonally from lower left to
upper right, from the archer’s buttocks to the column that separates the narrative to the stairs upon which mourners and holy men mount to the bier and body of the martyred saint. The composition directs the gaze of the spectator from the eroticized male body to the passive, cold, and denying form of the martyred woman, and couples sadistic violence with narrativity within the same composition. In doing so, Carpaccio underscores the connection between voyeurism and sadistic impulses explored by the gaze of the spectator in The Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and Funeral of St. Ursula.

"Look on the tragic lodging of this bed"

Welles intended that his Othello would have the “atmosphere of violence . . . of Venice . . . in the heyday of Carpaccio.” By the same token, the “atmosphere” of Carpaccio’s world that determined Welles’s conception of his Othello was informed by the circumstances of life in Renaissance Venice. Carpaccio’s paintings capture the reciprocal relationship between the artist and the environment that influenced his art. The popularity of the “eyewitness style” in Quattrocento Venice “developed its particular artistic profile in a precise cultural setting and with precise perceptual habits, tastes and literary models, echoed in a precise artistic tradition.” That is, Carpaccio’s work is “a symptom of a whole complex of cultural concerns.”

As Patricia Fortini Brown observes, the eyewitness style of documentary evidence and detail provides a clue to the perceptual skills and values of the Venetians, who believed that the objects themselves could provide an index of truth and “a full account of men and places unseen.” Artists rendered a detailed and faithful accounting of their world, for in Renaissance Venice “truth” rested on “prevailing standards of evidence and proof.” Yet the distracting power of objects to avert our eyes from truth is central to the tragedy of Othello. It takes only one piece of evidence, only one “theatrical property,” the handkerchief spotted with red strawberries, to distract the protagonist from the vision of his “saint,” consuming him with his own blighted speculations and dark misgivings. In the context of such a world we begin to understand the rich allusive-

ness of Carpaccio’s “eyewitness style” and its link with Welles’s treatment of voyeurism in his film Othello.

Carpaccio’s Venice, like the Venice of Shakespeare’s play, is one characterized by surveillance and the grisly aftermath of its justice. Venice was a city whose very existence seemed predicated upon surveillance, where “every merchant, every priest was expected to spy for his country’s good.” In Venice the fragmented truths discovered through spying and surveillance were sometimes enough to condemn an imagined malefactor. It was a world ominously policed by every citizen, where whispered innuendo served the purposes of dark justice. On the knowledge supplied by spies, Venice’s governing body, the Council of Ten, effectively policed the city of Venice:

So voracious was their desire to pry that, throughout Venice, they set up the famous Lions’ Mouths, by which Venetians could inform the Council anonymously of their suspicions of their neighbors. On this knowledge the Council acted swiftly and silently, for no public trials enlivened the Venetian scene, and there were no appeals. Once found guilty, the prisoner was sometimes quickly and efficiently strangled in the dungeons; or thrown into a part of the lagoon reserved for the purpose, where no fishing was allowed; or hanged by one leg from the pillars of the Doge’s Palace; or quartered and distributed about the city; or buried upside down in the Piazzetta, legs protruding; or beheaded—as a public spectacle . . . But most traitors went silently in the night, their broken bodies sending a shiver of horror through the waking city as dawn gilded the palaces and churches.

The habits of justice as practiced by Renaissance Venetians and the Council of Ten would have pleased Iago, who by mere appearance of truth condemns Desdemona to a silent and swift sentencing. It is a justice that also satisfies Othello’s wounded narcissism, replete with the irony that Desdemona be strangled on “the bed she hath contaminated” in the secrecy of the night: “Good, good, the justice of it pleases, very good” (IV.i.204-5).
The courts were capable of violence and bloody public spectacle, as acknowledged by the Duke who hears Brabantio’s charges against Othello when he promises that “the bloody book of law / You shall yourself read, in the litter letter” (I.iii.67–68). Yet, as Guido Ruggiero points out, cases tried by the Avogadori of the Commune and reviewed by the Council of Ten were tried with “generally little reference to the law.” Venetian justice prided itself on being “individualistic and personal rather than fixed upon an abstract concept of justice embodied in the law,” scrutinizing the details of a crime as well as the life of the accused perpetrator. Courts were careful to gauge penalties to the crime and took special care to consider the status of the criminal and victim and the particular details of their history. Ironically, when the crime of eloping with Brabantio’s daughter is weighed against the circumstances of Othello’s immediate usefulness to the state and Desdemona’s testimony of their courtship, the Duke and Senate react much as Ruggiero claims Venetian courts often did—they decide his case without reference to the thirteenth-century law code Promissio Maleficorum that concerned “sexual crimes” such as elopement. The circumstances and methods of Venetian justice were not lost on the Venetian artists of the period, who frequently depicted images of Venetian Justice with its eyes open. On the Ducal Palace one of the sculptures on the capitals represents Venetian Justice without a blindfold, for “Venetian law removed the blindfold from justice by asking judges to evaluate each case with their eyes open, mindful of the character and condition of both culprit and victim.” Yet if Venetian justice studied the accused malefactor with open eyes, its punishments were secret and hidden, in which condemned criminals were dispatched in silence and hidden by the night. The habits of justice in Renaissance Venice give topical relevance to Ludovico’s injunction at the close of Othello to both “Look on the tragic lodging of this bed” and “Let it be hid” (V.ii.364, 366), his responses alternating between the evidentiary nature of establishing “truth” (the bed and its contents) and the guilt that accompanies scopophilic impulses, even those sanctioned by law.

The bed and its “lodging” (“loading” in the Folio) as lamented by Ludovico, luridly described by Iago, and anticipated by the theater audience, might well be considered the imaginative center of Shakespeare’s play. It is the object within Shakespeare’s theatrical tableau that establishes the evidentiary “truth” of a crime (“Look on . . . this bed”) and provides the focus for luridly imagined scenes of sexual explicitness and degradation. Yet in his film Welles allows his audience to view the bedroom well before the play’s catastrophic end. Those glimpses of the wedded pair in the bedroom ominously foreshadow Desdemona’s death, but are curiously devoid of the lurid and voyeuristic pleasures one might expect Welles to explore. To understand Welles’s particular treatment of the bedroom scenes, we must again turn to Carpaccio’s Life of St. Ursula, which also provided the director with the visual inspiration for this scene. The “first interior ever painted in the Renaissance,” Carpaccio’s Dream of St. Ursula, c. 1495, evokes the serenity of a graceful, domestic interior familiar in seventeenth-century Flemish paintings. However, like the bedroom scene in Welles’s Othello, Carpaccio’s domestic interior, as Philip Brockbank observes, has the unsettling effect of “a death-vision, an intimation of martyrdom.”

The domestic interior revealed in Carpaccio’s painting depicts a large canopied bed with a simple rounded footboard (figure 2.22). The bed, which contains the sleeping saint, occupies all of the left half of the composition. On the right a winged angel enters the doorway and gazes upon the sleeping woman. This painting bears an interesting resemblance to the bedroom setting created for Welles’s film (figure 2.23). In one of the film’s earliest glimpses of the bed, Welles presents a view of the room and its contents from a perspective slightly to the left and behind where the angel stands in Carpaccio’s painting. However, the figure that stands in the doorway in Welles’s film is the darkened figure of Othello himself. He gazes upon Desdemona, whose luminescent form stands before the bed upon which she shall be sacrificed. Barber and Wheeler have suggested that Shakespeare’s tragedy has its roots in the “gay gazing sights” of the old religion and the visual representations of Christ on the Rood, saints, and the Virgin Mary so often lambasted in the sermons and religious homilies of Shakespeare’s England. Similarly, in this scene Welles invites his spectator to view Othello’s love through Othello’s eyes as an anguished type of worship, as he searches for the visible embodiment of divine perfection in a “saintly” and luminescent Desdemona. It is appropriate to Welles’s
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configuration of Othello’s tragedy that the spectator be privy to the bedroom, for it proclaims the martyrdom of Desdemona as necessary to Othello’s fantasy of affections and desires. The film’s first glimpses of the bed anticipate the final death scene and its grim parody of sexual desire.

The repetition of the bedroom scene in Welles’s film effectively undercuts the film’s narrative action by substituting images of regressive preoedipal visual pleasures, because, instead of narrative movement, the spectator discovers pleasure in a repeated return to the moment of loss. The film’s strategies for depicting Othello’s repressed desires concurs with masochistic repetition in film as delineated by Gaylyn Studlar, in which masochism “aestheticallyizes the erotic into cold suspense” and “diverts sexuality from orgasm to an erotic contemplation at once frustrating and pleasurable.” Similarly, Welles’s film represents Othello’s desire as prefiguring Desdemona’s death, freezing her desire like the painted image of Carpaccio’s martyred saint or a statue of monumental alabaster.

The film’s return to the domestic interior frustrates the narrative impulse operative within linear time, its masochistic aesthetic conditioning the spectator’s voyeuristic pleasure of viewing the bedroom by the punishment and death that inevitably follow it. In this way Welles signals to his audience the collapse of conventional cause-and-effect action, reconstituting cinematically the effect achieved in Carpaccio’s paintings. Desdemona’s martyrdom is anticipated and predicted in the same way that the viewer of Carpaccio’s Dream of St. Ursula recognizes that Ursula’s
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Welles's Othello, like Carpaccio’s narrative painting of The Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and Funeral of St. Ursula, alternates the display of masochistic repetition with the sadistic frenzy of activity. Welles’s camerawork captures the sadistic impulse for constant motion and perverse movement in the activities and perspective of MacLiammoir’s Iago, while Carpaccio measures the sadistic actions of the soldiers by the vast numbers of victims who darken his landscape. Both artists alternate their violent images with funeral processions. The circular structure of Welles’s film and Carpaccio’s narrative painting expresses the constant dialectic between stasis and perverse motion that is so central to Shakespeare’s play, described by Jonathan Dollimore as “an arrest of mobility which at the same time intensifies it.”

The passive return to loss that marks masochistic repetition ultimately serves to mobilize the constant activity indicative of sadistic repetition. The final scene of the play, as Dollimore observes, reveals that Othello’s attempts to displace masochistic reparation onto another must ultimately circle back upon himself, the “turban’d Turk” whom he must kill. So, too, Welles conceives Othello’s tragedy as exploring the experiential polarities expressed in psychic conflict, in the interplay of the masochistic aesthetic with sadistic impulses.

Welles demands in his Othello that the spectator create a coherent narrative from the oscillating perspective of the camera, and so must the critic reconstruct the visual and imaginative framework upon which Welles created his masterpiece. Through glimpses of intention and imagined relationships one begins to recognize the associative richness of Welles’s visual imagination. Welles’s film is powerful precisely because it synthesizes the visual experience of Renaissance Venice with the voyeuristic impulses of his own life and art, in which the spectator gleams significance from the richness of detail and inferred truth from imagined relationship. Tracing the connections between Welles’s artistic imagination and voyeuristic impulses, one discovers the visual inspiration of Vittore Carpaccio in Welles’s filmic expression of the “voyeuristic pleasure of pain.” Welles’s film unites the director’s personal vision of the dangers and enticements of voyeuristic excitements with Carpaccio’s “eyewitness style” in re-creating Shakespeare’s scopophile tragedy. The director captures the play’s concern with regulating disordering and disordered sexuality by subjecting it to the gaze of his camera, but, like the Venetian art that inspired his film, Welles’s camera reveals the dangers implicit in spectatorship.