The Grandiose Subject of Cinema

In his widely influential article on the “cinematographic apparatus,” Jean-Louis Baudry argued for a connection between the experience of the spectator at a conventional film and the Western idea or myth of the “transcendental subject.”¹ Baudry begins with Renaissance painting and linear perspective as precursors of the cinema’s ambition to present a “total vision” that corresponds to the conception of “the fullness and homogeneity of being.”² The representation of plenitude not only depicts a world but constructs a “subject”: the viewer of a great Renaissance painting is in some sense a master of what is displayed, a self constituted by the totalizing work of art and sharing in its claim to plenitude. The cinema immeasurably increases this claim:

If the eye which moves is no longer fettered by a body, by the laws of matter and time, if there are no more assignable limits to its displacement—conditions fulfilled by the possibility of shooting and of film—the world will not only be constituted by this eye, but for it. The movability of the camera seems to fulfill the most favorable conditions for the manifestation of the transcendental subject.³

In this view the spectator identifies “less with what is represented, the spectacle itself, than with what stages the spectacle”;² identifies, that is, with the projector. The movie screen thus functions as Jacques Lacan thought the mirror did for the human infant, reflecting back to the viewer a fictitious unity of self:

Just as the mirror assembles the fragmented body in a sort of imaginary integration of the self, the transcendental self unites the discontinuous fragments of phenomena, of lived experience, into unifying meaning.⁴

Baudry’s theory at first seems to include all cinematic experience in the orbit of the transcendental subject and therefore to implicate the medium as a whole in the false consciousness of Western, bourgeois culture. But he also allows for an oppositional cinema in which the illusions of bourgeois subjectivity are unmasked:

Both specular tranquillity and the assurance of one’s own identity collapse simultaneously with the revealing of the mechanism, that is, of the inscription of the film work.⁵

The classic instance of such revelation, the text from which Baudry draws his title, is Dziga Vertov’s Man with a Moviecamera (Russian: Chelovek s kinoparatom), in which the filming camera itself frequently appears in the image, but any foregrounding of the medium — any self-reflexive or metacinematic representation — can be used to call into question the grandiose presumptions of the cinematic “eye” and to create a text that is critical of rather than complicit in the ideology of domination.

Baudry’s formulation seems especially relevant to Welles, for not only does his work often draw attention to itself and its “inscription,” but from the start of his career Welles was also interested in grandiose, arrogant, totalizing protagonists whose excesses reveal
contradictions in the social values they instance and whose claim to personal greatness
masks an inner void. The following study of Orson Welles's Othello explores the film's
ambivalent treatment of the grandiose subject, attending to the psychological patterns that
inform Welles's interpretation and to the metacinematic figures—particularly the use of
mirrors and buried images—that disturb or complicate our relation to the screen image,
implicating the spectator with the spectacle, and locating the question of spectatorship at the
center of the tragedy of Othello.

Mirrors

Welles's Othello is notable in its frequent use of mirror reflection. There are at least four
actual mirrors, and there are several shots in which a reflected image appears in water. In
addition to lateral reflection, the motif of mirroring is extended metaphorically by reverse
angle shots, which offer something like mirror images of one another, and by the film's
insistent equation between the mirror gaze and the gaze of the anxious husband.

Several later Othello films use mirrors too, perhaps influenced by Welles, and I will begin
by discussing these briefly before turning back to Welles in order to suggest how a single
visual motif, not required by the text but perhaps suggested by it, can serve widely divergent
interpretations. Because visual style does not contest the text, does not or need not emend
the text, it often provides a privileged access to unconscious or partly conscious interpretive
patterns. This is particularly true for Welles.

In Liz White's Othello (USA, 1980) and in the Sergei Yutkevich film (USSR, 1955)
mirror imagery is used, very differently in each case, primarily to explore the protagonist's
ethnic identity and Iago's assault on that identity. In the Yutkevich film the mirror is the
reflecting surface of a public well or rain pool, a central feature of the architecture of the
plaza of the temple of Poseidon at Cyprus. We see this location first when Iago stabs into it
meditating on "the web that will ensnare them all." A low-angle close-up here suggests a
camera placement below the surface of the water. As his plot takes shape, he reaches into the
well and disrupts the surface, effecting his own features (photos 4.1, 4.2). He attacks his own
image but is thinking of Othello, of fragmenting Othello's self-image as he does his own.
Othello's reaction to the lengthy temptation scene (3.3) is a reprise of this scene at the well.
Disturbed that Desdemona may have betrayed him because of his color, he rushes to the well
(now seen in extreme long shot, revealing its place in the design of the temple and its
relation to the beautiful Cyprus coast and examines his face in the water. Yet though the
image wavers, it does not fragment (photos 4.3 and 4.4). His blackness is not cause for self-
doubt here. Such a treatment is in keeping with Yutkevich's interpretation of the character:
he is the "noble Moor" throughout and is never shaken inwardly. This scene conveys Iago's
failure to evoke an inner disintegration equal to the evil he is able to accomplish in the
action.

In Liz White's Othello, an independent, all-black production completed in 1966 (released
1980), a mirror scene stands at the center of the design and is again used to explore the
question of Othello's ethnic identity, though in a very different way. In this production
Othello is played as an African, whereas the "Venetians" are American blacks of lighter skin
color. The complex historical and psychological relationship between black Americans and
their African heritage is sensitively used in the film as a vehicle for conveying Shakespeare's play of radical alienity and kinship. In White's interpretation black-white
contrasts are softened but are perhaps all the more painful because Othello at first feels
himself to be a full member of an ethnic community he only partly understands. As in the
Yutkevich film, the mirror scene comes after the temptation scene. White uses the "happily
for I am black" speech only to disman its implication, at least initially—in fact altering the
text, so that Othello proudly says "happily, I am black."
Yet the issue of color is not so easily disposed of. Unsure what to make of Iago's insinuations, Yaphet Kotto as Othello goes into his bedroom, dresses in African robes, and examines his reflection. He sees his own regal image but also remembers the details of the wooing of Desdemona, whose image appears in the mirror as he thinks of her. Her image is in turn replaced by that of her father. Othello muses, “her father loved me,” but a light-skinned urbane Brabantio speaks words of contempt from the mirror, questioning how his daughter could ever have chosen “the scotty bosom of such a thing as thou.” For Liz White color prejudice, whose origins lie in the white culture not directly represented in the film, manifests itself in black self-deprecation, and especially in the social hierarchy of skin color within the black community. Her Othello is relatively unaware of these tensions in the community he has joined, but they are powerful enough to destroy him. White's use of the mirror stresses paternal aspects of Othello's self-image; it is ultimately the rejection by Brabantio, not Desdemona, that proves decisive in his undoing; an uncertain and misunderstood relation to the father is central to the tragic action.

In contrast to Yulkevich and White, the mirror scenes in Welles's film do not emphasize
ethnic identity. Welles plays a light-complexioned Moor and consistently underplays any sense of racial difference. Like White, he uses the mirror to explore the psychological dimension of the play, but for Welles the psychological issues involve disturbance in the maternal rather than the paternal sphere, and it is Desdemona, not Brabantio, who appears in the mirror at the climax of the temptation scene.

The mirror imagery begins early in the film and undergoes several transmutations before we get to that moment. The first instance occurs in the brawl Iago provokes to rouse Othello from his nuptial bed and disgrace Cassio. The celebration of the victory over the Turks takes place in a vaulted subterrestrial crypt open at one point to the sky by means of an oval opening or skylight. As the brawl develops, the soldiers fight in a flooded area beneath this opening, sometimes ankle deep in water. The first mirror reflection occurs in a shot of this flooded floor, where the tiny image of the guard, reversed and bounded by the reflected outline of the skylight, appears in the water, contrasting the anarchy of the brawl with the order and calm that would prevail in Cyprus if the soldiery did not “outport discretion.” The image is clear and still but very tiny. We may not be able to interpret it alone, but it is glossed by the next shot, a closer shot of the guards peering down into the crypt, this time not reflected but photographed directly (photos 4.5, 4.6). Immediately after this we see the tiny image again, and then its fragmentation by the feet of a pair of struggling combatants (photos 4.7 and 4.8). The precariousness of civil order and the debasement of this value so precious to Othello are conveyed by the contrast between the unsightly low parts of the fortress and the dignified and ordered upper reaches, and by the fragility of a reflected and reduced image.

The climax of the scene is the rousing of Othello from his bed in a chamber high in the tower. At this point in the film the interplay between the wedding chamber and the crypt is established by intercutting, though later—and especially in the murder scene and its aftermath—the bedchamber and the crypt will be more closely linked by emphasis on nearly identical architectural details. For now the lovers and the brawlers inhabit visually distinct realms, though we may sense the potential for a sullying of the marriage bed that their juxtaposition implies. In the play text the decorum of marital sexual relations and the decorum of the citadel town are associated. When Othello says “silence that dreadful bell: it frights the isle from her propriety,” he mentions only the public aspect of the disturbance, but the festivities for the victory over the Turks celebrate “Othello's nuptials” as well and take place during the withdrawal of the couple to their bedroom. Iago makes the link between the two “scenes” clear when he compares the mood of the combatants before the brawl with “bride and groom divesting them for bed.”
The analogy between the marriage and the brawl is developed in a variety of ways, of which two may be noted. First, when Othello is first shaken in his confidence in Desdemona and is briefly restored to trust, Desdemona wipes his brow with a handkerchief, which is then accidentally dropped. In the film there is a close shot of Othello’s foot unwittingly trampling the handkerchief, and this echoes the shot in which the mirror image of the onlookers is fragmented by a brawler’s boot in the crypt (photo 4.9; compare photo 4.8). Second, in the final moments of the film, as Othello is dying alone in his bedchamber with Desdemona’s body, we get a dizzy, rotating point-of-view shot of what appears to be an oval window or casement. As the camera movement stabilizes and the barred oval opens to reveal Cassio and others looking down, we realize that what we have been seeing is the skylight of the bedroom, now linked decisively to the crypt as a place of violent and unseemly disorder witnessed from above (photo 4.10). In the last shot before the dissolve to the credits (photo 4.11), Cassio closes the barred skylight hatch, an action that substitutes for Shakespeare’s “Look on the tragic loading of this bed ... the object poisons sight/Let it be hid.” This final shot is a summing up of several other visual metaphors: oval windows or mirrors and barred images of many kinds prepare us for the complex, summative effect of the closing of the hatch on the marriage/murder bed, but full discussion of these images must be deferred. For now it is important that the final sequence invokes the brawl, relating the murder to the careless effacement of the tiny human image mirrored briefly in the dirty water of the crypt.

At this point it may be helpful to remember places in the text where the dirtying of sexuality is presented in terms that may have suggested this symbolic use of the crypt.

I had rather be a toad
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others’ uses. (3.3.270–73)

But there, where I have garnered up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life;
The fountain from which my current runs
Or else dries up to be discarded thence!
Or keep it as a cestern for foul loads
To knot and gender in! (4.2.57–62)

The next and principal mirror sequence is the temptation scene (3.3) where, as in the films of Liz White and Sergei Yutkevich, Othello, partly shaken by Iago’s intimations, consults his mirror to see if his reflected image can rebut or confirm Iago’s insinuation that Desdemona sees him as a gross and unhandsome alien. For Welles, Othello’s anxious self-examination is inconclusive, its irresolution figured for us in Othello’s movement from a wall mirror to a table mirror of similar design and in the variety of perspectival problems that characterize the sequence. We have trouble seeing what Othello sees—sometimes the angle is wrong, showing us a mirror but not the image in it; sometimes Othello’s face or his shadow fall over the image (photos 4.12, 4.13). When we do see the whole image, it is juxtaposed with Iago’s face, or Othello, unsatisfied by the evidence he sees, turns away from it to the other mirror in the room (photos 4.14, 4.15).
As Iago advances his theory that Desdemona’s choice of Othello indicates the perversion of her sexual desires (“One may smell in this foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural...”), Othello suddenly leaves the frame and the chamber and finds Desdemona in another room in the fortress. The brief scene between them, in which Desdemona attempts to wipe Othello’s brow with the fatal handkerchief and he rejects her comforting gesture, letting the handkerchief fall, is wordless. The effect of the elimination of dialogue (about the “pain” on Othello’s forehead and the insufficiency of Desdemona’s “little napkin” as a bandage) is to continue the emphasis on Othello’s anxious gaze. When contemplation of his own image cannot help him to respond to Iago’s poisonous insinuations, he turns to Desdemona and looks at her. But this is no answer either, and he returns to the mirrored chamber as precipitously as he had left it, and looks again.

Again, both the face and his mirror image are presented to us obliquely and incompletely. As he gazes, a long shot of Desdemona is intercut, and then we see him turn from the mirror toward her. At this point the frame includes Othello’s face, the mirror image of the back of his head, and, most important, the tiny image of Desdemona in the center of the mirror, an image so small that we need the previous full shot of her, which functions almost as an insert, to know how to read it (photo 4.16). (As in the crypt scene, what is shown in miniaturized reflection is also shown full size; what is seen in a mirror within the frame is also seen in the larger mirror of the screen.) Othello leaves the chamber again, returns to her, and stares into her eyes, holding her face in his hands (photo 4.17). Thus twice her eyes replace the looking glass where he seeks an answer. He foresakes the mirror finally only when she appears there, reduced to a minuscule reflection. His own image cannot be seen clearly or steadily, and a tiny image of the other replaces it. The eyes of the beloved cannot
be interpreted either, though he gazes into them twice: perhaps because they reflect the tiny image of the self. From this troubling interrogation of self and other, of face and mirror, Othello flees to the bedchamber, parting its curtains as a forward tracking movement from the bed meets his matching and opposite movement into this intimate space. (The curtain parting was seen earlier, just before the married pair consummate their nuptials, and will be repeated just before the murder.) The sequence of the inquiring gaze is threefold: the mirror, the eyes of the beloved, the marriage bed that may have been betrayed. That the questioning gaze is finally directed at the bed is important, for, as in Edward Snow's brilliant critique of the play, Welles's Othello comes to confuse Desdemona's imagined adultery with his own sexual possession of her—this is "the bed she hath contamined," "lust-stained" by his own knowledge of her as much as by Cassio's.  

Photo 4.16

Photo 4.17

Now follows a sequence in which Desdemona searches for Othello in the arched colonnades of the fortress. Crosscut tracking two-shots in deep focus convey unbridgeable emotional distance and create an extreme disproportion in scale between the two figures (photo 4.18; compare photo 4.16). Emotional distance is reciprocal: though it is only Othello whose mistrust has caused the breach, he appears as tiny and far away to her as she does to him.

The sequence of the gaze as it moves from the mirror to the eyes and then to the far-away figure of the beloved intimates an analogy between emotional mirroring and the perspectival principles that govern the representation of space. Desdemona enters the mirror at its vanishing point when Othello can find no solace there; because their mutual gaze cannot reassure him of her love, the sequence ends with her failure to reestablish contact with him, as he recedes to the vanishing point of the screen image. The perspectival reduction of the visual image manifests the power of the gaze to order space and bridge distance, but it also indicates the limits of that power. Here the interplay of large and reduced images enact the subtle reciprocities of marital intimacy, but it also points to their fragility and loss.
The eye is literally as well as figuratively a mirror. Welles seems to know this; his use of mirrors resembles the lover's game of finding one's image reflected in another's eyes. In contrast to Yutkevich and White, Welles is primarily concerned not with identity (who am I? whom do I see when I see my image in the mirror?) but with intimacy and with reciprocity of intersubjective experience. But for Welles's protagonists (Kane and "Black Irish" in *Lady from Shanghai* as well as Othello) the very things that make intersubjectivity possible—the relativity, symmetry, and mutuality of our views of each other—seem to demonstrate that there can be no love. In the eyes of another, even a lover, one's image nearly vanishes, reduced to a point. Space itself vanishes in linear perspective. If we are transcendent subjects in relation to projected space, as Baudry holds, so are other people, even that far-off other person who stands in our vanishing point and to whom we appear diminished. For Welles fantasies of omnipotence and transcendence are often associated with the power of the film medium. But he is also aware of the capacity of the medium to degrade and diminish and associates it, as here in *Othello*, with the failure of love.

There is a scene in Olivier's *Hamlet* that is superficially similar to the reverse-angle sequence in which Desdemona stalks Othello in the Welles film. The differences may help to bring out clearly the way Welles thematizes the cinematic medium. At one point in the Olivier film Ophelia looks down a long corridor to Hamlet, seated in a chair a hundred feet away. A reverse-angle shot shows Hamlet looking back at her as she leaves the image to go into her chamber (photos 4.19, 4.20). Hamlet does not see that her departure is a response to her father's command and cannot rise to question what appears to be a rejection for he is psychologically bound to his lonely chair in the empty throne room, brooding over his father's death and his mother's remarriage. This sequence was nicknamed "the longest-distance love scene on record" by Olivier and his associates. Although this sequence marks the failure of Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia, it is really a love scene in one sense because it conveys the love that was and could be if the lovers were not constrained, she by her father and he by his complex psychological and moral involvement with Claudius, Gertrude, and the memory of his father.
Camera distance and reverse-angle shots convey a painful sense of emotional distance, as in Welles's *Othello*. But in comparable scenes in Welles's work the alienation between lovers is felt as a property of space, as if emotional distance were a consequence of the geometric principles governing the diegesis. There are some stylistic differences. Welles tracks with the foreground figure rather than alternating between fixed camera positions, which lends a greater effect of instability and relativity. But the main differences between the two directors is that with Welles these reversals of point of view are seen in relation to a sequence in which connection is sought but not found; the inspection of the mirror, the appearance of the tiny image of the beloved in the mirror, the closing of the physical distance between the pair, the failure of the gaze into the beloved's eyes, the angry visit to the conjugal bed, and then the return of the tiny, distanced image of the other in the unreflected or "actual" space outside the mirror. The failure of connection thus moves outward from the mirror Othello looks into to the mirror (the film screen) we, as audience, see. The utter hopelessness of establishing connection to another expressed by these sequences is not uncommon in contemporary life, but fortunately it is not universal. Where such alienation is normative and indeed inevitable, however, is in watching a film. It is the case that we can have no response from the screen and that the properties of scale, projection, and linear perspective constitute that world as unreachable.

For both the protagonist and the viewer, then, the lesson of the mirrored gaze, as it is explored in Welles's *Othello*, is one of alienation and lovelessness. Desdemona's beauty, which seemed to hold the promise of a rich and reliable satisfaction, is experienced as cold and denying. For this film Brabantio and Cassio, the father and the rival, do not figure prominently, nor do the Oedipal dynamics Othello's position between them implies. The problem is not jealousy or infidelity but the failure of trust the possibility of infidelity has given rise to. In many interpretations of *Othello* both on stage and in films, Othello is so blinded by jealousy that he cannot really look at Desdemona, and we sometimes have the feeling that if he could put his anger aside for a moment, he could see that his wife loves him. In this film Othello looks into Desdemona's eyes, but he has lost the hope or the faith that could animate their mutual gaze. His mistrust has made their interaction empty and unsatisfying, quite apart from the truth or falsehood of the charge of adultery.

**Mothers**

Another way of putting this is to say that the psychological issues that determine the tragic outcome here are maternal ones. It is not conflict with rivals or with internalized Oedipal guilt that plagues Welles's character; it is the failure of the maternal object to mirror and to satisfy. The terms in which such an emotional pattern might be described are various: Erikson might speak of a failure of basic trust; Klein, of envy of the withholding breast; Lacan, Winnicott, or Kohut, different as they are in other ways, might speak of maternal mirroring; Mahler and her followers, of incomplete separation from the mother. Whatever the terms, the issues are maternal and center not on guilt or conflict but on a basic insecurity in the unmirrored self. 

Because this is so, scenes from the play in which Oedipal conflict is most prominent, like
the council scene, in which Othello makes his case against Desdemona’s father are muted for Welles. In fact this scene is remarkably dull and empty in the film. Instead of the busy, complex, and exciting play of generational, racial, and gender conflicts that the scene offers and which are put into play in most productions, we find a serene, confident Othello, who appears not to notice the presence of anyone else in the chamber, filmed mostly in isolating medium shot or close-up. This is a grandiose Othello who does not so much come into conflict with others as fail to take note of them, especially to take note of them as separate, autonomous persons. He has invested himself solely in his wife, who plays the role of a self-object reflecting his grandiosity. When this function fails, when it is even called into question by the possibility of her infidelity, the character faces a terrible isolation and emptiness, which he reacts to with depression or rage.

The quasi-maternal treatment of Desdemona in the film is developed perhaps most strikingly in the brilliant interpretation of the encounter between Othello and Desdemona in 4.2. This comes after Othello’s recall to Venice and his replacement as governor by Cassio (4.1), a scene in which he strikes Desdemona. Welles cuts Emilia’s role in the confrontation between man and wife that follows, and with it much of the paranoid suspiciousness (“You have seen nothing then?” “This is a subtle where, a closet look and key of villainous secrets; And yet she’ll kneel and pray; I have seen her do’t.” 4.1.121–23) and all of the histrionic pretense that Emilia is actually a procuress (“Some of your function, mistress,” 4.1.27). The role Desdemona plays in Othello’s need stands out more clearly: “Let me see your eyes; Look in my face” (25–26) here takes on the urgency of the earlier mirror/face sequence, though now Othello’s placement in the foreground obscures Desdemona’s face from us just at the moment when he looks into her eyes. Disappointed, he slumps into a seated depressive posture in a vast hall, alone until Desdemona, as in the earlier sequences, seeks him out again. The speech that begins “Had it pleased heaven to try me with affliction” (48–64) is spoken from the defeated, passive posture Othello has assumed and is intercut with shots of Desdemona standing near him. The lines she speaks in self-defense are cut, as is her assurance that if her father is the cause of Othello’s dismissal, she is on her husband’s side (“if you have lost him, I have lost him too,” 46–47). She simply stands silent.

 alas, to make me
 The fixed figure for the time of scorn
 To point his slow, unmoving finger at
 Yet I could bear that too, well, very well;
 But there, where I have garnered up my heart,
 Where either I must live or bear no life;
 The fountain from the which my current runs
 Or else dries up: to be discarded thence!

The maternal associations of these lines have often been noted.15 The wife has replaced the mother in this image as the source of life itself, and a source that remains so intimately connected to the life of which she is the source that independent existence is compromised—this language evokes not merely the mother but the symbiotic mother of early childhood. Desdemona is alone in the image during this part of the speech. As it starts she is seen in medium shot from face to waist in a gown that falls loosely below the bodice. At the words “the fountain,” Othello’s hand comes into the image as he touches her just below the breast (photo 4.21). As his hand moves downward in the folds of the gown along her belly, the camera moves downward with his hand, so that her face disappears from the shot (photo 4.22). “The fountain from which my current runs/Or else dries up”: the gesture or caress begins below the breast and ends just below the genitals. At “dries up,” the hand clutches the folds of the dress momentarily in a gesture of infantile dependence: Welles presents the failure of sexual connection as if it were a withholding of the breast, a failure of maternal nurture. And not of nurture only, but of a connection so close that he can trace the broken path of his defeat on her body. The current of his life runs from the breast to the vagina of a
The final lines of the speech suggest that his interpretation is right, that the "there" of the text is rightly thought of as both the site of maternal nurture and sexual property:

"There," "thence," and "it" imply a stable, single referent that the speech does not actually provide: the heart or breast that is a fountain becomes a fount site of sexual coupling in the course of the passage. The speech intimates that sexual union is debaseing and possessive and that it constitutes revenge for the failure of nurture. One can "keep" the polluted cistern (compare "or keep a corner in the thing I love for others' uses") of marital sexual property even when "discarded" from the maternal source of life and selfhood.  

The "cestern" of the speech has appeared earlier as a visual image, as we have seen, and the marriage bed, sullied with the sexual consummation of the marriage, with the imagined adultery and the actual murder, will be seen as its double in the film's powerful conclusion. At this point both Shakespeare's text and Welles's images suggest that sexual experience can evoke the trauma of maternal rejection and that the anger of sexual "jealously" has as its deepest object not the rival or the wife but the mother. The nuptial bed, which seems to offer the hope of restoring the mother-child dyad in all its magical perfection, thus becomes the place where the failure of that perfection is reexperienced and then revered.

This sequence ends with the last attempt Othello makes to reestablish connection to Desdemona through his gaze, and given us the closest shot (brow to lips) of her face as he looks at her (photo 4.23). But as before, beautiful as she is, how she looks back is determined by what she hears from him ("O thou weed! / That art so lovely fair and smells so sweet / That the sense aches at thee, wouldst thou had never been born!") and she is sad and distant even in extreme close-up.

The character Welles develops, supported by this complex visual design, is grandiose and immensely demanding, passive and enraged by turns. The violence that erupts at the close is not that of jealousy but of narcissistic rage, which knows no limits when the object in whom the protagonist's sense of self is uniquely invested fails him.
An example from the crypt scene may be useful: as the brawl goes out of control there is one point at which the camera dollies rapidly past bars at a tilted angle, with fleeing soldiers seen as a blur on the far side of the bars (photo 4.31). This is followed by a shot with the camera placement and tilt angle reversed, so that we are given a fleeting glimpse into the bars, which we now understand is a dungeon. Our point of view had been that of the half-dressed, emaciated wretches who are momentarily revealed clutching the bars (photo 4.32). The point-of-view shot followed by a shot that reveals whose point of view we have been seeing from is frequent in the film. In one notable instance we see birds in a sky and tiny figures upside down on the tower parapets before we learn that we are looking through Othello’s eyes as he regains consciousness after an epileptic seizure. In the scene in the crypt we discover simultaneously that the fortress in which Othello is attempting to enjoy the “fruits” of newly married bliss contains a loathsome prison, and that we have been sharing a view of the chaos below with its prisoners.  

In the opening minutes of the film the bodies of Othello and Desdemona are carried in solemn funeral procession while Iago is locked in a cage and hoisted up the tower wall to hang, presumably until dead, near the window of the fatal beechchamber (photo 4.33). These haunting images of Iago in his cage linger over the rest of the film and announce the motif of caging and imprisonment. They also provide the film’s first reversals of the expected relation between spectator and character. The sequence is rich and complex, and several examples must suffice:

1. The moment at which Iago is locked into the cage is rendered in two shots that appear continuous, with a crucial reversal of angle in the middle. First we see the cage from Iago’s point of view, and the camera tracks almost into it with him, until all we see are a few of its bars in close-up. The bars appear to draw nearer to us rapidly in the same direction, but as details of the funeral procession that was formerly behind Iago can be seen through the bars, we realize we are still seeing the bars from Iago’s view point but now from the inside as he pulls himself to them and looks out (photos 4.34, 4.35). The apparently continuous forward tracking that conceals or eludes a 180-degree reversal is closely related to reverse-angle shots elsewhere in the film, especially the matching reverse-angle long shots that conclude the presentation of the emotional breach between Othello and Desdemona. Here the effect is not only to equate or compare the inside of the cage with the world outside but also, because the viewer shares Iago’s point of view through a full but momentarily confusing reversal, to equate one side of the screen with the other.

2. Once Iago is in the cage, the viewer’s relation to the spectacle is associated with his in yet another way. With him we watch the funeral procession through the crossed bars of the cage, rising and rotating slightly with him as his cage is hoisted up. Then we see the procession from another angle, another high angle but independent of Iago’s point of view, and watch the funeral approach with a large cross borne in front of the mourners (photo 4.36). As this cross approaches, it repeats almost exactly the framing effect of the cage bars (photo 4.37; compare photo 4.35). This links the cross and the cage. The rituals of sanctification (including marriage) and the rituals of torture mirror each other.

There is no indication, as there is in Vulkevich, that the repression the film evokes is the expression of a particular society at a particular historical moment. Welles’s concern is not
with Venetian mercantile power and its relation to the Renaissance Church but with a more general and unchallengeable pattern. The world of the film is cruelly repressive, cold, and violent, but the insistent implication of the barrier imagery—that we are inside this prison house world too—is that it cannot be changed. Othello, who seems to stand apart from it in his virtue and courage, is drawn in by the surfacing of a chilling mistrust within himself that echoes the cruelty of Iago and Iago's tormenters. In its political dimension the Welles *Othello* offers no way out. Othello's murder of Desdemona manifests a violence already present in the social world of the film from the opening shots, and neither he nor any other character is given a place in which to stand apart from the pattern of repression and oppose it.
This sense of helplessness extends to the film spectator, who, like Othello, is implicated in the evil world he observes. We have examined many of the visual strategies by which this implication is suggested. The final and perhaps most impressive instance of the inscription of the audience’s gaze in the image on the screen occurs, I think, in the last shot, where Cassio closes the barred skylight. That moment can now be seen as the completion of the visual analogy between the marriage bed and the prison. It is also, I suggest, a concluding restatement of the mirror/eye motif. The shape of the oval, the placement of figures within it, and the low angle from which we see it all repeat elements of the scene in which the guards look down into the crypt and are mirrored in the water below. In addition, previous reversals throughout the film have prepared us to see the resemblance of the skylight to an eye, with miniature human figures reflected in its dark surface. It stands, in one sense, for the eye of Othello as it closes in death. In another sense, it is a mirror of the spectator’s gaze, and the closing of the barred hatch is the final and most powerful example of the film’s denial of the freedom of that gaze.21

Reflections on American Slavery: The Suppression of the Other

Othello’s blackness does not count for much in Welles—at least not on the surface. He is played as very light-complexioned, not at all rude or exotic in speech or manner, and little emphasis is given to lines that evoke his strangeness or cultural alterity. Welles introduces the film with voice-over narration that presents the marriage with Desdemona as natural (“... it happened that he fell in love with a young and noble lady called Desdemona, who, drawn by his virtuous, became equally enamored of him.”). The complex process by which readers of Shakespeare come to know, in the course of the first act, how they are to receive this marriage is foreclosed by a liberal American presumption of nondifference that is followed through in text editing, characterization, and visual style. Yet such a position can be thought of as a suppression of racial difference, as we find it in Shakespeare and as we know it in the painful history of black oppression after the Renaissance. I want to suggest that the film’s refusal of the text’s racial contrasts (which are often stark and vicious), though well-intentioned, is disabling, a failure of recognition akin to Othello’s own failure to recognize Desdemona as separate from and other than himself.

In the film’s displacement of race, the caging of Iago is central. Welles’s invention has several sources in the text: Iago will be punished and made to speak (“torments will open your lips”); though Othello had been a slave in his youth, in the last scene of the play it is Iago who is referred to several times as a “slave,” a “damned slave.” In putting a white rather than a black man in a cage Welles may have been responding to those cues and making use of the accident that the Moroccan castle where much of the film was shot was equipped with such a device. But whatever the origin of the idea, it offers an image that is deeply resonant for Americans because of the history of black slavery and oppression. The reserve with which this “torment” is presented works with the racial reversal to create the sense of something left out—we see Iago hoisted up but nothing of the pain such a punishment entails; the torture is in the future.
Caging was a frequent punishment for rebellious slaves and was first described in American literature in a well-known passage in de Crevecoeur’s eighteenth-century *Letters from an American Farmer*. Walking before dinner at the home of a slaveowner, de Crevecoeur was startled by a flock of birds surrounding a cage hung in a tree. Looking up, he “perceived a negro, suspended in the cage, and left there to expire.”

I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes, his cheekbones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places, and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds. From the edges of the hollow sockets and from the lacerations with which he was disfigured, the blood slowly dropped and tinged the ground beneath ... I sought, though trembling, to relieve him as well as I could. A shell ready fixed to a pole, which had been used by some negroes, presented itself to me; filled it with water and with trembling hands I guided it to the quivering lips of the wretched sufferer. Urged by the irresistible power of thirst, he endeavoured to meet it as he instinctively guessed its approach by the noise it made in passing through the bars of the cage. “Tanké you white man, tanké you, puté some poison and give me.” “How long have you been hanging there?” I asked him. “Two days, and me no die; the birds, the birds; aah me!” Oppressed with the reflections which this shocking spectacle afforded me, I mustered strength enough to walk away, and soon reached the house at which I intended to dine.22

This letter, “Reflections on Negro Slavery,” is a well-known text in the literature of protest against racial injustice, and it is possible that Welles read it. The point, however, is not to establish a specific source but to suggest what Welles leaves out, the kinds of expectations Welles’s caging of Iago plays against, resists, and reverses. Being hung in a cage is, as de Crevecoeur reminds us, an unspeakable torture. Welles ends the scene before any physical pain might occur, displacing the horror thus elided into images of effort, work, and solemn spectacle. Further, for Americans, torture this monstrous has special associations with the oppression of blacks.23 This is so whether we think of de Crevecoeur, of the many echoes and repetitions of his story in later literature, of or the descriptions of Lynchings and mutilations so prevalent in the accounts of black oppression in America. (A recent example is the treatment of the murder of Emmitt Till in the television documentary, *Eyes on the Prize.* ) Liz White’s film uses this history in her treatment of Othello’s epilepsy, where Yaphet Koto’s sightless, bulging eyes and horribly distorted features, though the result of illness, allude to the horrors of slavery.

Welles elides the pain; the scene is followed by the opening credits and the beginning of the story which Iago’s punishment concludes. During the narrative the empty cage reappears at strategic moments, and its position outside the window of the fatal bedroom means that we never see that place without remembering the funeral and execution that will end the action. At the end of the film the motif of mirror reflection and that of the cage combine: as the final credits begin, we see an inverted image of the tower with the cage tiny in long shot reflected in the water of a Venetian canal. The image of the cage thus haunts the refined civilization that employs it. But this final shot of the cage brings us no closer to the suffering that will take place there.24

In contrast to de Crevecoeur, Welles’s use of the image of the cage omits something else as well: the human contact between the horribly suffering victim and the chance witness to his fate. Despite “recall” and “horror” de Crevecoeur is able to make a small gesture of relief.

And of course Iago is white and unspeakably vicious. The question is not whether Iago deserves relief but rather of the ways in which the film’s reversals and displacements make such a gesture impossible. The substitution of the white villain for the caged slave is meant as an indictment of racism and parallels the verbal reversals of Welles’s radio polemics of the period.25 But an indictment so thorough, so wish-fulfilling in its revenge, perhaps carries
Concluding

Orson Welles’s *Othello* offers a powerful and coherent interpretation of the play informed by a remarkably complex structure of visual imagery. This *Othello* is far more consistently bleak and despairing than is generally recognized, perhaps a good deal more than the play justifies, though Welles’s interpretation resonates with a number of contemporary readings, especially those of Edward Snow and Stanley Cavell. The psychological affinities of the film are with theories that stress the importance of maternal “mirroring” and the disastrous consequences of its failure.

Welles’s art strives consistently to foreground the work of inscription, to disturb the mirror function of the screen as Baudry understands it, and to deflate the omnipotent position of the film spectator. In this sense his *Othello* is a critical text, one that makes us aware of its own methods and of the psychological and social contradictions that inform them. Welles’s practice embodies, before the fact, Baudry’s program for an adversarial cinema:

Both specular tranquillity and the assurance of one’s own identity collapse simultaneously with the revealing of the mechanism.26

This *Othello*, however, cannot go beyond its own revelations, its own collapses; it remains psychologically and politically caught in its own evocation of entrapment. Its politics are the liberal politics of equality. But equality is so complete here that, like the tragic narcissism of the protagonist, it is a denial of pain, of history, and of otherness. Society is a prison in Welles’s film because social life—like marriage—cannot be imagined except as a mirror of the self.

Notes

2 Ibid., 42.
3 Ibid., 43.
4 Ibid., 45.
5 Ibid., 45–46.
6 Ibid., 46.
7 The Stuart Burge film starring Laurence Olivier (U.K., 1966) will be omitted from discussion here. Although its interpretation of the play is relevant at a number of points to the issues discussed in this chapter, it is a work that was only lightly reconsidered for the film medium and aimed to recreate the magisterial National Theater production of 1964. Thus it does not offer as much material for visual analysis as the other films.
8 For a fuller account of this interesting film, see chapter 5.
10 There is a suggestion here that Desdemona’s presence is evoked by Othello’s gaze. This aspect of the shot will be important to recall when we discuss the similarity between this sequence and the process of maternal “mirroring” in psychoanalytic theory. In the murder scene Desdemona also appears to evoke Othello; she whispers his name and his face suddenly appears from the darkness, unexpectedly close to hers.
12 See above, p. 44.
13 This is perhaps the place to note that Roderigo, whose passion for Desdemona is in many other ways a burlesque of Othello’s, also has a mirror in the film. It is steamed over with mist from the
14 The literature on maternal mirroring is vast. I confine myself to several particularly resonant authorities: a psychoanalyst and a film theorist. See D. W. Winnicott, Playing and Reality (New York: Basic Books, 1971), chap. 9, "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development," 111–18. "In individual emotional development the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face (p. 111): "What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and when she looks like is related to what she sees there" (p. 112). "When the average girl studies her face in the mirror she is reassuring herself that the mother-image is there and that the mother can see her and that the mother is en rapport with her" (p. 113). Christian Metz, The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1982) speak of how the "other mirror, the cinema screen" activates the Lacanian mirror stage, which "alienates men in his own reflection" and extends the "subterranean persistence of the exclusive relation to the mother" (p. 4). In cinema the "perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its replica in a new kind of mirror" (p. 45). For Metz film is like a mirror except that the spectator's own body is never reflected in it (p. 45). Metz is drawing on Jacques Lacan, Ecrits: A Selection, ed. A. Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), "The Mirror Stage," pp. 1–7.

15 As by Snow, "Sexual Anxiety," 404–5; Marianne Novy, Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 132. Snow speaks of "maternal betrayal" here, whereas Novy's interpretation, like my own, sees the lines as expressive of a fantasy of symbiotic fusion with the mother. Stanley Cavell does not use the language of fusion, but in his interpretation of the play, too, Othello cannot accept Desdemona's separate existence. See Discovering Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), chap. 3, "Othello and the Stake of the Other." 125–42. "Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists; is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him. The content of his torture is the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own, his own as dependent, as partial" (p. 138).

16 Melanie Klein's 1956 lecture, "A Study of Envy and Gratitude," in The Selected Melanie Klein, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1987), 211–29, is relevant to Othello at many points and provides an especially interesting gloss on Welles's interpretation of 4.2.1: "What the envied breast has to offer is unconsciously felt as the prototype of creativeness, because the breast and the milk it gives is felt to be the source of life" (p. 219). "If it [i.e., envy of the breast] is strong ... hatred and anxieties are transferred to the female genital" (ibid.).

17 The confusion between self and other intensified by the passage may be felt in a syntax that reverses the subject object relation implied by the paired verbs discarded and keep. If Othello himself is what is discarded, he is also what is kept—bouffed but retained—by Desdemona. In Klein's terms the passage suggests the reintegration of the object spoiled by envy: Othello identifies himself as a contaminated part or effluent of a maternal body.

18 The emphasis on the failure of the beloved's eyes to return an anxious gaze in a reassuring way may draw on Welles's memory of his dying mother's eyes. As Charles Higham retells Welles's description of his mother's last days, when Orson was nine years old, Beatrice Welles's eyes were a salient part of her memory:

Beatrice spoke to him of her approaching end, quoting Shakespeare, her shining eyes appearing dark by the light of the candles on his birthday cake. Eyes that had been green were now almost black with suffering; her flesh was yellow and flabby with sickness. She told Orson to blow out all the candles on the cake, and as he did so, for there was no other light in the room, it became utterly dark. In this charged and symbolic way, she told him what death was, and he may never have recovered from that terrifying moment.

(Orson Welles: The Rise and Fall of an American Genius (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 44.


20 The world-as-prison motif may also be related to the psychological patterns that underlie the mirror images in the film. See especially Melanie Klein's discussion of the fantasy of being imprisoned within the mother's body, which she associates with the wish for revenge for the
withholding of nourishment. The Selected Melanie Klein, 186 and notes.

21 One may contrast Welles's positioning of the spectator with Baudry's statement of the way in which the grandiose "eye" of the spectator is constituted in conventional film: If the eye which moves is no longer fettered by a body, by the laws of matter and time, if there are no more assignable limits to its displacement—conditions fulfilled by the possibility of shooting and of film—the world will not only be constrained by this eye, but for it. The movability of the camera seems to fulfill the most favorable condition for the manifestation of the transcendental subject.

Baudry, "Ideological Effects," 43.


23 See, for example, Marius Bowley, "The Cage and the Prairie: Two Notes on Symbolism," Hudson Review 10, no. 3 (1957): 405-8. "Horrible facts are self-purging. The mind casts them out for its better health. But here the caged Negro acquires a symbolic status and will not be exercised. The image of a caged man is not in itself capable of assaulting the imagination in this way, as Marlowe's Bajazet can prove" (p. 407).

24 The displacement of physical pain is consistent in the film. Othello never brandishes his sword as in so many other versions; we do not see him kill himself: the knife that kills Emilia and the one that kills Rodrigo enter without our seeing them. And as we have seen, sharp edges and pointed bars often frame the action but seldom appear in the action.

25 See Barbara Learning, Orson Welles (New York: Viking, 1985), 329–30, citing a Welles radio speech:

I was born a white man and until a colored man is a full citizen like me I haven't the leisure to enjoy the freedom that colored man risked his life to maintain for me. I don't own what I have until he owns an equal share of it. Until somebody beats me and blinds me, I am in his debt. And so I come to this microphone not as a radio dramatist (although it pays better), not as a commentator (although it's safer to be simply that), I come, in that boy's name, and in the name of all who in this land have no voice of their own. I come with a call to action. (p. 330)

Welles took courageous, self-risking stands on civil rights, and his efforts to put himself in the place of the oppressed and to speak for them are often moving. But can it be said that his attempts to speak for the pain of others were free of grandiose posturing, or that they did not displace and subtly disempower those he claimed to speak for?