Touch of Shakespeare: Welles Unmoors Othello

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[If it were really like Othello nobody could understand it, however new it might be. And if it were new, it couldn’t possibly be like Othello.
—Aldous Huxley, Brave New World

The most detestable habit in all modern cinema is the homage. I don’t want to see another goddamn homage in anybody’s movie. There are enough of them which are unconscious.
—Orson Welles, at the Cinémathèque française

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Orson Welles’s Touch of Evil (1958) bears marks of a dense, knotty relationship to William Shakespeare’s Othello, a relationship that has until now been overlooked (and, in my experience, sometimes denied with surprising vehemence). The connection is pervasive yet indirect, and I approximate this indirection structurally through the form of my essay—just as Shakespeare provides a buried foundation for Welles’s film, evocative quotations from the play are confined by design to my footnotes, thereby offering a running dialogue with the body of the argument (endnotes are largely reserved for explanatory digressions). This creates an admittedly demanding reading experience, which (I hope) emulates the kind of conversation Welles himself was having with Shakespeare. The excessive length of this essay and its discursive annotations manifest my desire to

1 Thus, as an opening example, I observe that the play itself draws our attention to circui
tous inducement: the First Senator accuses Othello of using the very methods (“by indi-
rect and forced courses” [1.3.111]) that could more appropriately describe Iago’s strategies.
establish definitively this hitherto unrecognized relationship between film and play. I err on the side of over-stating the case (making an argument by accumulation, as it were) in part because the evidence for my initially intuitive linkage remains profoundly circumstantial. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of *Touch of Evil*’s engagement with *Othello* is how insistently the film displaces its allegiance to its predecessor—making this connection all the more difficult to pin down. Most likely much of our continued inability to recognize *Othello* in *Touch of Evil* rests in this sophisticated displacement. Critics have only recently—and only fleetingly, never at length—begun to notice even the mere “whisper of Desdemona and the Moor in the thwarting of this modern couple” (Lane 146). In the final pages of the essay, I conjecture that the *racial* displacement enacted by Welles—put bluntly, creating an American *Othello* without a ‘black’ *Othello*—serves as a more unsettling cause for our continued disacknowledgement of his evocation of Shakespeare.

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Looking ajar, I begin by contemplating an *Othello*-derived trifle in a more contemporary production. The play is invoked at a crucial juncture in the recent remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004). This moment occurs when the African-American soldier Bennett Marco (Denzel Washington) discovers (or rather, believes he discovers) that he cannot trust the woman in whom he has been confiding. In her bathroom, he notices a surveillance camera hidden above him behind a ventilation grate. In fury, he searches through her purse, finding, among other evidence, not Iago-esque money but rather audiotapes of their confessional conversations. His faith in her shattered, he flees her apartment. Immediately before noticing this camera, we catch sight of an object in the mirror, a reversed image from the wall behind him, an image that we never see in its proper perspective. It is a poster from Paul Robeson’s *Othello*—most likely his highly successful 1943 Broadway production (see fig. 1).

How much are we to make of such a glimpse at such a moment? Should we simply dismiss it as a chance gesture, just another poster in an apartment full of theatrical posters? By recognizing this fleeting image, are we falling into the painfully American trap of identifying black male ac-

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The handkerchief is spoken of twice in connection to “trifle’s”—once by Iago (“Trifles light as air” [3.3.323]) and once by Emilia (“such a trifle” [5.2.234]).

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tors with Othello? Or is it fair to read significance into this glance, as if the film were saying: "of course you (anamorphically) envision Othello standing behind this moment, just as you were so quick to see him behind O. J. Simpson and other black figures under state scrutiny." Even if the mirror image cannily inverts our insistence on Othello's theatrical past, we are still left wondering how we should take into account these observations—that Marco has been tortured on an island (which, with its decayed arabesque structures, could very well be a former Mediterranean outpost) by a malign character who manages to 'get inside his head'; that Marco later bursts in upon this same woman and, furiously unable to recall her name ("Susie, Rosie, whatever the hell your name is"), nearly strangles her while demanding the truth of her; that Washington and Meryl Streep, who also stars in the film, were once invited by Joseph Papp to be cast as Othello and Desdemona; that, when discussing his role of Malcolm X, another figure under heavy observation, Washington pondered that "perhaps there could be" a "correlation there between Othello and Malcolm X" (Lee 117); that in interviews Washington has consistently answered the query about his fidelity to the original Manchurian Candidate with variations on this response: "To me any good piece of material like Shakespeare ought to be open to reinterpretation. I played Othello but I didn't sit around thinking how Laurence Olivier did it when he played it" (Chavez).

While this final comment is alluring (especially in light of the computerized 'white-washing' Marco undergoes by a subsequent surveillance camera), I adduce this movie as only one example of an underexamined field in the study of Shakespearean influence on screen. The Manchurian Candidate is by no means an adaptation of Othello, but it is precisely the lack of a proper vocabulary for how to articulate its connection to the play that leads one to consider it an emblem, if you will, of a blind spot in current scholarship. In recent decades there has, admittedly, been a veritable boom in research on movies adapted from Shakespeare, concurrent with the continued proliferation of such adaptations. But with few exceptions these investigations have largely been devoted to a relatively stable list of recognized Shakespearean films. (Likewise, scholarship on Welles's Shakespearean movies rarely strays from Macbeth (1942), Othello (1952), Chimes at Midnight (1967), and the Brook King Lear (1953) to contemplate Shakespearean elements outside of this established set.) Those studies that do pursue Shakespeare beyond the cinematic canon tend either to catalog the appearances of "Shakespeare in popular culture" (an admittedly useful step, but nonetheless a preliminary one?) or heavily (albeit often suggestively)
theorize these appearances. We find few sustained meditations on what could arguably count as a more obliquely Shakespearean influence where his works are less obviously invoked. In the case of *The Manchurian Candidate*, we never hear the name of Shakespeare cited, and no lines derive directly from the play. How then do we articulate a far more subterranean relationship in a work wherein Shakespeare shapes the thematic and structural contours but only occasionally emerges in an overt acknowledgement?²⁷

Specific interpretive difficulties arise when we perceive traces of *Othello* in a contemporary context, precisely because that play makes problematic the idea of evidence itself. A symptom of *Othello* (and, troublingly, a symptom of reading *Othello*) involves the obsessive search for evidence. This is not a play or character to which one has a passive reaction; Iago’s medicine works upon us in ways from which we cannot seem to inoculate ourselves. Our sight is poisoned by something that we never see, long before we even know what it is we thought we were seeking. In our worrying what might possibly count as proof, itself a preoccupation of *Othello’s*, Iago has uncannily produced in us an occupational hazard: “the quest for material origins” (Kezar 53).²⁸ In our comparable search for motives and causes, we are provoked into intense responses that unexpectedly echo the same violence that we find so disturbing in our antecedents—previous ‘racist’ critics (the notorious Rymer and his heirs’), ‘naïve’ audiences (the unanecdote of an *Othello* performance involving an observer’s misguided interruption of the action), films that thematize murderous possession (*Carnival [1921/1931], Men Are Not Gods [1936], A Double Life [1947], even a Cheers episode [1983; see Rippl]). It is thus with reasonable hesitation that one embarks on an inquiry into finding hidden evidence of *Othello* in a film, since Iago seems to have already set us up to suspect any evidence (even as we desire to see it).

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The fantasy scenario: what could possibly count as incontrovertible evidence for Welles’s dialogue with *Othello* in *Touch of Evil*?² Would we only be satisfied to catch him in the act,²² as it were—the primal scene equivalent of a diary entry reading “Plan: modify Badge of Evil via the subtle

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¹ OTHELLO: Make me to see’t, or at the least so prove it / That the probation bear no hinge nor loop / To hang a doubt on, or woe upon thy life! (3.3.365–67)

² IAGO: Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? (3.3.396)
introduction of elements from *Othello*. Barring the discovery of this confessional cache, how much are we to attribute to his long-standing fascination with 'Moorish' things, most proximally manifested by his 1948-52 production of *Othello*—partly set in Morocco and submitted to Cannes under a Moorish flag—but commencing with his supposed first childhood reading of Shakespeare: "One especially fanciful story, told by Welles himself and repeated by almost all of his biographers, has him traveling to the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco with a satchel full of Elizabethan plays, which he studied while domiciled in the palace of an Arab sheik" (France 1)? How much can we read into the anecdote, related in passing by Charlton Heston—the nominal star of *Touch of Evil* who, in his account, helped persuade the studio to let Welles rewrite and direct the script—that when Heston first met with Welles to discuss the modifications of the screenplay, he was greeted at the door by "a looming figure in a flowing black Moorish robe from his *Othello*?"

Leaving aside these biographical insinuations, let's concentrate on the screenplay, for a legitimate preliminary question involves asking how many of the *Othello* fingerprints that are discernable in *Touch of Evil* are in fact from Welles's hand. If we are willing to attribute to Welles a compositional ingenuity comparable to that which we find so remarkable in Shakespeare (who himself was often working with his contemporary equivalent of pulp fiction), then even those elements that Welles preserved from his sources must inevitably be considered under his signature—yet even without this supersubtle caveat, the modifications are telling enough on their own. Paradoxically, the threads from *Othello* that we can assign to Welles have seamlessly woven themselves into the fabric of the film and have thus become naturalized to the viewer (with a skeptical response sounding something like "that's just part of the story; that's not necessarily related to *Othello*"

Stating the case strongly, Welles modified these four major elements of the plot from the original Whit Masterson novel and Paul Monash screenplay:

- He foregrounded an inter-racial relationship by making the lead role an official with the Mexican government (Heston's Miguel Vargas) and his wife an American (Janet Leigh's Susan Vargas). Originally, the American Mitch Holt was married to a woman of Mexican descent (Consuelo Holt in Masterson, Teresa Holt in Monash), but their ethnicities are comparatively uncontroversial within their respective plots. Welles thereby echoes Othello-Desdemona by reversing the genders of
this inter-racial couple, and even doubles them by creating another Mexican husband with an American wife, Manolo Sanchez and Marcia Linnekar, who had originally both been Americans.

- The inter-racial relationships are further accentuated by the transposition of the action from a California city (Welles recalled it as “San Diego,” although the sources do not indicate a name) to the fictional setting of “Los Robles,” a nightmarish town that straddles both sides of the Mexican-American border. Racist comments about Mexicans are stated by a number of American officials, but are especially typical of Captain Hank Quinlan (Welles), the manipulative Iago figure of the film; indeed, “Mexican” and “foreigner” are uttered by him as contemptuously as “Moor” is by Iago. (Just before Vargas first meets Quinlan, a billboard looming behind Heston announces, as if in mockery, “Welcome Stranger!” [see fig. 2]) Cyprus, as an outpost of the Venetian empire, is itself situated as a border on the edge of “civilization,” as Quinlan refers to the United States.

- Welles heavily underlines the theme of marriage, far from a preoccupation in his sources. In Masterson, the Holts have been married for years and have a daughter, and the equivalent Sanchez/Linnekar couple gets married, uneventfully, during the course of the novel. In contrast, they have already been “secretly” married in Welles’s film, since her Brabantio-like father Rudy Linnekar would not have approved. More significantly, the Vargases are on their honeymoon when we first meet them (according to Welles’s screenplay “They fell in love quickly and without any warning to their parents, were married”), and, just as Othello and Desdemona have their nuptial rites interrupted, are disjoined for most of the film. (Lawyers’s advertisements for “marriages and divorces,” scattered throughout Los Robles, insinuate that their union might be under strain.)

- The interruption of the Vargas honeymoon commences with the intrusion of a violent external event. In Othello this involves not only the slanderous yelling of Iago and Roderigo in the first act but also the tempest on the way from Venice to Cyprus. The bomb that explodes Rudy Linnekar’s car was not witnessed by Holt in either source; in contrast, Welles places the Vargases precariously close to this car—so close, indeed, that their kiss almost seems to ignite the explosion. Welles’s extensive description of the opening scenario of Touch of Evil could just as easily apply to the play: “A honeymoon couple, desperately

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i RODERIGO: an extravagant and wheeling stranger. (1.1.133)
ii IAGO: . . . he will divorce you. (1.2.14)
iii MONTANO: A fuller blast ne’er shook our battlements. (2.1.6)
in love, is abruptly separated by a violent incident...—an incident which, although it has no personal bearing on either of them, the man considers as a matter of his urgent professional concern” (Memo).  

Even without the myriad echoes that we shall shortly examine (nearly all of which, again, can be attributed to Welles’s intervention), these four fundamental transformations, all flagged to us within the very first minutes of the film, should remind us of Othello: a racially ‘other’ official (Vargas soon figures himself militarily: “there are plenty of soldiers who don’t like war”) whose honeymoon is violently interrupted while in a hostile border environment. Without an appreciation of this film’s conversation with this play, many such details remain inexplicable. Consider, for instance, the somewhat snide yet genuine query from the original New York Times review of the film: “And why, Mr. Heston, pick the toughest little town in North America for a honeymoon with a nice morsel like Miss Leigh?” (Thompson 228).

What makes Welles’s engagement with Othello so preposterously elusive is the fact that none of these parallels with the play is slavishly maintained throughout the film. Instead, we have a series of fluctuating alignments, in which Shakespearean characteristics shift across multiple Wellesian characters, in which thematic developments are split and recombined in new permutations, in which cinematic mood has as much to do with the Shakespearean quality of the film as do the more direct allusions. It even seems at times that Welles makes gestures toward Othello only to discard them. For instance, early in the film, Susie Vargas is asked twice (once in Spanish, which she does not comprehend, then in English) “if your husband is jealous?” We are thus given the key word, indeed the core theme, of Othello, which never recurs in the film. When Vargas later becomes enraged during the search for his presumably violated wife, we do not sense that this arises from any jealousy, but rather a real concern for her safety. (In this allusive slight of hand, can we sense Welles teasing us? teasing out our prejudices, Shakespearean and otherwise, in order to re-direct them?) Thus we are left with the curious result wherein Welles acts even more ‘Shakespearean’ (that is to say, liberal, agglomerative, careless, and self-interested) in the appropriation of his source than most directors have been in more typically ‘faithful’ versions of Othello. To paraphrase

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1 EMILIA: Is he not jealous? (3.4.28)
a statement uttered by the Doctor in *Touch of Evil* when viewing Linnekar's obliterated body, this is *Othello* strained through a sieve. There have been many attempts to taxonomize non-traditional Shakespearean adaptations, but none of them quite fit what Welles achieves here. I can think of nothing better than to call this a *translation* of Shakespeare's play, and an American one at that: Welles has carried *Othello* over to an entirely brave new world and somehow managed to make it disturbingly native.

There is an unfortunate tendency (to which I am liable myself) in Shakespearean film criticism to revert to recounting rather than analysis. Perhaps this results from the sheer plenitude of information that we could possibly absorb (camera angles, lighting, color, sound effects, music, costumes, blocking, setting, lines cut and scenes reordered [see Bellour]), made all the more dauntingly available through home playback systems. It's as if the very same readers who are quite well versed in dealing with the verbal sophistication of the text become overwhelmed by the abundance of the screen. There is a similar annotative tendency to be found in analyses of *Touch of Evil*, albeit from a less verbal and more visual/aural perspective. The inclination to focus almost exclusively on the technical (in effect, non-textual) virtuosity that Welles flaunts is understandable (at his best he is, indisputably, cinematically overwhelming), but ultimately disappointing, and, I would argue, contributes to the inability to hear him playing off of Shakespeare. Since Welles's fugal variations on *Othello* are fundamentally non-linear in their correspondence—indeed, they are radically modulating Shakespeare—let's play along with him, starting not with his first opening note, but rather a peculiar character's interlude, which not only beguiled early American reviewers but was frankly (and thus exceptionally) admitted by Welles to have been composed with deliberately Shakespearean overtones.

The Night Man (Dennis Weaver) has no name. He's a jittery, at times inarticulate motel clerk (at "The Mirador") who is supposed to be helping Susie get some rest but seems reluctant to fulfill his basic housekeeping duties (making the bed, cleaning up, keeping the register). He strikes us as darkly comical; I take it we are to view him with a combination of bemusement and unease. Just as the Porter in *Macbeth* provides a curiously effective counterpoint to the recent bloodshed, the Night Man's role would seem to promise a welcome respite (for Susan as well as the audience) from the overheated intensity of the previous night's explosion and investigation. The promise is fleeting, as this "queerly likeable and diverting sort of zany" (Welles Memo) soon becomes a hapless figure, unable to intervene
(indeed, entirely unaware of the necessity of intervention) when Susan gets
tormented (and, it would at first appear, raped) by a gang of leather-jack-
eted teens. We later see him, distressed, “embracing a windblown tree like
a Shakespearean fool” (Naremore 202) (see fig. 3). Welles admitted as
much when he observed that the Night Man was

the complete Shakespearean clown, and like the Shakespearean clowns,
somewhat marginal to the story. . . [T]he horrific atmosphere by which
he is surrounded could not of necessity bring forth anything but a fantastic
creation of this kind, an Elizabethan figure, as you say. (Bazin, Bitsch, and
Domarchi 65)

Welles posits here an almost generic necessity for the emergence of the
Night Man, akin to that which Kenneth Burke attributed to the appear-
ance of the Porter.33 As Welles indicates, the closer structural analogue to
the role of Porter or Fool in Othello would be the Clown, who, like the
Night Man, effectively shuts down music:1 Weaver defiantly flips off the
switch on the motel’s blaring speakers in the midst of the physical assault
on Susan—turning the relief from the wearying saxophone riffs (a relief
again desired by both Susie and the audience) into a chilling silence. And
just as the Clown’s role in Othello is almost invariably cut in production on
account of his seeming incongruity with the tragic tone of the play, Welles
admitted (somewhat defensively) that critics tended to be baffled as to the
purpose of Weaver’s character.34

Yet we would be remiss if we failed to identify the Night Man with an-
other more prominent character from Othello. When the Night Man first
speaks with Susie, she asks him to turn the music down, since “It’s past seven
and I haven’t been to bed yet.” He seems acutely perturbed by this word—
“bed”—which becomes the fixation for much of his stammering response:

Bed? Well you can get into it now, I brought the sheets. They think I’m
gonna help make it they got another thing comin’! I’m, I’m not gonna be
a party to [throws sheets down] nuthin’. I’m the night [bumps into the
wall]—uh, it’s, it’s day already. I’m the night man.—[perturbed, she inter-
rupts:] Have the day man help me make the bed.—There ain’t no day man
. . .—[after more of his rambling, she interrupts again:] But won’t you help
me make the bed?—[he, with churning features:] Bed?

1 CLOWN: . . . the general so likes your music that he desires you for love’s sake to
make no more noise with it. (3.1.11-13)
The Night Man responds as a neurotic anti-Emilia. Rather than obliging her request to put the sheets on the bed, he appears incapable of even contemplating this action. Regardless, the effect in both play and film is similar—the emphatic preparation of the bed creates a foreboding that some violent act will soon take place there. (This is only the second of Susan's four beds; the first was mere furniture; on this one she will suffer the staged rape; on the third she is drugged while a murder takes place above her feverish face; and the fourth, in jail, is where Vargas finally recovers her.)

Shortly after Desdemona asks that she be shrouded in her wedding sheets, she recalls and then sings the willow song. Many readers have tried to elicit what exactly makes this lyric so haunting; it certainly feels anticipatory, even if its words at best only glancingly apply to her and Othello. It strikes me that, like Burke's analysis of the shift to the Porter scene, we have yet another one of Shakespeare's tonal modulations, a pause that gives us pause. On stage this scene can feel unnervingly long, as we endure this proverbial calm before the storm. Welles creates a comparable calm after the (presumed) storm of Susan's rape. He does so, remarkably, by having the Night Man/Clown/Emilia now perform a song equivalent to that of Desdemona's. In a meekly dazed voice, he intones the eschatological chorus from a traditional hymn ("When the roll is called up yonder / When the roll is called up yonder") before an increasingly alarmed Vargas interrupts him. Like Vargas, we are in the dark as to Susan's whereabouts, so the Night Man's facile repetition of the last words of Vargas's queries (e.g. Vargas: "What seems to be the trouble?" Night Man: "Trouble?"

Vargas: "My name is Vargas." Night Man: "Vargas?") only serves to agitate us further. The Night Man, for some inexplicable reason, cannot tell

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i EMILIA: I have laid those sheets you bade me on the bed. (4.3.22)

ii DESDEMONA: Prithee tonight / Lay on my bed my wedding sheets. (4.2.106-07)

iii IAGO: Indeed!

OTHELLO: Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou aught in that?

Is he not honest?

IAGO: Honest, my lord?

OTHELLO: Honest? Ay, honest.

IAGO: My lord, for aught I know.

OTHELLO: What dost thou think?

IAGO: Think, my lord?

OTHELLO: "Think, my lord?" By heaven, thou echo'st me,

As if there were some monster in thy thought

Too hideous to be shown. (3.3.101-11)
Vargas where Susan is sleeping,

cannot even “look, please, in the regis-
ter.—Register?” (I note further the Night Man’s unusual use of the word “brawl”—as in “wild party,” to Vargas’s bewilderment—which is also Othello’s repetitiously scornful term for the melee in Cyprus.)

I devote this space to dissecting the comparatively minor character of the Night Man because it exemplifies how an impressively heterogeneous sequence of Othello elements (sheets, bed, music, willow, echo, brawl) can, in Welles’s hands, manage to become consolidated in one idiosyncratic figure. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, that figure emerges as Shakespearean despite its failure to correlate to any single source. Such multivalent correspondences are all the more impressive when one recognizes that the Night Man was hardly present at all in Welles’s own screenplay (where he was an old, candle-bearing clerk with only a few lines), much less the Monash or Masterson versions. Once Welles knew that Weaver was available for the part, he rewrote the role for him during production. The Night Man thus belongs to a compositional category that we might call ‘the adventitious’—things fortuitously at hand that are then spun out into a larger web.

We associate Iago with this adventitious facility (Stephen Greenblatt has likened it to improvisation), and Quinlan demonstrates skill with it too (manifested in his oft-remarked “famous intuition”). There is thus a reasonable temptation to read these characters as revelatory self-projections (frustrated directors) of their creators. We find Shakespeare working adventitiously when we try to come to terms with his surprising timeliness (say, making a play about a Moor shortly after a Moorish ambassador is painted at court) as well as the demands arising from working with a repertoire company (requiring, for instance, a Will Kempish role). I would like to see Welles as Shakespearean in his own adventitious handling of timely

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1 DESDEMONA: Do you know, sirrah, where lieutenant Cassio lies?
CLOWN: I dare not say he lies anywhere.
DESDEMONA: Why, man?
CLOWN: He’s a soldier, and for me to say a soldier lies, ’tis stabbing.
DESDEMONA: Go to; where lodges he?
CLOWN: To tell you where he lodges is to tell you where I lie.
DESDEMONA: Can anything be made of this?
CLOWN: I know not where he lodges, and for me to devise a lodging and say he lies here or he lies there were to lie in mine own throat. (3.4.1-13)

2 OTHELLO: For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl! / . . . the name / Of a night brawler? / . . . silence those whom this vile brawl distracted. (2.3.162, 185-86, 246)
issues (racism, police brutality, international relations) and his long-term collaboration with a group of actors (with some Mercury Players and old friends convening for this last Hollywood hurrah). 'Materials' (often chance conditions) present themselves to the artist; ingenious artists will draw upon these material elements to reinforce the synthetic dynamic of their evolving composition. With Othello murmuring in the background, consider the following material facts that Welles adventitiously absorbed in Touch of Evil: Dennis Weaver is interested? Make him into a Clown. Marlene Dietrich is available? Make her into the fortune-telling, gypsy-like prostitute Tana. Welles injured his leg during production? Give Quinlan a cane (Kane?) to limp around with, which will serve as ocular proof in the plot. Mexican censors won't allow the movie to be produced in Tijuana, on account of its unfavorable portrayal of “Los Robles”? Shoot the entire film in California, in a derelict, canal-filled town described by Pauline Kael as “a real nightmare” — Venice (qtd. in Corkery).

'Venice' had to have delighted Welles; note the pleasure he takes in recounting the collapse between the filmic and narrative locales for his previous Othello:

Time and chance and many, many other verisimilitudes would take us over half of Italy, to England for the mixing of the sound, to Africa, especially to Africa, and specifically to Morocco. Now Othello's story has nothing to do with his own native land, but our story was very much involved in it. . . . [W]e entered the lists of the Cannes film festival under a Moorish flag, appropriately enough I'd say for a movie on the Moor of Venice. (Filming Othello)

"It is no accident that"; "it seems more than coincidental"; "appropriately enough"; "not surprisingly" (one of Stephen Heath's ticks when discussing this film)—all such phrases are understandably seductive when confronted with such a luminous conjunction. Let us be bold, then: Venice is the present but largely unspoken hub of both Othello and Touch of Evil, a Borgesian center that is nowhere and everywhere. After act one, Othello is entirely displaced to Cyprus, the remote periphery of empire (see Vitkus and Orkin). Characters recall it as the moral site contrasting the barbaric frontier (Vargas: "All border towns bring out the worst in a country; I can

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1 OTHELLO: That handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give. / She was a charmer and could almost read / The thoughts of people. (3.4.53-56)

2 BRABANTIO: This accident is not unlike my dream. (1.1.139)
just imagine your mother’s face if she could see our honeymoon hotel”), and are called back to it (Vargas frequently anticipates returning to his capital, Mexico City; Susan comes from Philadelphia, the origin of our compact)—but in this play the Moor is of Venice but more in Cyprus. Venice might be considered a memory of the past to which we cannot return. Is Welles’s silent ‘Venice’ (California, in scare quotes, having been constructed in 1905 as a kind of romantic ‘setting’) a shimmering recollection of his prior Venice (Italy)? By the final scenes—when Vargas, trailing Quinlan and Menzies (Quinlan’s unwitting Roderigo), must wade through the flotsam-laden canals—Venice is visually, albeit not verbally, invoked.

This entire episode transposes the early mutiny scene from Welles’s Othello, which seems to take place in something akin to a cavernously vaulted sewer. While I do not have the space to explore fully the dialogue Welles develops with his own film (in part, because I sense that he is more agonistically wrestling with Shakespeare’s play), there is certainly a case to be made for such an exploration. Welles was always recycling, even repeating his work; his Shakespearean productions in particular were restricted to a comparatively short list that had already begun to take form in his teens, were later broadcast over radio, were presented onstage, and were (eventually) made into movies. Thus we should expect that later films require a recursive reading as the latest manifestation of a sequence of prior versions (in different media) leading up to them. Speaking only prospectively, then, these connections seem to me worth further contemplation: the bravura opening sequences; the labyrinthine quality of both films; the heavy motifs of mirrors and encaging shadows; the understated blackface/brownface of the heroes; the rather wooden demeanors of the Othello and Vargas characters; the pose of pressing close to walls to overhear conversation (Othello to Cassio and Roderigo, Susan to the female gang members); the comparable late shots of half-shadowed Othello/Vargas faces emerging from pools of darkness (see figs. 4 and 5); and a nominal overlap between Suzanne (the actress who played the character of Desdemona in Othello) and Susan (the character who acts as a Desdemona in Touch of Evil).

Generically, both Welles’s Othello and Touch of Evil are frequently classi-
fied as film noir, with Touch of Evil singled out as the “self-conscious endpoint of noir” (Lott 545), following Schrader’s seminal essay. This classification does not matter as deeply to me as it has to other viewers; or rather it matters differently to me. Those elements that are often ascribed to noir have as much to do with Shakespeare as they have to do with this filmic style, a style to which Welles has a problematic alignment at best; perhaps Welles even manifests an entirely distinct strain of Wellesian noir. Thus it appears somewhat recursive to say that Welles’s films are inflected by noir when noir itself is inflected by Shakespeare (Welles’s more primal source42). Furthermore, noir was profoundly determined by Welles in the first place (via Citizen Kane (1941), The Stranger (1946), The Lady From Shanghai (1947), Mr. Arkadin (1955), his work in Journey Into Fear (1942), The Third Man (1949), etc.—in short, nearly everything he had a guiding hand in during the 1940s-50s). Consider this definition of noir from a film studies lexicon:

Ultimately film noir is not about investigating a murder, although it might at first appear to be. Generally speaking, in the film noir the woman is central to the intrigue and it is therefore she who becomes the object of the male’s investigation. But, as you will have guessed, it is less her role in the intrigue that is under investigation, much more her sexuality because it is that which threatens the male quest for resolution. The ideological contradiction she opens up by being a strong, active, sexually expressive female must be closed off. That is the diegetic trajectory and visual strategy of film noir. However, there are obvious difficulties in containing this woman. (Hayward 120)

This fits Shakespeare’s Othello just as closely as it does Welles’s. We are being tautological (“Behold, a mammal” [Nietzsche 183]) when we observe that Welles’s Shakespearean films have noir elements in them.43

To reframe this: what do we find in Othello that prefigures what we have come to associate with noir, and how are these “black”44 elements reconstituted in Touch of Evil? Joan Copjec concentrates on how an “absent cause” (xii) invariably forms the catalyst for what others have termed “noir anxiety” (Oliver and Trigo), and this helpfully elucidates Hayward’s focus on “investigation.” If anything, Othello is a meditation on causality; seeking the thing that cannot be seen (the impossibly absent evidence, which only further confirms the causal logic). “What is the matter?”45—

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1. OTHELLO: It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. (5.2.1)
   Kezar is particularly incisive on this point.
a query that rings incessantly throughout the play like the alarum that it is—could easily be taken as the syntactical core of noir inquiry. Right after the explosion, a worried Susan asks, “Mike, what happened?” He doesn’t know the answer but does know that “I’ve got to find out.” Othello and Vargas’s Oedipus-like identification with the solving of puzzles coincides with the necessity of discovery that dominates both narratives. In both cases this identification results in an exposure of their wives to venomous slander; in both cases the husband seems to acknowledge, if only faintly in an aside to himself, that he is at fault: “Susie, Susie, forgive me.” And the wife, despite her suffering the violent consequences, is to have nothing to do with this inquiry—in her mere attempt even to enunciate this question she is instantly quieted by the husband, who tells her to return to their domicile: “Go on, darling—you wait at the hotel.”

While Touch of Evil is full of such “What’s the matter”-like queries from Vargas (with Susan verbally, physically, and figuratively cut off from formulating them, as is Desdemona), the most telling version of this line occurs nearly at the center of the film. Vargas has (correctly) accused Quinlan of framing Sanchez, and after Vargas storms away Menzies asks: “What’s the matter with him Hank, is he, is he crazy?” Quinlan is momentarily defeated. Rather than Iago managing the scene of Othello’s epileptic fit (Othello awakens to witness the orchestrated conversation with Cassio), we find Vargas spurred into an investigatory fervor that eventually reveals a long record of false evidence planted by Quinlan. This is the pivotal scene within Welles’s restructuring of Othello; I mark it here because after this point Vargas will begin to appropriate Iago-like techniques, and Quinlan will eventually be reduced to Othello’s murderous (and, in effect, suicidal) dissolution. Welles permits Vargas to see, paradoxically, what Othello cannot: the absent evidence. While in the bathroom of the Sanchez apartment during the suspect’s interrogation, Vargas knocks over an empty shoebox (Vargas: “I saw that shoebox ten minutes ago, Captain.” Quinlan: “Yeah . . . well maybe you didn’t notice”), which will later miraculously hold the (planted) dynamite upon which Hank’s chief

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1. OTHELLO: I must be found. (1.2.30)
2. OTHELLO: I am to blame. (3.3.284)
3. OTHELLO: All’s well, sweeting; / Come away to bed. (2.3.242-43)
4. CASSIO: What’s the matter?
   IAGO: My lord is fallen into an epilepsy. (4.1.49-50)
5. IAGO: . . . your wisdom / From one that so imperfectly conceits / Would take no notice. (3.3.151-53)
case rests.¹

There are additional contenders for the role of the handkerchief.⁴ There are crucial forms of evidence are more self-consciously related to the media of sight (photography) and sound (recording), which both play and film interrogate—as if Welles were reflexively commenting on his medium, film, which combines these forms of evidence. Earlier in Touch of Evil, Susan unwittingly poses for a potentially incriminating photo with one of the Grandi boys (Vargas is prosecuting a member of this family for narcotics trafficking, but they remain the local criminal force, now led by the semi-absurd “Uncle Joe”). On the spur of the moment she calls him “Pancho,” but he could very well be trying out as a malicious Cassio: he has what Susan derides as “all those pretty front teeth”;⁴ he serves as an obstructive rather than enabling go-between³ for Susan and Vargas, cutting off their phone conversations with one another as he commandeers the switchboard at the Night Man’s motel; and he leads the assault on Susan, which by all indications will be a rape. He’s worse than what Othello imagines Cassio to be, and Vargas isn’t fully aware of him until after Susan’s ordeal.⁵ So this photo provides an analeptic vision of the jealous route taken up by neither Vargas nor Welles—a sight offered to us of the originary narrative that the film deflects. Susan receives an envelope from Sal, another one of the Grandi boys (Uncle Joe sent him on this errand) and opens it just as she was about to depart from Vargas for Mexico City (Vargas: “All I can say is, if you are taking that plane, I’m very glad.” Susan: “I’m very glad you’re very glad.”¹). Susan considers showing this note to Vargas, hesitates, and then abruptly announces, “now I think the best thing is to stick close to my husband. OK? . . . So Mike I’m coming with you.” What was so threatening inside this envelope? A note signed by “Pancho” (with characteristically Shakespearean multiplication: “A souvenir with a million

¹ CASSIO: I found it in my chamber; / And he himself confess’d it but even now / That there he dropp’d it for a special purpose / Which wrought to his desire. (5.2.325-28)
² IAGO: As he shall smile, Othello shall go mad; / And his unbookish jealousy must conster / Poor Cassio’s smiles . . . / Quite in the wrong. (4.1.100-03)
³ OTHELLO: . . . went between us very oft. (3.3.100)
⁴ DESDEMONA: By my troth, I am glad on’t. . . . / OTHELLO: I am glad to see you mad. (4.1.232, 234)
⁵ DESDEMONA: That I love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world. . . . / Let me go with him. (1.3.246-48, 257)
kisses”) and a photo of the two of them close together beneath the entrance to a hotel. The sexual overtones are already there—when Quinlan learns of her visit with the Grandis, he insinuates that she was “picked up” by a “good-looking young man [who] was a friend of hers.” Once again, the familiar tale of jealousy (and ocular proof to stimulate it) is raised and then set down again. (Not that Quinlan doesn’t try; after breaking the pigeon egg [see endnote 49], he retaliates for Vargas’s accusations by cutting to: “Where’s your wife, Vargas? . . . Hmm. You’re still here? . . . No, no special reason, no—just, wondered.”) A pattern is emerging: Welles constantly invites us to look for Othello where we think he should be, where we expect him to be, and he’s not quite there.

I defer, for the moment, a closer reading of the second handkerchief-contender (a recording device) with the intention of building up toward Welles’s added murder scene, which stunningly draws together the fundamental Othello elements in the plot. Suffice it to note here that while we tend to associate the Othello narrative with “ocular proof,” Iago is at least as (and perhaps more) reliant on auricular proof (hearsay) than he is on showing things to Othello. This has as much to do with his telling things to Othello (e.g. reporting Cassio’s ‘dream’) as it does with a more localized verbal ‘lexicon,’ as it were, with which Othello becomes infected. A standard example of such lexical infection is found in the “goats” and “monkeys” which first appear in a phrase by Iago (regarding the impossibility of witnessing Cassio and Desdemona in flagrante delicto”) and are later blurted out by a splenetic Othello. Can we sense words and phrases from Othello similarly seeping into Touch of Evil? In the first long shot, the Vargases (and the Linnekar car) are interrupted in their progression by a herd of goats; local color, yes, but we may hear them bleating back to the play when one of Quinlan’s first lines is “Whaddya know, the D.A.! in a

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i See Othello’s predilection for hyperbolic calculations: “O that the slave had forty thousand lives!” (3.3.442); “O, a thousand, a thousand times!” (4.1.187); “she with Cassio hath the act of shame / A thousand times committed” (5.2.217-18).

ii IAGO: Or to be naked with her friend in bed / An hour or more, not meaning any harm? (4.1.3-4)

Bianca also speaks of “friend” with sexual overtones (3.4.177).

iii IAGO: After some time, to abuse Othello’s ears (1.3.386)

I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear. (2.3.344)

iv IAGO: It is impossible you should see this / Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys. (3.3.403-04)

v OTHELLO: You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus.—Goats and monkeys! (4.1.258)
monkey suit." (The play is notoriously full of animal references; can we likewise map Quinlan's infuriation at the "half-breed" who murdered his wife to be akin to the slanderously racialized references to horse-breeding\(^i\) that Iago launches up to Brabantio in the first scene?) "Honest," the most carefully examined word in the entire play (see Empson's canonical analysis), was clearly emphasized by Welles in his revision of Badge of Evil. In the novel the word appears but once (145), and only twice in the Monash screenplay (36, 66); in Welles's film we hear it enunciated seven different times, nearly all of which refer to Quinlan (just as most references in the play refer to Iago). "Jealousy," while not nearly as oppressive a word as it is in the play, is nonetheless more pronounced here than it is in either version of Badge—where it is never mentioned. "Reputation," perhaps the third-most underscored word in the play, and barely mentioned in Monash ("make your rep" [70]) is heatedly discussed after Vargas's departure from the interrogation (Quinlan: "Listen, I got a position in this town, a reputation.\(^ii\) Who's Vargas?" Grandi: "Why, you just said it yourself: somebody's reputation has got to be ruined, why shouldn't it be Vargas's?"); and was earlier spoken of by Grandi: "He's got a reputation [snearing tone]; he's got a young bride; he's gonna leave this town wishing he and that... wife of his had never been born."\(^iii\) The acid earlier thrown at Vargas's face\(^iv\) would appear to be a literalization of this smear campaign against his reputation, and later Susan's (Vargas, acidly: "Her family, her good name;\(^v\) nothing's been

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\(^i\) IAGO: . . . you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins and jennets for Germans. (1.1.107-10)

\(^ii\) CASSIO: Reputation, reputation, reputation! Oh, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation! (2.3.252-55)

\(^iii\) OTHELLO: Would thou hast never been born! (4.2.70)

\(^iv\) OTHELLO: My name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face. (3.3.387-89)

Note that this is emended from both the 1622 Quarto and 1623 Folio readings of "Her name."

\(^v\) IAGO: Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, / Is the immediate jewel of their souls; / Who steals my purse steals trash: 'tis something, nothing; / Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands. / But he that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him / And makes me poor indeed. (3.3.158-64)

Note that the contents of Vargas's 'purse' (his gun from his briefcase) were stolen at the Mirador.
touched by all this—filth.”) Vargas will soon call Susan “mi vida,” proverbial of course but also indicating the extent of his stake in her; once he believes that she has been abducted, he refers to her only as “my wife.”

These are all common words, admittedly (as they were for Shakespeare), but when heard cumulatively and in conjunction between both sources they indicate an apparent resonance between the larger thematic dynamics of both play and film. Likewise, it might appear to be unremarkable that Othello and Touch of Evil take place over a fairly compressed sequence of days and nights. But the effective timelines for both versions coincide closely enough to invite speculation. The first image onscreen in Touch of Evil is a hand setting the time bomb, which will explode, as we have been visually warned, in three and a half minutes (a duration further reinforced by this time diegetically coinciding with the length of the uninterrupted opening shot). We are thus given a statement: this film will be deliberately self-conscious about its temporal frame. The play is likewise very aware of its timing, primarily in terms of rushing (“haste” recurs, even redounds upon itself), to the extent that days seem as if they were compressed (Rymer, in scorn: “whether this Act contains the compass of one day, of seven days, or of seven years, or of all together, the repugnance and absurdity would be the same” [127]). I am less interested in the familiarly enigmatic “double-time” scheme (in other words, how could Cassio have had the opportunity to cuckold Othello?) than I am in mapping the overlap between simplified timelines.

When the timelines of the play and the film are superimposed, we have a striking homology:

- The time that the newly married couple seems to enjoy before being interrupted by governmental obligations is quite brief—Vargas, to Susan immediately before the car explodes: “Do you realize I haven’t kissed you in over an hour?”
- The action begins at night and ends at night. While the time span

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i OTHELLO: An honest man he is, and hates the slime / That sticks on filthy deeds. (5.2.151-52)
ii OTHELLO: My life upon her faith! (1.3.292)
iii OTHELLO: My wife, my wife! what wife? I have no wife. (5.2.99)
iv OTHELLO: We must obey the time. (1.3.298)
v CASSIO: . . . haste-post-haste . . . (1.2.37)
vi OTHELLO: Come, Desdemona; I have but an hour / Of love, of worldly matter and direction / To spend with thee. (1.3.296-98)
differs slightly (in Othello we appear to have [at least] two full days between three nights, and in Touch of Evil one full day between two nights), both frames are relatively constricted and nearly continuous.53

- These time frames are both substantially reduced from Shakespeare and Welles’s respective sources. Cinthio’s fable is vaguely elastic in its temporal sequence, but the main action takes weeks, if not months, and the entire narration (if we include the marriage of the Moor and Desdemona) years. From beginning to end of the Masterson novel, three weeks transpire; in Monash, nearly six days. Thus the timing of honeymoon (included in neither the play’s nor the film’s sources) becomes intensely dramatized in both versions.

- Sleeplessness seems to reinforce the insomnia-like quality of the narratives—nearly all of the major characters in Touch of Evil stay awake through the cycle of the film (Susie unwillingly until she is drugged); Iago claims he was sleepless when Cassio let slip his erotic dream; Cassio and Iago depart from one another at day-break, just as Quinlan and Vargas do.

- In addition to the frame of the time that passes on stage and on screen, we have a vaguely ‘outer limit’ of conceivable time in the narrative future, which appears to be only “a few days” from now (Vargas’s phrase to Susie on how long he expects this case to take). To be more specific, three days seems to be the furthest endpoint that can be imagined by both Othello and Desdemona.54 In fact, Desdemona reveals to us what day today is (the second day of the play’s action): Sunday.55 Thus the play began on Saturday, and if we are to take this day (or the next—both plausible wedding days) to be the same day that Vargas and Susan got married, then Grandi’s insistence that his brother Vie55 is going on trial on Thursday (which is why, according to Uncle Joe, Vargas should not be bothered between now and then) confirms a similarly proximal endpoint for the action (that would be just four days from Sunday, when Grandi talks about the coming Thursday). Neither play nor film reaches this imagined temporal limit.

We’re nearly conforming to Aristotelian proportions here, with Welles closely adhering to the clock ticking in Shakespeare.

Welles follows another, more characterological precedent set by Othello when he introduces what appears to be a quasi-spurious motive for Quinlan’s behavior. Iago’s motivation, or rather lack thereof, has been an abiding

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53 DESDEMONA: ... but let it not / Exceed three days. (3.3.62-63)
54 DESDEMONA: Why then, tomorrow night, or Tuesday morn, / On Tuesday noon or night, on Wednesday morn. (3.3.60-61)
locus for discussions of the play, particularly since Coleridge. In sum, Iago’s stated reasons for his hatred of Othello always seem insufficient (e.g. insinuating that Othello has slept with Emilia) for the malice that ensues from his scheming. Shakespeare seems to scatter arbitrary possible motives when in fact there is no primary one. Welles did much the same himself for Iago in his filmed Othello, coming up with impotence as a supposed drive: “in life I know some villains, simple villains, inscrutable villains, but the audience doesn’t want to believe that. So you have to add something” (Marienstras 169).

As might be expected, motive is foregrounded in Touch of Evil—there are legal (even noir-ish) aspects of the detective narrative requiring that it be addressed. Vargas readily admits, for instance, that to indict Sanchez, Quinlan “can show motive, yes, but—won’t you need a bit more than that?”—namely, evidence, which Quinlan assures him he will get soon. Yet the film seems markedly attentive to this issue, especially with regard to Quinlan’s motivation, in what is arguably the most notable addition to the Badge sources. As is the case with their reception of Othello, critics of the film (even those who write favorably of it) tend to be unimpressed with its motivation—as James Harvey laments, this is “not the sort of thing this movie makes you feel is very urgent,” citing as disappointing “this movie’s occasional feeble attempts to ‘motivate’ its characters” (303, 304). Harvey’s judgment echoes that of James Naremore (a generally sensitive and compelling interpreter of Welles), who singles out one particular episode for disapproval: “When Welles uses the script to ‘explain’ [Quinlan] . . . the result is dismally feeble” (180). Contrary to the displeasure that this scene commonly elicits, we should instead regard it as an astonishing amalgamation of traits from Othello characters, including a peculiar motive that almost certainly signals Othello.

We will return to Quinlan’s motive momentarily, but let’s first register these other Othello-derived traits. As examined previously through the Night Man, we’ve seen that Welles often recombined a range of attributes into one compressed figure; we might, for instance, be reminded of Brabantio when Schwartz explains Quinlan’s location as the bomb opens the movie (“Got him out of bed at his ranch”), or later when Quinlan makes the outrageous accusation that Vargas (the man in charge of the Pan-

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1 IAGO: I speak not yet of proof. (3.3.198)
2 IAGO: Call up her father, / Rouse him. (1.1.64)
   BRABANTIO: My house is not a grange. (1.1.103)

Pechter glosses “grange” as “an isolated rural abode”—akin to Quinlan’s isolated ranch.

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American Narcotics Commission) is actually “a drug addict! He’s got that young wife of his hooked too.” In this scene, Welles has folded Cassio’s problematic drunkeness into Quinlan—in a stunned response to Vargas’s recent accusations, Quinlan downs the double bourbon\(^5\) that Grandi has served to him, despite his protestation that “I don’t drink”\(^\text{ii}\) (and, according to Menzies, hasn’t been drinking for twelve years). They then proceed to make a deal—although this takes place off screen, the implication is that the Grandi boys will do something threatening to Susan in order to get Vargas off of their family’s case as well as Quinlan’s. As Grandi put it earlier: “We are both after the same exact thing Captain.”\(^\text{iii}\) Menzies later finds a stuporous Quinlan in another bar (“I’ve been in half of them,” he slurs).

It is here we discover not only the supposed motivation for Quinlan’s dedication to capturing criminals, but also an anticipation of his subsequent murder of Grandi. It’s subtly revealed, with the bartender and Menzies crossing Quinlan’s inebriated reminiscence:

QUINLAN: Dynamite's no way to kill. Did I ever tell you the smart way to kill, Pete?
MENZIES: Sure, sure, strangling.
QUINLAN: Mmm, clean, silent—
MENZIES: You told me all that. C’mon, finish that coffee.
QUINLAN: That’s how my wife died. I don’t usually talk about my wife.
MENZIES: Never when you’re sober.
QUINLAN: She was strangled, Pete.

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\(^1\)Brabantio insists that Othello must have used some narcotic agent upon his daughter: “Is there not charms / By which the property of youth and maidhood / May be abused?” (1.1.168-70); “thou hast practiced on her with foul charms, / Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals / That weakens motion” (1.2.73-75); “She is abused, stol’n from me and corrupted / By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks” (1.3.60-61). To which Othello responds with a ‘confession’ reminiscent of Sanchez’s sarcasm (“Sure, I’m the fortune hunter who hypnotized Marcia—who made her kill her father for his money—wait, if I had that kind of power, I wouldn’t be where I am today, believe me”), describing with “what drugs, what charms, / What conjuration and what mighty magic— / For such proceeding I am charged withal— / I won his daughter” (1.3.91-94). There’s a slight visual emphasis on this subject in the film as well: when we first meet the Vargases walking toward the border, they pass a prominently displayed “Droguería”—drug store.

\(^2\) CASSIO: I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking... I am unfortunate in the infirmity and dare not task my weakness with any more. (2.3.28-29, 35-36)

\(^3\) IAGO: Let us be conjunctive in our revenge against him. If thou canst cuckold him, thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport. (1.3.363-65)
MENZIES: I know, I know.
QUINLAN: Binding cord, she was working up at the packing plant so the killer had it right to hand, smart. You don’t—leave fingerprints on a piece of string.
MENZIES: Bartender, what do I owe you?
QUINLAN: That half-breed done it, of course, we all knew that—
MENZIES: La cuenta.
QUINLAN: —but I was just a rookie cop.
BARTENDER: Four seventy-five.
QUINLAN: I followed around after him, eating my heart out, tryin’ to catch him. But I never did. In some mud-hole in Belgium the good lord done the job for me in 1917. Pete, that was the last killer ever got out of my hands.

Nowhere in either Masterson or Monash is any strangulation mentioned whatsoever. Strangulation evokes general associations with Jacobean drama—John Webster, for instance, has a character in *The Duchess of Malfi* who makes a similarly favorable evaluation of this method: “Strangling is a very quiet death” (5.4.33). But Webster was himself responding to *Othello*, where Iago’s infamous instructions set the stage, as it were, for all subsequent theatrical strangulations. While the exact method of Desdemona’s ultimate murder may be debatable, Othello’s stated intentions are clear, and we can’t help but be lured back to them when we hear a Welles character discussing the relative merits of strangulation. This startling addition strongly links *Touch of Evil* to *Othello* (indeed, I believe it was at this moment in my first viewing that I was convinced of the relationship between the two). In seeming to give us a motivation (treated with incredulity by critics such as Naremore) for Quinlan’s obsessive pursuit of criminals, within one brief dialogue Welles covertly introduces the key (yet consistently unrecognized) *Othello* element of strangulation. At such a moment, one is tempted to proclaim: the fundamental, unspoken motive for *Touch of Evil*—its unconscious, as it were—is nothing other than *Othello*.

We have followed, until this point, a fairly clear set of correspondences between Vargas/Quinlan and Othello/Iago. But by making Quinlan the character correlated with the strangulation that we normally associate with Othello, Welles continues to pivot us toward a more troubling engage-

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1 IAGO: Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated. (4.1.201-02)
ment with his character. Since Vargas’s relentless investigation appears to spell ruin for Quinlan’s career,¹ are we meant to feel pity for him—the Iago character? Such potential sympathy becomes even more disturbing when, in a subsequent scene, Quinlan ends up committing murder by strangulation, thereby reenacting the crime from whose consequences he had suffered himself. Twisting back to Othello, we should recall the two sets of transgressions there, which take the form of a recollection (supposed or real) followed by an uncanny reenactment. When Shakespeare provides for us a motivation, no matter how unconvincing, of Iago’s jealousy, he elicits a talion-like parallel in the torture (of imagined adultery) that Iago will inflict upon Othello. (One might even surmise that Shakespeare began with the torture and then projected the jealousy backwards onto Iago.) Later, when Iago persuades Othello to strangle Desdemona in her bed, a cruelly poetic equivalence is again envisioned. To state the formula: the terrible thing that has been done to him, he will do unto another (distorting the golden rule just as Iago earlier inverted the Yahweh proclamation “I am that I am” [Exodus 3:14]). Iago and Othello both envision themselves carrying out a form of perverse justice,² and Quinlan seems to do so as well, in act if not in word (Menzies later attributes such intentions to him: “I guess you were somehow thinking of your wife, the way she was strangled”).

As if Quinlan’s reminiscence about his wife were not enough unto itself, Touch of Evil climaxes (the action, soundtrack, and camera angles are more feverish here than they are even in the final episode) with an actual, graphically portrayed strangulation scene, which bears the (displaced) fingerprints of Shakespeare. I liken this episode to a mad aria, whose deliberate excessiveness requires that we attend to it. Susan, drugged with sodium pentothal but made to appear as if she had been smoking marijuana (and perhaps injecting heroin), lies collapsed and naked on a Hotel Ritz bed back in Los Robles, having been taken there by the Grandi gang after the assault out at the Mirador Motel. Uncle Joe invites Quinlan into the room, apparently to show him that he has performed his duty in setting up Susan, but unaware that Quinlan plans to murder him.⁶⁰

¹ OTHELLO: Farewell! Othello’s occupation’s gone! (3.3.358)
² IAGO: I am not what I am. (1.1.62)
Othello’s final story of killing “a turbanned Turk” (5.2.358) conveys a comparable sense of a narrative (past) wrong collapsing into the actual (present) retribution.
³ OTHELLO: Good, good! The justice of it pleases. Very good! (4.1.203)
Upon entering, Quinlan instructs Grandi to “Turn out the lights.”

We have been prepared for this moment—twice previously Vargas has (almost comically) entered dark rooms and wondered, in bewilderment (to Susie), “what are you doing here in the dark?” and, with concern (to the Night Man), “The lights, the lights seem to be out in all the cabins.” Vargas seems at best a disoriented Othello, unable to turn on the lights (and with no malice, figurative or otherwise, intended in such requests). In contrast, Quinlan, more Othello-like than Vargas here, commands the situation. Like Roderigo in Welles’s Othello, Grandi makes a desperate attempt to escape death by clawing at a high window, but Quinlan eventually corners him, and garrotes him with Susan’s stocking. Throughout the scene we get shots of Susan’s head, at which Quinlan leers through the metal bars of the headboard. Her presence here (tossing in a sweat, but never awakening) serves to eroticize the scene, recalling again Iago’s proposed fantasy of killing Desdemona in the bed where she had supposedly slept with Cassio. Indeed, a promotional still from the film (which was also the basis for the posters) suggestively conflates this bed with the later one in which Vargas and Susan will reunite (see fig. 8). The melodramatically hybrid image—Vargas was never in the presence of this headboard from the murder scene, nor was he without his suit coat until after the fourth bed—recalls a similar promotional image from Welles’s Othello: the disheveled, darkened man scrutinizing the apparently incapacitated blonde woman on their bed (see fig. 9).

Another sequence of images creates a specific visual recurrence in Touch of Evil of the famous opening of Welles’s Othello. In the latter, we see first Othello’s inverted face, an image that commences a funeral procession (and is later recalled when Othello recovers from a collapse on the beach). In the former, we see an upside-down shot of Susie awakening from her drugged slumber, with aggressive flashes to Grandi’s horrifying upside-down head looming over her.

Further “ocular proof” cinches these correspondences. Quinlan ruinously forgets his cane at Susie’s bedside—the object that will finally persuade Menzies that Vargas’s accusations of Quinlan’s framing are indeed cor-

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i OTHELLO: Put out the light, and then put out the light. (5.2.7)
The mere mention of similar lines in A Double Life almost hypnotically incites the Ronald Coleman character to murder Shelly Winters. Thanks to David Avalos for this observation.

ii IAGO: Lend me a garter. (5.1.81)
rect. Vargas is thus, by this point, not an Othello who credulously believes falsified evidence, but rather an Othello who correctly interprets both framed (the empty shoe box) and inadvertent (the cane) evidence. Moreover, he usurps, we might say, Iago/Quinlan's proof-adding drive, so that Vargas ultimately is the one forced into underhanded strategies of "spying, creeping" (his disdainful words to himself) in order to prove definitively Quinlan's culpability. In the final episode, Vargas gets Menzies to wear a microphone so he can record Quinlan's confession, with Menzies having to draw Quinlan out of Tana's "so you can hear. I'll get him out, away from the music. Be sure he doesn't see you." This is the only scene that I have found Welles to have acknowledged as displaying a (supposedly unconscious) debt to Othello. When the Cahiers interviewers in 1958 asked him whether "the greatest influence discernible in your work was Shakespeare?" (to which Welles responded, "Yes, without any doubt"), they continued by referring to the Night Man (whom Welles conceded as Shakespearean, as discussed above), and then they specifically cited this moment: "There's a strange thing in Touch of Evil; the way you direct the scene where Heston is listening to the conversation between Quinlan and Menzies makes it seem like the scene where Othello is listening to the conversation between Iago and Bianca [sic]." Welles seemed pleased but surprised by the resemblance—"I hadn't thought of it, but yes, it's true!"—without admitting any further debt to the play (Bazin, Bitsch, and Domarchi 64-65).

Welles creates an impressive (and alarming, given Hoover's F.B.I. and the likely surveillance of Welles himself) contemporary analogue for the handkerchief in this recording device. Quinlan eventually discovers the "bug" Menzies is wearing via the "echo" it causes on the bridge, shoots Menzies, tries to pin his death on Vargas (who is confident that "this is something you finally can't talk your way out of"), and is shot in turn by a dying Menzies. Like the posthumous speech of both Desdemona and

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i IAGO: I confess it is my nature's plague / To spy into abuses. (3.3.149-50)
ii IAGO: Do but enconce yourself... / For I will make him tell the tale anew: / Where, how, how oft, how long ago and when. (4.1.81, 84-85)
iii This echoing pattern was discussed earlier with respect to the Night Man (see page 38). The play in general seems preoccupied with repetitious speech—the Clown's quibbling (noted above) with Desdemona over "lies" and "lodges" (3.4.1-9; see page 39fn1), and Othello's irritation with Emilia ("What needs this iterance, woman?" [5.2.153]).
iv IAGO: From this time forth I never will speak word. (5.2.309)
v DESDEMONA: O falsely, falsely murdered! (5.2.119)
Roderigo; the tape allows Menzies to accuse Quinlan after death.

Opening up the mere possibility for sympathizing with this defeated Iago figure—the tear he sheds after shooting Menzies, the tenderness expressed for him by Tana’s eulogy, even the calm pity that Vargas seems to convey visually toward him as Quinlan collapses (notably, with bedsprings behind him)—is nothing short of audacious. Critics have often noted the paradoxical balance of “intellectual condemnation” and “emotional complicity” we have for Quinlan (Comito 26); and Welles himself remarked on this ambivalence: “most of my friends and most critics who comment on Touch of Evil believe Quinlan has an essential goodness, while I think he’s a scoundrel” (Marienstras 166). In making Quinlan, as the film closes, a diminished Iago figure (less Iago-like, and thus more likable), Welles draws us into a gray area of moral evaluation. We are not left with the relative clarity of the obviously defeated hero, his wrongly murdered wife, and the defiant villain. Instead, we uncomfortably occupy the territory between the starkly opposed poles that Vargas earlier posited: “Who’s the boss, the cop or the law?” Our sympathies have been unsettled and displaced.

Indeed, the film’s radical displacement of the play is precisely the characteristic form of its engagement with its source. As has been demonstrated throughout the essay, Touch of Evil ceaselessly rearranges the very elements that it lifts from Othello—thus we have an Othello who is not jealous, an Iago who drinks, and a Desdemona who survives. The rearranged borrowings are so extensive that they can obscure the amount of the debt. But the most profound displacement—far more consequential than any of the distributed elements of character, plot, setting, etc.—entails the shifting of Othello’s ‘Moorish’ness onto a non-‘black’ (but still “other”) figure. In so doing, Welles’s film invites us to reexamine the way Othello has come to be over-identified as an exclusively ‘black’ figure in American culture. I offer, in closing, a necessarily schematic cultural history in order to make clear how unorthodox (and, as a result, almost invisible) Vargas stands as an Othello.

While it would be presumptuous to attempt to settle what most likely

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1 CASSIO: ... even but now he spake, / After long seeming dead. (5.2.332-33)
Roderigo’s letters are another device which serve the same purpose of belated technological accusation.
will remain an (at times fruitfully) irresolvable discussion surrounding Othello and ‘race,’ there are a few generalizations that can safely be made at some remove from this debate. The early-modern notion of race was in many respects pre-racial—that is to say, while there were clearly categories of religious, geographical, and political otherness (among many such categories), what we tend to take for granted retrospectively as racial identity is largely a nineteenth-century construction (see Appiah). Such racialized thinking was certainly emerging in the early seventeenth century (what Mary Floyd-Wilson has recently termed “geohumoral theory” [3]), and clearly “Shakespeare took advantage of the rich and at times disturbing network of allusions association with ‘Moor’” (Hall 360). However, it was only over the course of subsequent centuries that Othello increasingly induced more anxious contemplations about the hero’s race. There are early intimations of this anxiety in the late seventeenth-century Rymer (who scoffs at the patent implausibility of a Moorish general). By the 1800s we find critics, actors, directors, and audiences making increasingly contorted efforts either to deny the hero’s ‘black’ness (casting him as a ‘tawny’ ‘Arab’) or accentuate it (and either make Othello into a devil or buffoon—see Collins for the two sides to this colored coin69). We have now reached the complicated stage where contemporary black actors (most vocally and persuasively, Hugh Quarshie), who a generation ago welcomed the opportunity to perform a role that had nearly exclusively been played in blackface, now question whether they should even take on this part for fears of perpetuating a racist tradition. (One prominent African-American actor has gone so far as to term the inevitability of this role for black actors “the Othello syndrome” (Gordon Heath 146);70 a critic calls this “Othellophilia” [Daileader].) As the Nigerian playwright Ben Okri has concluded, “If Othello is not a play about race, then its history has made it one” (10).

The over-identification of Othello/Othello with race (that is, as a play primarily about race, as a character essentially, even tragically, raced71) has been particularly—perhaps unavoidably, given our “monstrous birth”72—symptomatic of American responses to the play.73 As the future First Lady Abigail Adams complained of a 1786 performance: “I could not separate the African color from the man,” and this can, for better or for worse, characterize much of reception of the play to this day (qtd. in Edelstein 258).74 On account of this invariably problematic cultural tradition, the history of the staging of this play in the United States has frequently made Othello’s race75 hyper-accentuated—whether performed by a black man, a white man in blackface, or a ‘photonegative’ casting with a white man in a black
troupe (as Patrick Stewart did a few years ago at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, DC). Moreover, “Shakespeare’s American Play” (Lovell) occupies a central place in the cultural landscape: it represents two out of the six “Shakespeare in American Communities” productions that the NEA sponsored in 2004; it has been proposed as the solitary Shakespeare play for high school English courses (Scholes) and African-American literature surveys (McLendon); and it has even been figured as a progenitor of African-American culture itself (Andreas; Pimienta-Bey). One senses at work here what Jonathan Arac (in his discussion of the cultural status of *Huckleberry Finn*) has termed “hypercanonization.” And, somewhat discouragingly, while intellectual critiques of ‘race’ have become more sophisticated and more established, this reductive association between *Othello* and ‘black’ness in American culture seems only to be solidifying.

A recent instance of this enduring attitude can be found in the “Rap *Othello*” as presented by *The Reduced Shakespeare Company*. This American *RSC* has had great success touring over the last two decades, starting in Berkeley and eventually gaining a long run in London’s West End. Their ninety-minute “abridged” version of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (2000) is often witty, in a brashly sophomoric fashion, but it relies somewhat cozily on pop-cultural familiarity with Shakespeare. Their *Othello* sketch, with the three white actors ‘rapping,’ serves as a disturbingly representative example of Othello’s racialized identity in the American psyche. The lyrics include the explanation that Desdemona loved Othello “like Adonis loved Venus” because he had a big “—sword” (and we’re meant to complete the rhyme for “Venus,” with the obligatory phallic hand-gesture accompanying it). Because most of the rest of the production consists of comparatively innocuous humor, I continue to be surprised, upon re-viewing, by how offensive this ‘rap’ is. But if you’re going to unhistorically essentialize Othello’s part as “written for a black man,” if you’re going to perform a minstrel version of hip-hop, if you’re going to claim that a Moor “obviously” meant “a black person,” when it had a much more complex range of associations in “the sixteenth century” (*Othello* was written and performed in the next century)—then I suppose it shouldn’t be shocking that the long-standing anxiety about inter-racial marriage and black male sexuality, always at issue in American *Othellos*, should well up in a joke about penis size. A footnote in the published version of their performance defends the scene in pseudo-academicise: “It should be noted at this point that the authors fully realize how trite and overused rapping is as a way to show youth, vivacity, and attitude. . . . And yet, *Rap Othello*
is one of the most consistently crowd-pleasing sections of the show” (Borges, Long, and Singer 33fn55). Perhaps we can ascribe this success to the long minstrel tradition of exploiting the humorous possibilities of miscegenation as “the most preposterous—and most repulsive—abrogation of the established racial taxonomy” (Collins 96). And yet here we are, again, with an Othello who seems nothing other than African-American.77

In the 1940s and 1950s, when Welles became immersed in Othello, this play had a powerfully contemporaneous charge. Paul Robeson, who contemplated but ultimately declined to play his 1930 London Othello in the United States for fears of racist retribution, still received enraged responses to the Life photographic profile of his groundbreaking 1943 Broadway performance.78 Robeson considered the unprecedented success of this show’s long run to be an early symbolic triumph for racial integration. Following the 1954 Brown v. Board decision, the entire nation struggled to confront America’s racism more directly, if not always successfully. A whole generation of angst-ridden films arose in response to this tumult, some addressing the subject more obliquely than others.79 The most threatening specter of the consequences of integration was, of course, miscegenation;80 several states explicitly mentioned intermarriage in their briefs against Brown (Henderson 445). Until the relaxing of the Production Code in the 1960s, depicting miscegenation onscreen was not allowed. We should not forget that even Welles’s own Othello was threatened for this very reason:

[T]he Breen office (the self-censorship arm of the motion picture industry) informed one possible backer that it would not pass on the film were Othello to be played as a black man, even if that black man was a white actor in blackface. . . . On March 24, [Richard] Wilson sent Welles the relevant pages from the Production Code: “Miscegenation (sex relationship between the white and black races) is forbidden.” (Anderegg 110, 183fn22)

The industry’s code reflected California law at the time of its 1930 composition, although the state Supreme Court finally struck it down (Perez v. Lippold) the same year Welles began production on Othello (1948). This case turned on an ingenious invocation of freedom of religion (the couple claiming that their Catholic tradition did not prohibit intermarriage), but for our purposes here the case is even more notable for how it was forced into a corner by the ambiguous racial category of “Mexican-Americans.” Whereas other state agencies often categorized Mexican-Americans as “non-white,” in terms of miscegenation law they were considered “white.”

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Thus while any other "non-whites" were permitted to marry amongst "themselves" (nationally, this category varied, including "Mongolians," "West Indians," "negroes," "Malays," "American Indians," "Hindus" "mulattoes"—the list would be farcical in its detail were it not so consequential), in this case, Mexican-Americans were not allowed to marry "non-whites." Thus Andrea Perez (a United States citizen of Mexican descent) was not allowed, by law, to marry the black Sylvester Davis.\textsuperscript{81}

Ramon Miguel Vargas, however, could marry Susan. With this couple, Welles brilliantly displaces the theme of black-white miscegenation, which would not officially be shown on screen until 1964 (\textit{One Potato, Two Potato}), onto the racially liminal but still provocative pairing of a Mexican and an American.\textsuperscript{82} In other words, Welles unmoors Othello.

Perhaps some will dismiss these numerous \textit{Othello} elements in \textit{Touch of Evil} as just an elaborate, even unconscious joke on Welles's part; others will fault me for a too-strong reading of the film. But given Welles’s own reputation as a racial "renegade"\textsuperscript{83} in his professional as well as personal life, is it not plausible to view \textit{Touch of Evil} as an astounding translation of \textit{Othello} in America (or even into 'American'), which dares us to recognize an Othello who does not conform to our prejudices of what constitutes that character? What would it take for us to recognize an American Othello who was not 'black'?\textsuperscript{84}

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Fig. 1. Major Bennett Marco in \textit{The Manchurian Candidate}, with a carefully framed poster from Paul Robeson's \textit{Othello} in the mirror. (Copyright 2004, Paramount Pictures.)
Fig. 2. Vargas arrives on the scene, “an extravagant and wheeling stranger” (1.1.133). (Copyright 1998, Universal Studios.)

Fig. 3. The Night Man, “the complete Shakespearean clown,” according to Welles (Bazin, Bitsch, and Domarchi 65). (Copyright 1998, Universal Studios.)
Fig. 4. Late shot of a half-shadowed Othello, emerging from a pool of darkness. (Copyright 1999, Image Entertainment.)

Fig. 5. Late shot of a half-shadowed Vargas, emerging from a pool of darkness. (Copyright 1998, Universal Studios.)
Fig. 6. Caption from the original trailer. (Copyright 1998, Universal Studios.)

Fig. 7. Hank has his handkerchief. (Copyright 1998, Universal Studios.)
Fig. 8. The melodramatically hybrid bed, from a promotional still: Vargas was never in the presence of this headboard from the murder scene. (Photo courtesy of Photofest.)
Fig. 9. A comparable promotional still: the disheveled, darkened man scrutinizing the apparently incapacitated blonde woman on their bed. (Photo courtesy of Photofest.)
Notes

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The title is of course intended to be a play off of Touch of Evil, but it appears that I have inadvertently invoked a line attributed to Horace Howard Furness by Jean Jules Jusserand, “One touch of Shakespeare makes the whole world kin,” itself an allusion to Ulysses’s line in Troilus and Cressida (3.3.169); Gabriel Egan notes that “Furness might have got the expression from an associate, the forgotten American Shakespearian Joseph Crosby who used it a letter to F. G. Fleay in 1876 or 1877,” citing Crosby (3, 202, 223-24).

2 I refer to Pechter’s 2004 Norton edition of Othello for quotations from the play; when discussing and citing the film, I refer to the restored 1998 version, overseen by Rick Schmidlin, Walter Murch, and Jonathan Rosenbaum. In reconstructing a conflated text of Touch of Evil—drawing upon production notes, Welles’s memo to Universal, and other materials—Schmidlin and his collaborators have, appropriately, entered territory familiar to Shakespeare editors, who in dealing with the multiple versions of Othello must invariably struggle with similar quandaries. While the Comito edition of the continuity script for Touch of Evil is still helpful for reference, his volume refers to the previous incarnation of the film (and, incidentally, includes a few errors in transcription—an apparently inevitable curse). For a discussion of the procedures involved in editing Othello, see Honigmann.

A handful of early French critics (cited later in this essay) occasionally commented upon some Shakespearean elements in the film. Most other viewers (with one exception—an online comment by Alex Fraser [“Macresarf1”] <http://www.epinions.com/content_73085652612/show_allcom>) make at best only passing references to Othello (Lane being characteristic, in the brevity of his observation as well as his non-academic position). More typically, they laud Welles’s film as ‘Shakespearean’ without pressing what exactly this appellation might entail. Even Michael Anderegg, in an otherwise authoritative reading of Welles’s blend of high and low culture via Shakespeare, fails to connect Touch of Evil to Othello; the nearest he gets is his connection of Quinlan and Falstaff (130) and the citation of Robin Wood’s links to Macbeth (70-71). Richard Burt suggests that Anderegg’s monograph would have benefited from “a fuller and more dialectical
engagement with Welles’s non-Shakespeare films, especially the film noir Touch of Evil” (Review, 514).

One might even sense a skeptical trend in what we are willing to accept as a Shakespearean offshoot—for instance, the connection between Forbidden Planet (1956) and The Tempest, usually taken for granted, has recently been challenged as being based on “rumor and hyperbole” (Jensen 64). Judith Buchanan makes the valid point that no contemporary reviewer (until Kingsley Amis in 1961) noted the correspondence between the film and play; yet her argument skeptically turns on whether there was any “deliberate” “intentionality” on the part of the filmmakers (two emphatic words in her piece, which should be no less problematic in the study of film than they have been in the study of literature). This seems to me to sidestep the larger issue under scrutiny here: since we can now recognize compelling correspondences between two works, how do we account for these correspondences not having been recognized (either by author or audience) earlier? (Buchanan does briefly acknowledge that this is one of Stanley Cavell’s preoccupations, although I’m not sure that terming his approach “refreshingly eccentric” should be taken as a compliment [153].) I thus bracket whether or not Welles intended for this to be a revision of Othello; that seems to me to be the wrong question, or at least the wrong formulation of the question, given what I hope will be a preponderance of evidence to demonstrate this link. For an eclectic contemplation of the interplay between direct and indirect sources for Othello, see Miola.

See the more general disappointment with “The Field of Literature and Film” as expressed by Ray: “The sheer number of these articles [“film and literature” studies], their dogged resort to the individual case study, the lack of any evidence of cumulative knowledge development or heuristic potential—all these factors suggest that, as a discipline, film and literature has largely remained in what Thomas Kuhn called a ‘pre-paradigmatic state’” (44).

Much the same could be said of the film O (2001), but it was deliberately self-conscious about producing and promoting itself as a version of Othello.

The critics whom I find most compelling on this topic are, perhaps necessarily, themselves obliquely engaged with the field of Shakespearean scholarship. I nod here to Julian Markels’s extraordinary linking of Melville’s Moby Dick and King Lear and Anthony Tatlow’s work on aesthetic dislocations of Shakespeare (via Brecht and East Asian culture). I linger for a just moment longer with Cavell’s beguilingly brilliant examinations of American film’s inheritance from Shakespeare. Cavell should be most familiar through his argument in Pursuits of Happiness that the “Hollywood comedies of remarriage” are themselves reworking (and thereby domesticating, both in the household and the nation) problems set up by Shakespeare’s comedies and romances, chiefly The Winter’s Tale. There is a less well-known but equally inspired piece of his that addresses what he comes to term the “competition” between Hitchcock’s North by Northwest (1959) and Hamlet. In both cases, Cavell moves beyond the mere listing of analogues and presses the ramifications of such competitions. Needless to say, this present essay is thoroughly
indebted to such contemplations. More profound, yet more tacit, is the influence of his reading of Shakespeare throughout _Disowning Knowledge_, in particular the essay “Othello and the Stake of the Other.” Finally, to make a recurrently obeisant gesture, we are all invariably indebted to Kenneth Burke’s foundational reading of this play.

9I take especial heed from Dennis Kezar’s clever anti-argument, in which he performs a pastiche of New Historicism, arguing for the centrality of the unnamed cultural ‘cause’ of the play, tobacco, only to extravagantly deny its validity, as he had promised he would from the first sentence of his polemic.

See Pechter’s insightful remarks on the surprising continuity to be found in the formal pattern of outrage expressed when discussing _Othello_; in this respect, we may be less remote from Rymer than we conceive.

10Heston continues: “His ‘Hello, Chuck!’ rolled twice around the entry hall” (154). “Chuck,” fortuitously, is also Othello’s term of endearment for Desdemona (3.4.48, 4.2.24).

11“Whit Masterson” was a pseudonym for the pulp fiction team of Robert Wade and William Miller. John Stubbbs has demonstrated, citing direct verbal echoes, that Welles must have been familiar with both novel and script (although he later denied reading the novel). Curiously, Welles even seems to have submerged the handful of Shakespearean elements that were present in Monash—eliminating the “Paunchy Man” named “Huff” (a bodily-emphasized low character, much like Measure for Measure’s Elbow); changing William Shayon’s name (a near-Shakespeare moniker) to Manolo Sanchez; and dropping the Falstaff quotation uttered by Schwartz to Holt: “Discretion the better part of valor” (70). Am I having it both ways by counting this elimination of evidence as evidence itself of his Shakespearean modulations?

12Leigh also played the new wife of Frank Sinatra’s Marco in the original version of _The Manchurian Candidate_ (1962). Leigh, as will be argued, serves as the Desdemona figure in _Touch of Evil_, where her name is Susie. “Susie,” as you will recall, is the other name Marco confuses with “Rosie”; and they both rhyme with “Desi”—a favorite nickname for Desdemona in a number of recent _Othello_ adaptations (Julia Stiles in the film _O_ and Keeley Hawkes in the modern _ITV Othello_ [2002]; “Desi” appears as well in the _Reduced Shakespeare Company’s “Rap Othello,”_ which will be examined at the end of this essay).

13To cite some actual examples: Nogales/Nogales and Laredo/Nuevo Laredo are dual-nation border towns with similar names. Brownsville/Matamoros (“moor-killer”) is richly suggestive for our purposes.

14The Italian title of the film is _L’infernale Quintan_—“infernal” but also “devilish.” This titular prominence of Quinlan recalls not only the verbal domination of Iago (who has more lines than Othello) but also Othello’s ultimate suspicion that Iago might be a devil incarnate.

15C. L. R. James forcefully (and provocatively) stressed this geographical aspect of Othello’s exclusion from the Senate: “I say with the fullest confidence, that
you could strike out every single reference to his black skin and the play would be essentially the same. Othello’s trouble is that he is an outsider” (141). Welles similarly emphasized this status: “Does Shakespeare give us the ordinary jealous husband? No, he gives us an extraordinary outsider. In other words, he gives us a foreigner” (Filming Othello).

16Othello’s name is not mentioned until 1.3; until this point he has been referred to, nine times and usually with scorn, as “the Moor.”

17The role of Brabantio corresponds obliquely to that of Linnekar. Both fathers die in the course of these narratives, and the words used to describe the death of Linnekar (both the D.A. and Quinlan call it a “terrible thing”) recall the only time the word “terrible” is used in the play (Brabantio’s first line being: “What is the reason of this terrible summons?” [1.1.79]).

18As Vargas chats with the border patrol, he jokes that he is “hot on the trail of a chocolate soda for my wife”; after the bomb explodes, he tells Susan “we’ll have to postpone that soda.” Just as the play speaks of sexual desire via the metaphors of appetite (EMILIA: “They are all but stomachs, and we all but food: / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full / They belch us” [3.4.101-03]), it seems plausible that this “chocolate soda” is a euphemism for their sexual consumption. (Tana and Quinlan’s later repartee about her “chili” is even more clearly eroticized.) In Monash’s screenplay “enchiladas” had figured analogously in the Holts’s sexual banter (27); when a phone rings, the wife Teresa says “Your food will get cold” [s.d.: “This isn’t what she really means, and Holt knows it. . . . Teresa looks down at her plate, not quite resigned to the interruption.”] (28).

There is a long history of associating Othello with chocolate—Verdi and Boito, when working on their opera, referred to it as “the chocolate project,” and annually exchanged a “torta di Otrello” (“a cake with a figure of the Moor in chocolate icing on top” [Wilson 47]); Thomas Mann recalled eating “Moor’s heads” called “Othellos” as a child (“small chocolate-covered cream-cakes” [Kurzke 9]). More promiscuously, in March, 1957 (in the middle of production for Touch of Evil), Welles made headlines in the gossip rag Confidential: “Orson Welles, His Chocolate Bon-Bon and The Whoopsey Waiter.” The “chocolate bon-bon” was African-American singer Ann Cornell, with whom Welles was spotted “playing kneesies at a tiny table for two and deciding where they’d have breakfast” (see Taylor; my thanks to Stacey Fay for this reference). (Confidential provided the model for the eponymous tabloid in L. A. Confidential, itself an homage to Touch of Evil.) Finally, a “black and white” was contemporary diner slang for a chocolate soda with vanilla ice cream (Mariana 30).

17The chiasmus of kiss/kill—kill/kiss, spoken of by Othello in his very last words (“I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss” [5.2.363-64]), compresses the larger rhythm of the relationship between Susan and Vargas, as their first and last scenes together frame both ends of the film with a kiss.

20Note the ambiguously received referent (a syntactical play of both play and
film) when Vargas states, following the explosion: “This could be very bad for us,” to which Susie responds, understandably confused, “For us?” and Vargas clarifies, “For Mexico, I mean.” (The line’s later modulation is suggestively more intimate—recalling the homosocial intimacy between Iago and Othello—as Vargas worries that Schwartz’s role in assisting his investigation “could be very bad for you.”) Marital and martial roles are thus intricately superimposed in both narratives (Susan: “even on his honeymoon the chairman of the Pan American Narcotics Commission has his sacred duty to perform!”), despite Othello’s protestations to the contrary (1.3.264-72).

21I make this statement fully aware of the tendency to make extravagant statements about Touch of Evil. Donald Pease, himself reading the film as an allegory for postmodern political theory, notes the tendency for “emergent disciplinary formation[s]” to produce “a discourse about the film which claims a knowledge that the film’s previous interpreters either would not claim or could not know” (79); his list includes Stephen Heath in film, Homi Bhabha in postcolonialism, and Michael Denning in American studies—to which could be added François Truffaut and the French New Wave, Anthony Nericcio and Chicano/border studies, and self-conscious reconfigurations in film (Psycho [1960], Halloween [1978], The Player [1992], Ed Wood [1994], Get Shorty [1995], Lone Star [1996], L.A. Confidential [1997]) and media art (Mark Lewis’s Upside Down Touch of Evil [1997]). One might even consider Welles’s now-celebrated fifty-eight-page memo to Universal (complaining about their editing and pleading for some say in their decisions) to be the first such excessive response to the film. All of these, I take it, are attempts to come to terms with the “baroque” extravagance of Welles’s film—which again is not so distant from the demands placed upon us to respond to Shakespeare’s Othello. And Touch of Evil certainly stands up to these investigations—one need only contrast a few scenes with the contemporaneous The Long, Hot Summer (1958) (where Welles hammed his way through the role of a tyrannical but eventually placated Southern paterfamilias) to realize how banal the typical late 1950s film was in contrast to this exceptional creation.

22Just as Kezar and Pechter have explored the ways in which our skeptical and violent responses to the play uncannily appear to have been initiated by Iago himself, Joel Altman has argued that the constant dismissals of the play’s improbability (commencing yet once more with Rymer) are anticipated in its very composition.

23The denied yet essential correspondences between William Randolph Hearst and Citizen Kane are analogously diffuse.

24I thank Tim Blackburn for this suggestion, which has come to shape much of my reading of the film.

25Welles: “Shakespeare always chose great themes: Jealousy: Othello” (Bazin, Bitsch, and Domarchi 57).

26I am not the first to have expanded this category of ‘Shakespearean’ to cover Welles’s other films—see, for instance, Henri Lemaître: “Perhaps the most
Shakespearean film in the history of the cinema is not one of those drawn from his works, but rather a creation of the most Shakespearean of the masters of the cinema, Orson Welles—the film, *The Lady from Shanghai*” (36).

Kenneth Rothwell categorizes seven kinds of “derivatives” (i.e. contextualizations; mirror movies; music/dance; revues; parasitical; animations; documentaries and educational films [291fn]); Ruby Cohn catalogs how

Rewriting of Shakespeare is known by an array of names—abridgments, adaptations, additions, alterations, ameliorations, amplifications, augmentations, conversions, distortions, emendations, interpolations, metamorphoses, modifications, mutilations, revisions, transformations, versions. In contrast, I use a looser and far more neutral word, “offshoot.” (3)

Infrequently heard when discussing Shakespeare on screen, although it could be considered one of the original terms in adaptation studies, given Bluestone’s use of it as an implicit metaphor throughout his seminal *Novels into Film* (1957).

Welles thereby joined two dominant strains in Shakespearean film of the 1950s: *Othello* was arguably the most frequently produced of Shakespeare’s plays (1955 alone saw the Yutkevich *Othello*, a BBC television broadcast, and the US release of Welles’s version); meanwhile, this decade might also be considered the great age of American Shakespeare spinoffs, with domestic versions of *The Taming of the Shrew* (Kiss Me Kate, 1953), *King Lear* (Broken Lance, 1954), *Othello* (Jubal, 1956) and *Romeo and Juliet* (West Side Story was originally staged in 1957); from abroad, we can include *Macbeth* (Joe MacBeth, 1955; Throne of Blood, 1957), *The Tempest* (Forbidden Planet, 1956), and *Julius Caesar* (An Honourable Murder, 1959). *All Night Long* is a 1961 *Othello* adaptation shot in London with a largely American jazz-centered cast.

Stephen Heath’s exhaustive, and ultimately exhausting, Barthesian transcription of the movie is an imposing landmark in this respect; Lewis’s video pastiche, in which he closely reconstructed the famous opening sequence but shot it upside-down, should be considered another type of obsessive tribute. Obsessive tributes, of course, run the risk of promising a transcriptional fidelity that they do not (cannot) always maintain—Wood has perceptively noted some of Stephen Heath’s rather egregious mistakes within his apparently meticulous approach (*Hitchcock’s* 16–18). To these we add another, apparently minor slip that remains consequential: Heath examines the dialogue that opens the film, when the Vargases cross the border patrol. He claims: “The relationship man-wife is heavily underlined and marked with surprise: Vargas ‘. . . my wife’ / Official ‘Your what?’ / Susan ‘Yeah, you’re right, Officer.’ (note, indeed, the ambiguity of Susan’s response)” (261). This is misquoted; Susan says, instead: “Barely a bride, officer.” Her line is delivered in a more playful tone than Heath hears (it’s mock-sarcasm, if anything, and the patrolman receives this by smiling and slapping his stand) and establishes instead the newness of their marriage rather than its ambiguity—that this is in fact their
honeyymoon. Comparable queries in the play similarly (albeit perhaps more anxiously) underline the novelty of Othello and Desdemona’s union (“BRABANTIO: Are they married think you?” [1.1.164]; “CASSIO: I do not understand. IAGO: He’s married. CASSIO: To who?” [1.2.52]; “MONTANO: But, good lieutenant, is your general wived?” [2.1.60]).

31My loudly musical puns here are sincerely expressed. “Music” clearly undergirds Othello in some profound way (see Knight), making it conducive to operas, jazz settings, and even rock musicals (e.g. Catch My Soul [1974]). Welles himself used a similar register when describing scenes from Touch of Evil where “the question of rhythm is absolutely central . . . built up in terms of what I can only describe as ‘sound-pattern.’ . . . The crescendo of suspense was to depend more on the sound track . . . The scene was conceived musically and it depended more than anything on syncopation” (Memo). Much has been written about the soundtrack (and Mancini score) for the film, but recent criticism focuses rather insistently on the trope of crossing aural “borders” (e.g. Leeper). It strikes me that the opening orchestration of battling themes (emerging from car radios, jukeboxes, and night club bands) which will return throughout the film resembles nothing so much as an operatic overture. Perhaps we should listen more attentively to Welles’s oft-professed admiration for Verdi’s opera, in comments which all but read as memorandum for the interpretation we are stalking here:

• A movie is a movie, and if we’re going to take movies as a serious art form, then they’re no less so than opera. And Verdi had no hesitation in doing what he did with his Otello, which is an enormous departure from the play; nobody criticizes him. Why is a movie supposed to be more respectful to a play than an opera? (Welles and Bogdanovich 228)

• I use Shakespeare’s words and characters to make motion pictures. They are variations on his themes. . . Without presuming to compare myself to Verdi, I think he gives me my best justification. The opera Otello is certainly not Othello the play. It certainly could not have been written without Shakespeare, but it is first and foremost an opera. (McBride 114)

• And when I make a film, I feel as free as Verdi or any other adapter who borrows a Shakespearean subject. I feel no obligation to Shakespearean tradition. . . I think it’s possible to shoot a Shakespearean film which is, in fact, a theatrical play. This is what Laurence Olivier has always done and it works very well. Why wouldn’t it work? It’s equally possible not to use a single word from Shakespeare. (Marienstras 164)

32That is, “look-out” place, or observer—both play and film being preoccupied with scopophilia, and, above all, looking at women.

33Burke, in passing as usual, offers these perceptive comments:

In the case of Macbeth, similarly, it would be absurd to say that the audi-
ence, after the murder scene, wants a porter scene. But the audience does want the quality which this porter particularizes. The dramatist might, conceivably, have introduced some entirely different character or event in this place, provided only that the event produced the same quality of relationship and contrast (grotesque seriousness followed by grotesque buffoonery). ("Psychology and Form" 40)

34 Such bafflement calls to mind Sir Philip Sidney's neoclassical disgust with the mingling of kings and clowns in The Defence of Poesie (1595).

35 Her business—a dilapidated brothel—itself manifests a locale only figuratively imagined in the play, when Othello speaks to Emilia as if she were a Madame (4.2.90–95).

36 Quinlan's leg, injured by "taking a bullet" for Menzies, is said to be the source of his "famous intuition." Iago uses Cassio's 'leg' in relating the story to Othello about Cassio's 'dream' to reinforce verisimilitude ("laid his leg o'er my thigh" [3.3.424]). Is it too much to become excited by the fact that the Cassio figure in Cinthio—a Captain (like Quinlan), albeit unnamed—has his leg cut off by the Ensign (Iago), who later blames the Moor (Othello) for this injury in order to spur the Captain's revenge?  

37 We find a reversed situational dynamic in Baz Luhrmann's William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet (1996), where the non-existent town of "Verona Beach" represents a vaguely Californian locale but was actually shot in Mexico. It was Aldus Huxley (see epigraph) who suggested that Welles shoot Touch of Evil in Venice.

38 Welles: "Exactly, I repeated myself. I believe we do it all the time. We always take up certain elements again. How can it be avoided?" (Cobos, Rubio, and Pruneda 457).

39 A trope utilized by critics of both film and play as a heuristic principle—e.g. Comito on Touch of Evil or Davies on Othello. Welles himself pointed out that his films were "based not so much on pursuit as on a search. If we are looking for something, a labyrinth is the most favorable location for the search" (Cobos, Rubio, and Pruneda 458).

40 Why do some care that he had an affair with his Desdemona (e.g. Vaughan)? or that Robeson did with his (e.g. Sorel and Sorel)? whence this frisson? By emphasizing the inter-racial couple in Touch of Evil, perhaps Welles was "pinching the kind of bigotry that had often fueled gossip about his taste for Mexican and black women" (Thomson 336).

41 Both Othello and Touch of Evil confess their own generic indebtedness to a kind of artistic production; in the last lines of the play, Lodovico commands Iago to "Look on the tragic loading of this bed" (5.2.368) in a final confirmation of literary kind. Early in the movie, Susan mocks Grandi for having seen "too many gangster movies," in a disavowal of what might initially appear to be the genre of this film. One senses both Shakespeare and Welles aware of their belated relation to the genres they seem to be revisiting—Othello appearing long after the 1590s
mania for revenge tragedy (after Hamlet, even), and Touch of Evil baroque
driving noir to exhaustion. (Tellingly, the word “vengeance” was used throughout
the promotion of the film—e.g. “THE OVERWHELMING DRAMA OF A
STRANGE VENGEANCE” [in the trailer (see fig. 6)] and “THE STRANG-
EST VENGEANCE EVER PLANNED!” [on the poster]). Welles insisted that
Shakespeare “never arrived” at true tragedy, since “tragedy cannot escape from
melodrama” (Cobos, Rubio, and Pruneda 458); he likewise categorized Touch of
Evil as a melodrama (Welles and Bogdanovich 299), a genre Linda Williams
finds unusually conducive to “the enduring moral dilemma of race” (xiv).

Critics have persistently noted how thoroughly Shakespeare infused Welles’s
work: “Welles comments on Shakespeare; Shakespeare comments on Welles”
(McKernan and Terris 17); “Shakespeare prompted Welles’s permutations” (Con-
rad 58); all of Welles’s films are, in their own way, Shakespearean texts” (An-
deregg 70).

I find most compelling on this account Linda Charnes’s work (“Dismember
Me”), since she reads Shakespeare (and Hamlet in particular) as ur-noir, rather than
the more conventional approach of detailing noir elements in the Shakespeare
movies. On Othello and noir, see Hirsch and Jacobs, although the latter makes an
unexpected retraction at the close of his essay which is pertinent to our analysis here:

Nonetheless, even granting the fundamental resemblance in word, thought,
and deed between Welles’s idiosyncratic version of Othello and the film noir
form, we must admit that the movie is not classic noir…. [T]he closest
that conventional film noir comes to sixteenth-century Venice is the Ve-
netian blinds in Sam Spade’s office. Even in the least documentary-influ-
enced noir films…there is an itchy, gritty, contemporary Americanness
of landscape, tone, and diction that is finally not translatable into Shakes-
pearean terms. (122)

This, I hope, is arguable. Incidentally, the last line Bogart mutters as Spade in The
Maltese Falcon (1941) derives from Prospero: “that’s, uh, the stuff that dreams are
made of.” On Olivier’s Hamlet and noir, see Guntner; for a longer survey of
Shakespearean noir, see Lanier.

At a loss to explain why Universal (and Hollywood) shut him out after pro-
ducing what he thought was an exceptional film, Welles conjectured that Touch
of Evil was “just too dark for them, too strange…. A little too tough, a little too
black” (Megahey 198). Similarly, he mused,

There’s something missing there that I don’t know about, that I’ll never
understand. It’s the only trouble I’ve ever had that I can’t begin to fathom.
The picture rocked them in some funny way…. Movies weren’t nearly that
black ten or twelve years ago. They just didn’t know what I was up to.
(Welles and Bogdanovich 322)
45John Shaw counts twenty variations of this question in the play; I refrain from citing them, and observe instead that nearly every major character—Othello, Desdemona, Iago, Emilia, Brabantio, Cassio, Bianca, Grattiano, Montano, the Duke—says this line.

46Welles commented, “my films are all for the most part a physical search” (Cobos, Rubio, and Pruneda 458). In the Masterson novel, Holt recalls his therapist telling him that “[i]n your business you probably have a secret fear of not getting all the facts. So you develop this ritualistic habit to prove to yourself that you do” (64).

47A useful slip in the Folio could serve as our caption for this pivot, when Othello watches the scene Iago orchestrates with Cassio. Generally, it is presumed that he says “Iago beckons me” (4.1.128), but the Folio reads: “Iago becomes me” (emphasis added). Some nineteenth-century productions switched the actors playing Iago and Othello roles on alternate nights, and the play itself seems to reinforce this gimmick—as Welles’s film Iago wrote in a March 9, 1949 diary entry: “I like Orson’s design for the growing dependence of Othello on Iago’s presence, the merging of the two men into one murderous image like a pattern of loving shadows welded” (MacLiammóir 28). The binding antagonism of which only Iago is aware (“I hate the Moor” [1.3.377]) is in Touch of Evil mutually recognized: “This is clearly a case of hate at first sight” (s.d. Welles script 12). Was Welles, who relished doubling roles (from his first schoolboy Shakespeare performance of Antony/Cassius to his projected Heart of Darkness film with Marlow/Kurtz), giving himself the opportunity to “become” Iago (a notoriously upstaging role, with more lines than the nominal hero) after already having been Othello (with a significantly diminished Iago)? (Heston admitted: “[T]he film is about Captain Quinlan, really. But that’s the way it should be. That’s the story. I play a man who’s looking for his wife, really” [Delson 54].)

48Another potential pun around handkerchief was drawn out by Olivier in his National Theatre blackface production (1965 film): he accentuated “hanged” so loudly that it comes across as something like “To confess, and be HANKed for his labor. First to be HANKed, and then to confess” (4.1.37-39).

49No handkerchief actually serves as evidence in the film, although I trust Welles to be slyly winking at us in the following interaction: the second time that Vargas accuses Captain Hank Quinlan of subterfuge is in front of a Senate-like gathering of the Chief of Police Gould, District Attorney Adair, and investigator Schwartz. Quinlan gamely denies the accusations until Vargas mentions that he has been out to Quinlan’s ranch, which enrages Quinlan: “My ranch! You’ve been spying out at my ranch? Foreigner?!” At that instant he breaks the pigeon egg he had just found in a nest on the windowsill; Vargas offers Quinlan a handkerchief (see fig. 7), which Quinlan uses to wipe his hands, then (with Welles’s characteristic magician’s slight of hand) pockets it, exchanging it for his badge, which he throws down as a gauntlet-like challenge to the officials to choose his story over Vargas’s. It’s a trifle, much like the Robeson poster in The Manchur-
an Candidate, in that we never see it again, but Welles has showed us his hand, and Hank has his handkerchief.

An even more fleeting image of a suggestive poster can really only be scrutinized with the advent of the DVD. When Quinlan, Menzies, the D.A. and Schwartz first cross over into Mexico to search for clues about the bomb, they pass in front of a street-side advertisement for CINE ROBLES, which declares “Everybody loved IDOLO de FANGO.” Idolo de Fango is the Spanish title for The Great Man (1956), directed by and starring José Ferrer, whose name also appears on the poster. The poster seems legible on at least two levels. First, Ferrer’s film, an exploration of a recently deceased media magnate (in this case, the thinly veiled television celebrity Arthur Godfrey), was widely perceived to be relying on Citizen Kane as a precedent. Is Welles nodding his head in Ferrer’s direction, letting him ‘know that he knows? Second, one of José Ferrer’s most famous stage roles was that of Iago, starring opposite Robeson (whom Ferrer sometimes upstaged). These are both suppositions, but in such a richly textured environment I feel at liberty to raise them. One additional outlandish extrapolation, following the intuition that Welles envisioned himself as modern Verdi: “fango” was a key word in a scene added by Boito’s libretto to dramatize Desdemona’s abjection in Othello. Furious, Othello throws her to ground and demands that she weep, to which she responds “A terra! . . . si . . . nel livido fango” (“On the ground, yes, in the mud”).

50Starting most forcefully with Stephen Heath, many readers of the film have noted that the actor playing “Pancho” is named Valentín de Vargas. Just as with the unspoken Venice/Venice connection, the Vargas/“Vargas” doubling seems to reinforce (tacitly) an identity between these two figures, two agents of the marriage/whoring fantasy oscillating throughout Othello. Again, if we’re willing to concede to Welles an ingenuity comparable to that of Shakespeare’s in fabricating his names (Fineman is quite insightful about those in Othello), we would also have to take into account these other possible associations: that Diego de Vargas was the Spanish governor who reconquered and reconolized New Mexico; that on April 18, 1942, Welles broadcast a special live birthday party for President Vargas of Brazil, “whose police state tactics Welles experienced firsthand when he filmed there” (Pease 101fn14); that Alberto Vargas painted some of the most famous pin-ups of the twentieth century (see Chutkow); that Vargas is a Spanish patronymic for “steep hill” (OTHELLO: “hills whose heads touch heaven” [1.3.140]); that Vargas is “part of an old Spanish proverb (Averiguelo Vargas,’ or ‘let Vargas find out’), [referring] to Francisco de Vargas, a fifteenth-century Spanish courtier from Queen Isabella’s reign famously known for his ability to crack difficult cases” (Oliver and Trigo 116); and that Much Ado’s Verges (also pronounced “Vargas”) can signify sour fruit juice, a rod as an emblem of authority, the border of a region, or a penis (Irvine 326).

Vargas’s full name in the screenplay reads as RAMON MIGUEL VARGAS, with “Ramona” in the southwest inevitably recalling the archetypical miscegenation in Helen Hunt Jackson’s Ramona (1884) and later versions of that story. (For
a wickedly funny pastiche of Hollywood’s anxiety about such mixed-race couplings, see the video piece *Ramona: Birth of a Miscegenation Nation* by Avalos et al. The Vargases have a brief cameo there, necking in the car while voices comment on the poor quality of Heston’s makeup: “HER: [T]o avoid offending anyone Hollywood’s best miscegenation couples are both white. HIM: Gee, they should have gotten Brando, he has a more believable mustache than Heston.” In the mock credits for the “Multicultural Caste,” Othello and Desdemona do not appear, but “Miranda & Caliban” do, and are followed by “Spike Lee & Orson Welles.”) As it happens, Ramon is the name of the Mexican tenor who plays Cassio in Plácido Domingo’s third recording of *Otello* (1994).

The phrase (3.3.361) is often quoted as shorthand for the cultural capital of being familiar with the play—as, for instance, in *Barbershop* (2002).

These larger themes (evidence, marriage, justice, occupation) are pervasive yet vague enough that I must for now postpone a prolonged contemplation of them; my argument here relies more heavily on establishing the groundwork for subsequent, even more conjectural reflections. (There will be some, I anticipate, who find these reflections far too conjectural already.)

If we consider that *Touch of Evil* already commences on the violent border rather than the central capital—*Othello’s* equivalent being the melee on Cyprus, with the suggested but not visited center [Venice/Venice]—then the approximation is even more exact. Strikingly, Verdi and Boito began their opera with the arrival at Cyprus.

Can we hear here the name of another authority figure, another kinsman (to Brabantio)—Lodovico?

Onscreen we see Grandi serve one drink to Quinlan and order another round—apparently the same number required to inebriate Cassio, who claims that he has “drunk but one cup tonight” (2.3.33) and shortly thereafter Iago calculates: “If I can fasten but one cup upon him / With that which he hath drunk tonight already” (2.3.42–43).

Wood helpfully suggests that Webster’s “morbidity and decadence” are as much in the spirit of *Touch of Evil* as he finds *Macbeth* to be (e.g. the washing of the blood from Quinlan’s hands, or Quinlan’s visit to the apparently vatic Tana) (*Personal* 152).

The 1622 Quarto stage directions indicate that “be stifles her”; the 1623 Folio has “Smothers her.” As to be expected, staged interpretations vary widely (suffocation with a pillow being a favorite, presumably because it underscores the setting of the bed, but stabbing in the neck an occasional possibility in the nineteenth century). The central preoccupation, regardless, is her throat (perhaps yet another reason why she is such a suitable heroine for opera).

One of the rejected methods, which Othello had proposed, was to “chop her into messes!” (4.1.194). In the screenplay, Welles apparently transposes this gruesome solution to an earlier case that Menzies and Quinlan had ‘solved’: “Pete, he used that axe to chop his wife into that mess we found” (emphases added, 110).
In a stunning, protesting-too-much slip that the screenplay includes but the film omits, Quinlan drunkenly responds to Menzies’s questions about the murder of Grandi: “You must be getting silly in the head. I didn’t kill my wife. That half-breed done it” (emphasis added, 109). Although Stephen Heath was apparently unfamiliar with this line in the script, he still makes the observation that “in strangling Grandi [Quinlan] takes the role of his wife’s murderer” (76).

Quinlan’s intentions are confused at this point, characterologically as well as narratologically—apparently, he wants not only to remove the possibility of Grandi testifying against him but also to frame Susan for Grandi’s murder. The latter purpose seems spurious, and formal charges against her are never made. This confusion confirms, for me, that the extra-cinematic level of referencing Othello is at work here.

Even the script’s directions for Quinlan’s entrance evoke Othello’s state: he “moves and talks almost like a sleepwalker” (93). With reference to Othello, Cavell writes, “the words are those of a man in a trance, in a dream state, fighting not to awaken; willing for anything but light” (Disowning 133).

Stubbs even calls the cane “ocular proof,” without, however, any apparent awareness of further Othello/Touch of Evil connections (31).

There is one minor piece of absent evidence that Vargas fails to notice, however. The pearl necklace that Susan has been wearing throughout the film is no longer on her when they reunite at the conclusion; in leaving her alone throughout the film, can we say that he inadvertently “threw a pearl away” (5.2.352)? Welles likewise plays with Desdemona’s jewelry in his Othello: she begins the film wearing pearls, entering the Venetian court with a strand braided through her hair; she later is wearing a pearl necklace when Othello refuses her handkerchief—then a double necklace when he demands the handkerchief of her, then a triple one when she laments to Emilia; subsequently she has one strand again, and then finally none by the time she readies herself for bed.

As with cane/Kane, Vargas/“Vargas,” Venice/Venice,’ Suzanne/Susan, we hear the whisper of another pun here—Menzies is now a vehicle for a mic/Mike, as Quinlan discovers: “I’m talking to Vargas now . . . through this walking microphone that used to work for me.”

If the surprise were in fact genuine, I would hope that Welles would take similar pleasure in this extended dialogue that I have elaborated here. Kaja Silverman’s analysis of this sequence in the film could easily be transposed to that in the play: “Vargas does not speak during this sequence; he is ‘pure’ ear . . . . Even when the other two men are out of his line of vision, he is able to follow what goes on between them . . . Quinlan, on the contrary, neither sees nor hears Vargas” (55). In this case, however, Quinlan acts more as the unaware Cassio than the omniscient Iago.

In what might very well be a tip of the hat to Touch of Evil, the Iago figure in All Night Long also uses tape recording equipment (albeit in order to deceive Othello, rather than for Othello to disprove Iago). In both films we find an un-
suspecting Othello figure (if we can now identify the stalked Quinlan with Othello) imagining his antagonist with “that thing you’re wearing?... That halo... Looks real pretty on you, Pete.” See the comparable exchange in All Night Long, where Othello/Rex says to Iago/Cousins: “Drop that Sherlock Holmes bit—that hat looks funny on you.”

69 He was some kind of a man. What does it matter what you say about people?” These lines have been recurrently identified as an “epitaph” (literally, a tombstone poem), perhaps deriving from Schrader’s influential identification of the entire film as an “epitaph” for film noir. For a more extended examination of this familiar gesture, see my study on the rhetorical use of epitaphs (Newstrom).

68 Wood describes this as “the ultimate overriding effect of the film—its seductive and insidious invitation to the spectators to accept corruption as a fact of existence, privileging Quinlan over Vargas” (Hitchcock’s 18).

67 The 1970s board game Othello—with reversible chips white on one side and black on the other—provides yet another reminder (if that were necessary!) of how the play has come to be associated in popular culture with this black/white binary.

66 Gordon Heath played Othello in the 1950 Kenneth Tynan version as well as the 1955 BBC version; Welles included him as an uncredited pianist in Mr. Arkadin (1955), his film that immediately preceded Touch of Evil. It was in 1955 that the psychiatrists Todd and Dewhurst coined a clinical term for pathological jealousy: “the Othello syndrome.”

71 As Margot Hendricks ponders, “we might well inquire why literary works such as Shakespeare’s Othello and Titus Andronicus or John Webster’s The White Devil are treated as texts which deal almost exclusively with race and racism” (19).

72 What Nathaniel Hawthorne, astonishingly quoting Iago (1.3.395), called the disturbing but relatively unknown conjunction of two journeys of the Mayflower:

[T]he fated womb of which, in her first voyage, sent forth a brood of Pilgrims upon Plymouth Rock, and, in a subsequent one, spawned slaves upon the southern soil,—a monstrous birth, but with which we have an instinctive sense of kindred, and so are stirred by an irresistible impulse to attempt their rescue, even at the cost of blood and ruin. The character of our sacred ship, I fear, may suffer a little by this revelation; but we must let her white progeny offset her dark one,—and two such portents never sprang from an identical source before. (emphasis added, 50)

73 As a recent theatre critic reflected, “Remove the appearance of sharp racial differences from Othello and the difference in the play is so striking that it makes you wonder how many other stories have been distorted in our imaginations by our historical obsession with race” (Bruckner E:5).

74 Tilden Edelstein has written a helpful essay on this subject, showing how Othello has, in the United States, come to be figured as a ‘drama’ (culturally as well as theatrically) of racial intermarriage.
Despite continued efforts to recognize America’s inherent multiculturalism, most Americans still use ‘race’ “as a catchall term for the relationship between African Americans and those of European descent—a relationship that is inseparable from the origins of American national identity in a period that spawned both the concept of democratic rights and the institution of slavery” (Singh 70).

We might fill out this racialized American hypercanon with Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird; see Sundquist.

The recent film O, while apparently well-intentioned, seems equally troubling to me in its transformation of Othello into another racialized American stereotype: the urban black teen basketball star. See Burt (“Slammin”) for further discussion of “racial disintegration” in contemporary performances of Shakespeare.

As a reviewer reported in 1930, Robeson “identified himself and his people with the tragedy of Othello” (Bishop 33). This was perhaps a strategic, even polemical approach made necessary to justify his performance in the play (his later director Margaret Webster would, in 1942, maintain “that both the text and the sense of the play require a Negro in the title part” [emphasis added, “Robeson as ‘Othello’”]). Robeson became “The American Othello” (as his biographer Hoyt called him) not only through his undertaking the role three times over as many decades, but also in his recitations of speeches from the play in concerts (e.g. his 1958 Carnegie Hall appearance) and “the publishing and recording ventures he undertook in the 1950s . . . ‘Othello Associates’ and ‘Othello Recording Corporation’, respectively” (Cartelli 148). See Agee for a less sanguine view of Robeson’s identification with this role.

See Graham for a survey of such films.

The initially unspoken inspiration for Mailer’s inflammatory “The White Negro” (published the same year that Touch of Evil was produced [1957], and later included with a contextual introduction in Advertisements for Myself).

Thanks to Peggy Pascoe for clarifying these torturous distinctions; this brief account largely paraphrases personal communication with her. See her essay, “Miscegenation Law, Court Cases and Ideologies of ’Race’ in Twentieth-Century America.” Fitz goes so far as to posit “miscegenation as a metaphor for the Americas” (243).

Brian Henderson has made a comparable argument regarding the displacement of miscegenation in The Searchers (1956); in Welles’s Othello, Peter Donaldson reads Iago’s cage as a quietly resonant “displacement of race” and slavery (119).

Just exactly how advanced or how self-serving Welles was in terms of racial matters is open to debate. Robert Stam wants to see him “as a kind of ethnic renegade, rather like an anthropologist who, instead of maintaining the customary distance and superiority, has ‘gone native,’ who has loved the objects of his ‘study’ just a little too dearly and too well” (242)—this last phrase ventriloquizing (perhaps more problematically than it may at first appear) Othello’s “loved not wisely but too well” (5.2.349).

We might be moving in this direction; Latino actors Jimmy Smits (1984)
and Raul Julia (1979, 1991) have performed the title role in well-received Othello productions. See Bassi for a critique of “ethnic fallacies” in Shakespeare studies; see Gilroy for a more contentious call for an end to racialized discourse and ‘race’ itself.

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