

Spatial Sexualities: The Private, the Social, and the Distinctively Deadly in *Othello* on Screen

In Shakespeare's early modern domestic tragedy of *Othello* the bedroom marks a deadly intimacy. In an act of eroticized violence, Othello kills his wife on their marital bed "else she'll betray more men"¹ and commits suicide upon discovering that he has murdered her erroneously. With the technological resources at their disposal, modern film directors can present sexuality in innovative ways when adapting Shakespeare's play for the screen. Concentrating on the configuration of the bedroom in Oliver Parker's 1995 cinematic adaptation of *Othello*, this paper explores the complex interweaving of sexuality and space and demonstrates how spatial sexualities are constructed through the interpenetration of a myriad of discourses relating to identity, authority, gender, race and sexuality. Embedded in this intersection are distinctive spatial sexualities relevant to the genre of the film.

The scenario of the 1995 *Othello* is fuelled by desire and passion. The director, Oliver Parker, re-conceived Shakespeare's tragedy as follows:

I saw the play as an erotic thriller, and that is what I wanted to translate onto the big screen. Passion is the driving force of the story. Each character is motored by desire. There's an extraordinary fusion of people boiling with different passions.²

Iago's overriding passion and desire—Cassio has been chosen in his stead as Othello's lieutenant—takes over and violates and despoils the space most explicitly associated with the love and desire of Othello and Desdemona: their bedroom. Whereas the bedroom appears only in the final scene in the play, almost a third of the action takes place in the bedroom in the film as indicated by the production notes of the film, thus emphasizing the erotic element of the play. The representation of the events in the bedroom allows the director to articulate issues related to sexuality.

The bedroom both as a real space and as metaphorical space (in Othello's visions) is a space of negativity. As a real space it explores the transformation of

¹ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1997) 5.2.6.

² *Othello Production Notes* by Castle Rock International (as found in the BFI micro jacket), dir. Oliver Parker, prod. Luc Roeg and David Barron, 1-31, 9.

Othello and Desdemona's relationship due to Othello's sexual jealousy. It becomes a locus of possession and violence. As a metaphorical space it demonstrates Othello's perturbations and his feelings that he has been shamed by Desdemona's infidelity. The characters try to establish what Henri Lefebvre calls "a true space of pleasure"³ but they are hindered from doing so. Overall, the film emphasizes the destructiveness and violence attached to desire. Lefebvre suggests that society is a space "whose abstract truth is imposed on the reality of the senses, of bodies, of wishes and desires" (139). The film can be considered as an illustration of the destruction which occurs when desire attempts to impose itself on space.

The bedroom is the closest thing to an ideal space, the first time it is presented, because it is briefly a space fulfilled by bliss. The presentation of the couple's wedding night is the most sexually passionate scene between Othello and Desdemona. Othello's desire to possess Desdemona shatters the possibility of the existence of a "true space of pleasure" (Lefebvre 167) because he speaks of "the purchase made" which tinges the scene with male acquisitiveness. The word "profit" may suggest buying, investment, profiteering. Othello's words mentioned above—the only words in this scene—express not only his sexual desire for his wife, but also his wish to own her. As Desdemona has no corresponding speech, Othello's sexual power and authority over Desdemona is emphasized. Pierre Bourdieu's suggestion: "Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power. A person speaks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished,"⁴ applies to Othello's behaviour. Othello's desire to dominate and overpower the other is not only registered verbally. It is also communicated visually through an emphasis on his physicality. The montage offers an arresting spectacle of a "militant sexuality" by beginning with a concentration on the powerful upper part of Othello's black body, panning up his bare feet towards his trouser legs, and then offering a medium close-up of his hands removing his belt. Robert F. Willson, Jr. remarks, Othello "marches towards [Desdemona] like the conquering soldier."⁵

³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 167.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Economics of Linguist Exchanges," *Social Science Information* 16.6 (1977): 645-668, 648.

⁵ Robert F. Willson Jr., "Strange New Worlds: Constructions of Venice and Cyprus in the Orson Welles and Oliver Parker Films of *Othello*," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 20.3 (Summer 2002):37-39, 38.

Othello is no longer the strong warrior and the powerful man who made love to Desdemona the next time we view him in the bedroom. His vision of Desdemona and Cassio very close to each other smiling, which is immediately followed by a shot of an Othello sitting on the bed coughing and then falling on the bed, illustrates his physical illness which is due to his inner turmoil. Iago's eye invades the bedroom as he spies on Othello, who is unwell, from the door of the bedroom. He is witnessing the crippling result of his insinuations to Othello about Cassio and Desdemona. Othello's discourse is no longer overpowering but is pervaded by a fundamental distrust of women and feminine sexuality: "we can call these delicate creatures ours and not their appetites." Lawrence Danson explains Othello's thoughts:

'we' men cannot call these delicate creatures' appetites 'ours' not only because 'we' can never be sure 'we' fully own or control a property that can't be seen, but because 'we' define a woman's appetite as something always alien, the defining attribute or property of the other, the always not ours.⁶

As a result of his doubts about Desdemona's sexual fidelity, Othello's identity has disintegrated.

The discontinuous use of space in film can elicit visions which create a "radically altered world"⁷ as Susan Sontag points out, and is illustrated when Othello who is asleep in bed with Desdemona has a nightmare of her having sex with Cassio. The film transports the viewer into Othello's *id* and specifies the nature of his fears. Othello approaches the bed, the diaphanous curtains which enclose it move, while naked bodies can be seen vaguely behind them. Opening the curtains with a knife, Othello sees Desdemona naked holding Cassio in her arms. Her laughter in this

⁶ Lawrence Danson, "'The Catastrophe is a Nuptial': the Space of Masculine Desire in *Othello*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Survey* 46 (1993): 69-79, 70.

⁷ Susan Sontag, "Film and Theatre," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 362-74, 367.

explicit sexual scene endorses the idea that Othello feels derided and mocked because of his wife's sexual promiscuity and sexual fidelity. The bedroom rather than being the site of intimate happy values becomes a site of shame. Ewan Fernie writes on the primacy of the passion of shame in the play, but he does not to cur it on and in the bedroom in the way the film does:

[Othello] is remarkably indifferent to the supposed seducer, Cassio, and though he thinks about Desdemona and her imagined adultery, his most recurrent and vehement feeling is that he has himself been degraded and defiled. [...] The soul of Othello's jealousy is shame.⁸

By giving no indication that Othello is imagining the sexual encounter between Cassio and Desdemona, the film implies that Othello's visions are *more than real for him*; they supplant reality. This is an instance of Rainer Maria Rilke's proposal that space reaches from within us and reshapes the world.⁹ Othello's dreams are "ocular proof" for him of Desdemona's adultery.

The bedroom is more than the site Othello's sexual jealousy as evoked when the sexually jealous Roderigo, who has not "enjoyed" Desdemona, bursts violently into the bedroom and expresses his sexual dissatisfaction at the scene where it is frustrated. The idea that other men entertain sexual desires for Othello's wife in his own bedroom—Iago promises that Roderigo will "enjoy" Desdemona—erodes the couple's marital privacy and sexual life and gives a strange reality to Othello's suspicion that other men have been where he has "garnered up [his] heart" (4.2.58).

Imaginary space becomes more fragmented and chaotic as Othello's jealousy increases as evoked by the use of fragmented editing (excessively rapid shots of parts of the body) when Othello visualizes Cassio and Desdemona having sex during his

⁸ Ewan Fernie, "Othello," *Shame in Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 136-172, 136.

⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, "What Birds Plunge through is not the Intimate Space," *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (1980; London: Pan Books, 1987) lines 5-8, 263.

epileptic seizure in the dungeon. The exclusive and suffocating emphasis on body parts makes us *experience* Othello's self-tormenting visions but at the same time it also alienates us from him. The fragmented montage conveys that Othello can no longer fully articulate a "whole" idea of his wife as a single coherent being. For him, both his sexuality and hers have fragmented. His visual syntax, as it were, has disintegrated in the same way that his verbal language has become confused and disjointed in Shakespeare's text:

Lie with her? Lie on her? We say 'lie on her' when they belie her. Lie with her. Swounds, that's fouldsome! Handkerchief-confessions-handkerchief. To confess and be hanged and then to confess! I tremble at it. Nature would invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips! Is't possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O devil! (4.1.35-43)

It is not words, but images of Cassio and Desdemona having sex which shake Othello in the film. His visions of Desdemona's adultery may indicate his anxiety about Desdemona's choice of him as marital partner and his fear that Desdemona and Cassio might be a more "natural" couple. Arthur L. Little, Jr., commenting on the play, suggests that the coupling of Cassio and Desdemona would be acceptable by Venetian standards so this "social legitimacy" would give them "cultural invisibility."¹⁰ Little implies that the interracial union which is unacceptable to Brabantio is socially illegitimate and culturally visible. The supposed adulterous union of Desdemona and Cassio, evoked by Iago, offers "only a monstrous and grotesque parody of Othello's union with Desdemona because, given Desdemona's (obscene) marriage, the proper coupling of Desdemona and Cassio is now recoverable only as a scene of sexual adulteration or deviance" (316). In his anxious unconscious,

¹⁰ Arthur L. Little Jr., "An essence that's not seen:" The Primal Scene of Racism in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993): 304-324, 314.

Fishburne's Othello may be recovering the "socially proper" coupling of Desdemona and Cassio.

By realizing the innocent Desdemona's supposed adultery so vividly, the film dictates our response a little too forcefully, aligning us with Othello's visions. An imputation of sexual guilt is forced onto Desdemona. As Carol Chillington Rutter writes:

Parker's sensationalizing literalism requires spectators [...] to see what Othello sees, the fantasy become reality, so it makes Fishburne an Othello who has ingested, incorporated Iago's suggestions which his imagination then literally writes on to Desdemona's body in a series of images that work, perversely and reductively, to instantiate and validate the misogynistic stereotypes ('she must have change, she must') that Shakespeare's play circulates. This Othello sees Desdemona in bed with Michael Cassio—and so do we.¹¹

But what Othello sees is not simply unreal. The film embodies the complexity of Othello's love and passion. Othello has an instinctual need to be perversely gratified with evidence of Desdemona's infidelity but the film also addresses the sensational and perverse appetite of its audience. Are we forced to draw back and recognize our own complicity in Parker's erotic thriller?

All the heated sexual activity we have seen on the bed in the course of the film, makes way for a cold scene of death in the last scene. The bed contains the bodies of four characters: Othello, Desdemona, Emilia and Iago, revealing a negative and deadly experience of domestic space. Though we might see the bedroom as the sacred centre of the male and female union, it is criss-crossed by other relationships and desires. The desires and passions of the individuals have energized and activated the space of the bedroom and have now destroyed it. In the bedroom there is, metaphorically, insufficient room for all these passions.

¹¹ Carol Chillington Rutter, "Looking at Shakespeare's women on film," *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 241-260, 255-256.

Only Iago's desire has been fulfilled. The bed appears contaminated, not as a result of Othello and Desdemona's interracial union, but as a result of Iago's malevolently contaminating presence. Iago receives a strange and disturbing elevation through his living presence on the bed. This kind of bestial animation in a general context of death epitomizes Iago's serpentine erotically tinged hatred of Othello on a bed which is not just a marital bed but also the bed where Othello and Desdemona have died. Iago appears to have triumphed over the others and is now "evened with [Othello], wife for wife" (2.1.297). Iago who has given his meaning to the bed by linking it with death, has the cultural power and control that Andrew Hiscock attributes to those who assign meaning to a particular space.¹² It is Iago, above all, who makes *Othello* an "erotic thriller" in that it is his passion which takes over in the film.

The throwing of the bodies of the lovers in the sea may indicate that Venice is burying, leagues under the sea, its complicity in the couple's death. And a more sinister question arises: are we complicit in this outcome? Parker's film has implicated us voyeuristically in the sexual life of Othello and Desdemona and in its destruction. This final image of the bodies submerging in the sea may be meant to challenge us not to repress what we have experienced in the film. Perhaps the film unconsciously articulates its own nostalgic desire for passion and sexuality to have enough space to flourish.

¹² Andrew Hiscock, *The Uses of this World: Thinking Space in Shakespeare, Marlowe, Cary and Jonson* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004) 179.

Works Cited

- Danson, Lawrence. "‘The Catastrophe is a Nuptial’: The Space of Masculine Desire in *Othello*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter’s Tale*." *Shakespeare Survey* 46 (1993): 69-79.
- Fernie, Ewan. "Othello." *Shame in Shakespeare*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. 136-172.
- Hiscock, Andrew. *The Uses of this World: Thinking Space in Shakespeare, Marlowe, Cary and Jonson*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- Little, Arthur L. Jr. "‘An essence that’s not seen’: The Primal Scene of Racism in *Othello*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993): 304-324.
- Othello Production Notes*. Castle Rock International. BFI microjacket. Dir. Oliver Parker. Prod. Luc Roeg and David Barron. 1-31.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. "What Birds Plunge through is not the Intimate Space." *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Ed. and Trans. by Stephen Mitchell. 1980. London: Pan Books, 1987.
- Rutter, Carol Chillington. "Looking at Shakespeare’s Women on Film." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Ed. Russell Jackson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 241-260.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. The Arden Shakespeare. Ed. E.A.J. Honigmann. Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1997.

Sontag, Susan. "Film and Theatre." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy. 4th ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. 362-374.

Willson Jr., Robert F. "Strange New Worlds: Constructions of Venice and Cyprus in the Orson Welles and Oliver Parker Films of *Othello*." *Shakespeare Bulletin* 20.3 (Summer 2002): 37-39.

