

# UNDERSTANDING *IAGO*, AN ITALIAN FILM ADAPTATION OF *OTHELLO*: CLIENTELISM, CORRUPTION, POLITICS

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‘Liberamente ispirati dell’ “OTHELLO” di WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’ (‘loosely based on William Shakespeare’s *Othello*’), according to the closing credits, *Iago* (dir. Volfango di Biasi, 2009) was released on 27 February 2009 (in Italy only). While the film takes *Othello* as its source of stimulation, it reimagines the play in several key respects. It features a lengthy ‘preface’, taking some considerable time (over half of the film’s length) to set up the drama of act 1. Approximating iambic pentameter with a demotic Italian vernacular, *Iago* then proceeds to follow the plot and structure of *Othello* quite closely. But completing the film’s adaptive excess is an ‘additional act’: this ‘extra’ screen time shifts the anticipated ending of *Othello* and delivers a narrative attendant upon, and emerging from, the Shakespearian conclusions of act 5.

Perhaps most distinctively, *Iago* offers us Iago’s backstory rather than Othello’s, envisioning the lieutenant ‘of exceeding honesty’ as the wronged hero of the piece (*Othello*, 3.3.262). In a symptomatic scene, Brabantio (Gabriele Lavia), the Rector of the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Venice (and father to the beautiful Desdemona (Laura Chiatti)), luxuriates in his impeccably appointed office. Velvet-suited, and sporting a gold earring and dark cravat, he simultaneously suggests a Doge, a headmaster and a supercilious *paterfamilias*. As befits his high-ranking position, the gorgeous office overlooks a sun-dappled courtyard in which manicured hedges frame marble statuary, a fountain spurts from a grotto and trimmed trees sway gently in

the breeze. Here to protest is Iago (Nicolas Vaporidis), the Faculty’s most brilliant – but impoverished – student. Thanks to a backroom deal dreamed up by Brabantio and world-renowned architect Philippe Moreau (Mamadou Dioume), Otello (Aurélien Gaya), Moreau’s son, Black and hailing from Paris, has been parachuted in to lead the Faculty’s entry to the city’s Biennale event. Even though Iago is doing all the work, he remains an uncredited assistant. ‘Otello . . . hasn’t got a grasp . . . I’ve had to do everything’, Iago complains. Brabantio’s reply highlights his own imbrication in nepotism and corruption: ‘I value your discretion . . . the university senate made the . . . choice . . . we’d have to make a big fuss . . . Our profession is complicated . . . it’s politics.’ His unwillingness to countenance Iago’s complaint, and the obvious cultivation of clientelism, speak to what historian Paul Ginsborg identifies in contemporary Italy as a ‘patrimonialism’ undergirded by ‘fierce acquisitive instincts . . . family ambitions and clan loyalties’.<sup>1</sup> Disillusioned at the revelation of a ‘politics’ that is denying him his due, Iago leaves the Venetian office with an even greater sense of embitterment.

*Iago* joins a long list of Shakespeare-inspired Italian films, including *Che cosa sonole le nuvole?* (‘What are Clouds For?’, dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1967), *Un Ameleto di meno* (‘One Hamlet More’,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ginsborg, *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power and Patrimony* (London and New York, 2004), p. 6.

dir. Carmelo Bene, 1972), *Sud side stori* ('South Side Story', dir. Roberta Torre, 2000), *Cesare deve morire* ('Caesar Must Die', dir. Paolo and Vittoria Taviani, 2012) and *La stoffa dei sogni* ('The Stuff of Dreams', dir. Gianfranco Cabiddu, 2016) – adaptations of *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Tempest*, respectively.<sup>2</sup> To this list must be added *The Taming of the Shrew* (dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1967) and *Romeo and Juliet* (dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1968), which are forever associated with Italy thanks to ravishing cinematography and the *auteur* status of their director, and which, in their day, set new standards in terms of orientation, casting and aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Generalizations in such a wide-ranging generic sample are hazardous, but it is possible to maintain that the Italian Shakespeare film is marked by a suggestive deployment of natural and urban locations, a critical privileging of regional and class rivalries and an absorption in political legacies. In this sense, *Iago* is true to form. At the same time, *Iago* follows in the footsteps of, and takes some of its energy from, its immediate 'Venice-set film' forebears, including *Othello* (dir. Oliver Parker, 1995) and *William Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice'* (dir. Michael Radford, 2004), imitating the studied use of setting but moving away from the early modern period by situating the story firmly in the contemporary. The alliance with the contemporary – action in the here and now unfolds against the period backdrop of Venice – signals one of the ways in which, while linked to other films, *Iago* is simultaneously something of a curiosity in the history of Italian cinema's engagement with Shakespeare. In a singular combination, the film endorses a variety of genres and influences (it functions as both 'teen film' and 'Venice-set film'), looking outwards and inwards in its discovery of disappointment, excess and post-millennial Italian angst. Operating thus, it brings into play some of the themes and trends of what has been termed the 'Berlusconi era' (named after the politician and media baron Silvio Berlusconi, prime minister of Italy in a series of four governments during 1994–1995, 2001–2006 and 2008–2011).<sup>4</sup> *Iago* takes on additional complexions of meaning, this article argues, in the light of accusations surrounding

Berlusconi during his tenure in power, including collusion, conflict of interest, fraud and abuse of power.<sup>5</sup>

The film's Italian identifiers are easy to spot. As a 'Venice-set film', understood by film critics Michael Pigott and Anna Sloan as a genre that prioritizes an 'urban-marine playground' of 'picturesque beauty' and 'moral depravity', *Iago* announces a subscription to authentic settings (apart from some sequences in Castelfranco Veneto, the film was shot entirely in Venice itself) and a *mise en scène* comprised of murky waterways, shimmering palazzos, sun-baked squares and ornately arched bridges.<sup>6</sup> As a 'teen film' conceptualized around architecture students, *Iago* makes of

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of these adaptations, see Mark Thornton Burnett, *'Hamlet' and World Cinema* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 41–4; Martin Butler, 'A *Tempest* between Naples and Sardinia: Gianfranco Cabiddu's *La stoffa dei sogni*', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 37 (2019), 209–340; Maurizio Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares: Media Adaptations in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 2013), pp. 81–98; Sonia Massai, 'Subjection and redemption in Pasolini's *Othello*', in *World-wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance*, ed. Sonia Massai (New York and London, 2005), pp. 95–103; Mariangela Tempera, 'Shakespeare behind Italian bars: the Rebibbia Project, *The Tempest*, and *Caesar Must Die*', in *Shakespeare, Italy, and Transnational Exchange: Early Modern to Present*, ed. Enza De Francisci and Chris Stamatakis (New York and London, 2017), pp. 265–76.

<sup>3</sup> See Mark Thornton Burnett, Courtney Lehmann, Marguerite Rippey and Ramona Wray, *Great Shakespeareans: Welles, Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli* (London and New York, 2013), pp. 141–86.

<sup>4</sup> John Foot, *Modern Italy*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke and New York, 2014), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Daniele Albertazzi and Nina Rothenburg, 'Introduction: this tide is not for turning', in *Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition under Berlusconi (2001–06)*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi, Clodagh Brook, Charlotte Ross and Nina Rothenburg (New York and London, 2009), pp. 1–16, esp. p. 2; Maria Elisa Montironi, 'Narrating and unravelling Italian crises through Shakespeare (2000–2016)', in *Shakespeare and Crisis: One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives*, ed. Silvia Bigliuzzi (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2020), pp. 245–75, esp. p. 260.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Pigott, 'Introduction', in *World Film Locations: Venice*, ed. Michael Pigott (Bristol, 2013), p. 5; Anna Sloan, 'The tourist gaze', in *World Film Locations: Venice*, ed. Pigott, pp. 8–9.

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Venice a campus. It takes the imprint of *William Shakespeare's 'Romeo + Juliet'* (dir. Baz Luhrmann, 1996) and related high-school Shakespeare films such as *'O'* (dir. Tim Blake Nelson, 2001), detailing the intrigues and passions of its quintessentially youthful cast. In this way, it makes youthful the archetypal 'Venice-set film' while prioritizing the city's association with romance.<sup>7</sup> (The DVD version of the film released in Italy included a postcard invitation to enter a competition – 'Venice in Love' – to win a romantic weekend for two at the Palazzo Priuli, San Marco; see Figure 1).

In keeping with a film aesthetic that makes much of appearances and possessions – costume credits for *Iago* reference Bulgari, Chanel, Dolce & Gabbana and Gucci – the adaptation spotlights the trappings of wealth and entitlement as part of its rationale. The fashion-shoot elements of this *Othello* thus serve both market-driven and narrative-centred purposes. Venice, as *Iago* represents it, as well as signifying a wonderfully evocative series of period structures and places, is something of a catwalk – a luxury location populated by equally luxurious people and consumables. Except for *Iago*, who, in a sartorial illustration of his downtrodden position and as an index of his distance from haute couture, is shot throughout in shabby dark jacket and trousers, most of the film's players are photographed to show off in a manner akin to a *Vogue* editorial. Furthermore, as part of a repurposing of the play's characters and relationships, the lovelorn longings of Roderigo (Lorenzo Gleijeses) in *Othello* are displaced in the film on to *Iago*, while the homoeroticism of the *Iago*–*Othello* relationship is freshly located in the Roderigo character. Roderigo, brother in the film to Bianca (Luana Rossetti), is played as gay and camp and dressed in open shirt, necklace, outrageous collars, sequins, and puce coloured jackets. In *Iago*, *Iago* and Emilia (Giulia Steigerwalt) are friends rather than husband and wife, with Emilia's concomitantly extended role registered in her dominatrix-style black leather outfit, furs, studded bodice and chains (fashion as bondage). Perhaps, most strikingly, *Othello* and *Cassio* (Fabio Ghidoni) in *Iago* are cousins: their new

relation both underscores the praxes of nepotism that the film makes its partial subject (one leads, and the other is second assistant on, the team entering the Biennale event) and points up defining monetary accoutrements. As Drake Stutesman notes, in what could be a summation of the film's fashion-aware preferences, 'fashion is the sweep of a Look (a lifestyle)' or 'a message'.<sup>8</sup> While *Cassio* is arresting in his casually draped and costly long scarves, *Othello* makes for a socially dominant impression with a gym-toned physique accentuated by tight-fitting cashmere top and polo shirts and accessorized by a crucial property – a pristine white handkerchief.

As Shakespeare adaptation, *Iago* has only been occasionally considered in Shakespeare on film criticism, possibly because it was not internationally distributed and fared unimpressively at the Italian box-office.<sup>9</sup> Yet recent developments in adaptation studies and discussion in critical race theory make the film ripe for analysis. In what follows, I argue for a reading of the film that explores representations of race and difference inside intersecting representations of corruption, clientelism and class. The article takes *Iago's* three engagements with *Othello* – labelled here as *Preface*, *Play* and *Additional Act* – and looks at each in turn to identify the ways in which this Shakespearian adaptation functions to mediate a contemporary Italian crisis.

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<sup>7</sup> Jeff Cotton, 'Venice: city of the imagination', in *World Film Locations: Venice*, ed. Pigott, pp. 6–7, esp. p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Drake Stutesman, 'Costume design, or, what is fashion in film?', in *Fashion in Film*, ed. Adrienne Munich (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2011), pp. 17–39; pp. 20–1, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Sujata Iyengar, 'Beds, handkerchiefs, and moving objects in *Othello*', in *Variable Objects: Shakespeare and Speculative Appropriation*, ed. Valerie M. Fazel and Louise Geddes (Edinburgh, 2021), pp. 21–36, esp. pp. 27–33; Douglas M. Lanier, 'Vlogging the bard: serialization, social media, Shakespeare', in *Broadcast Your Shakespeare: Continuity and Change across Media*, ed. Stephen O'Neill (London and New York, 2018), pp. 185–206, esp. p. 186; Catherine O'Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema* (Basingstoke and New York, 2014), p. 175.



1 Postcard invitation, accompanying the DVD release of *Iago* (dir. Volfango di Biasi, 2009), to enter a competition to win a romantic break for two in Venice. Medusa Film / author collection.

### PREFACE

Kyle Grady writes that Iago's lack of obvious motive allows Shakespeare to develop a 'more mercurial and complicated villain': 'certitude' is replaced 'with loose ends'.<sup>10</sup> In *Iago*, by contrast, the titular character, echoing the phrasing of his Shakespearian counterpart ('People ... care about ... what you seem to be'), is given a history, a backstory that explains his motivations and allows us to see him and them psychologically. At the start of the film, Iago explains how his

origins disenfranchise him and prevent advancement: tousle-haired and sombrely dressed, he recounts the story of abandonment by his 'brick-layer' father, his lack of 'luck' and his generally straitened circumstances ('I borrow books'). Akin to the stereotype of the struggling Renaissance scholar, Iago is labelled a 'poor, starving book-worm' by fellow students. The invocation extends

<sup>10</sup> Kyle Grady, 'Othello, Colin Powell, and post-racial anachronisms', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67 (2016), 68–83; p. 68.

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hints in *Othello* at the same time as it builds upon the plotlines of plays such as *Macbeth* (the passing over of the 'brave [and] ... valiant ... captain' (1.1.16, 24, 34) for Malcolm) and *The Merchant of Venice*, that other Venice-set play centred on group forms of stigmatization and exclusion. Understanding Iago in this fashion is also contextually resonant. It suggests that, in a 'debt-ridden' climate, and at a time of rising 'unemployment' and 'widening inequality' in Italy, the figure of a working-class student served as a readily recognizable trope.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, as some historians have suggested, Italy during this period was characterized by 'latent rigidities ... Barriers ... blocked career progress', with 'declining prospects for mobility'.<sup>12</sup> To some extent, then, *Iago* executes a socially responsive operation, forming an alliance both with contemporaneous Italian theatre productions of Shakespeare in which 'characters' serve as 'metaphors for [the] ... unemployed and ... artists', and with Italian cinema's predilection for exploring questions of class and privilege.<sup>13</sup>

The fictive biography legitimizes Iago's idealism. Against a backdrop of disadvantage, he expounds in the campus design studio his thesis of meritocracy, a thesis that runs counter to the realities of what Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri term Italy's 'non-meritocratic system'.<sup>14</sup> 'I have a dream', Iago states, elaborating: 'in a far-away kingdom ... is a happy place ... a fair and ordered world where people are free and flourish.' The visual expression of his philosophy is the model city he has built, with its stairwell leading to the heavens (suggestive of disencumbered progress) and a spatial organization that enables 'desire' and 'love'. Repeatedly, Iago is discovered in visionary mode, as when, for example, he holds forth in a Biennale pavilion about his 'city of the future': the camera pans expansively over computer graphics of civic spaces, and soaring buildings, a dreamscape of opportunity fired by a belief in egalitarianism. Later in the film, again in the campus design studio, he is sharply distinguished from Otello who is only interested in market interests and late capitalist initiatives. Here, Otello executively alters the entry, privileging the

'business district' as the only site of 'progress'. Subsequently, in a care-worn square, surrounded by crumbling brick walls and chipped masonry, Iago laments, 'He wants to build a gilded prison where all people do is work ... It's designed to ... turn them into slaves.' Both the faded setting, and the expression of discontent, dramatically mark Iago off from the directions and tendencies of his world.

Inside the film's understanding of Iago as an inventive artist committed to epic and ethical ventures is its discovery of an institutional system averse to mobility and change. Iago's professional ambitions, the film makes clear, are unrealizable. Not only is he passed over as lead on his Faculty's entry to the Biennale event – he is also dictated to, and subordinated by, praxes of privilege that protect the upper echelons. Suggestive in this connection is the way in which, at the public exhibition of their individual projects, the students are rewarded based on familial connections. For example, because she is the Rector's daughter, Desdemona (a student in the Faculty) is given top marks for her 'environmentally friendly' city design: 'excellent work ... 100%', Professor Telli (Pietro De Silva) gushes. His indulgent look, and smiling countenance, are more than enough to demonstrate that the treatment she is accorded is institutionally inflected in her favour.

For his part, Iago's more innovative design, with its emphasis on 'democratic space', access for 'everyone', and 'passageways' linking 'the outskirts to the heart', is questioned and given a mere 'commendation' after qualifying discussion. In fact, in its

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<sup>11</sup> Bill Emmott, *Good Italy, Bad Italy: Why Italy Must Conquer Its Demons to Face the Future* (New Haven and London, 2012), pp. 6, 17, 90.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents: Family, Civil Society, State, 1980–2001* (London and New York, 2001), p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Montironi, 'Narrating and unravelling', p. 268; Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones, *A New Guide to Italian Cinema* (New York, 2007), pp. 154–6.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri, 'A "sickman" in Europe', in *Italy Today: The Sick Man of Europe*, ed. Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri (London and New York, 2010), pp. 1–15, esp. p. 2.

anatomization of a system that maintains its own interests, *Iago* gestures towards the practices for which the ‘Berlusconi era’ has become known, including clientelism, a system of social relations which involves, as John Foot notes, ‘an exchange of resources between a patron and a client’: these resources may not be ‘jobs, or even cash, but can be much more ephemeral “goods” such as trust, the promise of a future “recommendation”, or even the banking of such resources for future use’.<sup>15</sup> It is precisely such an arrangement that Brabanzio dangles before Iago when, in the office scene, he assures him patronisingly that ‘I recognise your worth . . . I will offer you proper work, my friend.’ In situations of ‘high unemployment and poverty’, when ‘resources’ are in short supply, clientelism thrives, and the system is inextricably associated with illegality.<sup>16</sup> During the 1990s and 2000s, political corruption was linked to all the major parties in Italy, not least after the ‘Clean Hands’ (*Mani Pulite*) operation of 1992 uncovered widespread bribery and malpractice.<sup>17</sup> And clientelism and corruption are at the heart of one of the preface’s core scenes – the backroom deal between Brabanzio and world-renowned architect, and father of Otello, Philippe Moreau. By a cosy fire-side, Brabanzio, referencing ‘the contract to build the bridge’, states: ‘just . . . sign the consultation . . . you’re not responsible . . . for the . . . outcome . . . We need to make all [our] friends happy . . . there’s a lot of politics.’ In reply, Moreau accepts the ‘favour’, including his son’s admission to the Faculty, with discourses of unpalatable business establishing Brabanzio and Moreau as equally enmeshed in shady networks of benefit only to those already in power.

*Iago* derives ideological impact not just from Iago’s institutional marginalization but also from the extent to which this is paralleled in a concomitant romantic disappointment. As several episodes make clear, the wronged hero’s tribulations in love echo his frustrations at the profession: one is a microcosm of the other, and Iago, it seems, is good enough for neither. As lover, Iago in the film surrogates for Roderigo in the play, taking on a romantic mantle in penning a love letter to

Desdemona, casting her in a fairy-tale light (‘She’s a sad princess, and I’ll rescue her from the tower’) and informing his friends that they are destined to be together (‘she’s my pole-star’). Typically, and matching the film’s attachment to Venice’s fabled reputation as a city of love, this latter scene takes place in St Mark’s Square at night, the camera’s lingering on St Mark’s Clock Tower, with its golden medieval astrological symbols, lending a visual illustration to his conviction. Quintessentially, Iago meets the expectations of a melancholy lover (as indicated in his black attire) battling against the odds, introducing into the reimagined backstory of *Othello* a class-driven plot-line more akin to popular versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. World cinema adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* often understand the play in terms of social divisions that keep the lovers separate, and *Iago* is comparable.<sup>18</sup> The disparity in the worlds that Iago and Desdemona inhabit is self-evident from the start. For instance, with no mother and obliged to live with his aunt, Iago is glimpsed making his way home to a mean apartment in Venice’s backstreets: cinematography specifies his route into the ‘sestiere de San Paulo’ (St Paul district), while establishing shots concentrate on washing hanging between faded buildings, indexes of a working neighbourhood. The apartment itself signals want: the stairwell is dingy, kitschy figurines decorate the walls, and the whole is cramped and constricted. In contradistinction is Desdemona’s domestic space. Always in a combination of silky white and sparkly gold, and described by Iago as ‘divine’ (the soundtrack that introduces her is the song ‘So Divine’ by Honeybird), Desdemona lives in a lofty, colonnaded palazzo, upward-tilting camerawork indicating her distance from her would-be lover’s plebeian circumstances. With its flocked wallpaper, exclusive sidepieces and antique spinning globe, the canal-side palazzo belongs to

<sup>15</sup> Foot, *Italy*, p. 188. <sup>16</sup> Foot, *Italy*, p. 190.

<sup>17</sup> Rosalind Galt, *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (New York, 2006), p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Thornton Burnett, *Shakespeare and World Cinema* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 195–231.

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a superior universe entirely of its own. Moreover, the fact that the palazzo is accessed via a private gated bridge suggests an enclosed body longed for by, but unavailable to, the love-struck Iago. The two settings could not be more romantically apart. Adding to issues of inaccessibility, and seemingly crystallizing the sense of her remoteness, Desdemona does not respond immediately to Iago's admittedly hesitant approaches, and, when she subsequently falls for Otello's charms, the humiliated student is distraught: 'I'll never love again ... I didn't think it would hurt this much ... I'm drowning', he states, using an appropriate watery metaphor.

It is because Desdemona and Otello belong to similarly elevated environments that, as the film understands it, they are drawn to each other. *Iago* lenses Otello, Black, Paris-based and connected through family to Venice's nepotism, as arrogant and overweening. 'I've spent my life going between Paris, Tokyo and New York', he brags to Desdemona, adding, 'I've studied design systems that even professors couldn't imagine.' A vernacular version of the play's 'round unvarnished tale ... the story of [Othello's] life' (1.3.90, 128), Otello's boasts are delivered against a backdrop of the Rialto Bridge and the Fondaco dei Turchi palazzo, constructs that symbolically affirm the speaker's membership of a modern, mercantile elite. Elsewhere, Otello appears at Roderigo's party as a gladiator (the film's approximation of 'our noble and valiant general' (2.2.1–2)) and in a tailor-made suit sporting a key around his neck (the freedom of the city is his, it is suggested).

In fact, the party concatenates the thematic of an Iago who is overlooked and dispossessed. Nodding to the Capulet ball scene in *William Shakespeare's 'Romeo + Juliet'* (1996) but incorporating more fully *Othello's* musical militarism ('the shrill trump, / The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife' (3.3.356–7)), *Iago* represents this occasion of excess as the moment at which Iago loses Desdemona to Otello. Taking place in a glittery white palazzo, stocked with ornamental pools, the party, and its masked and costumed partygoers (devils, pirates and emperors), recall Venice's

cinematic association with carnival, with a playground of transformation and alternative identities. Yet, for Iago, there is no transformation from his lowly self, the soldierly formations of the dancers drawing attention to his experience of exclusion and loss. The military note is equally emphasized in the ribald remarks of the partygoers ('Bring us the spoils of the enemy') and in the spectacle of a cross-dressed, chain-mailed Roderigo standing in triumph over his male dancer conquest. Contextually, this defining point in Iago's development has its place in the individualistic energies of the era, in what Paul Ginsborg has characterized as contemporary Italy's 'interconnected' imperatives of 'hedonism' and 'consumption'.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, in passages where visuals overtake dialogue, the score approves the direction of travel away from Iago and towards the face-painted warrior Otello as he seduces Desdemona in the library. Hence, the song of inferiority and supplication, 'Beggin'', performed by Madcon, with its haunting complaint, 'I'm on my knees when I'm begging', gives way to the more confidently forthright 'Louxor J'adore', performed by Philippe Katerine, with its motifs of luxury and appeased desire. This is Otello's music, secured through his father's status, and all march to it. With the party, the process of Iago being pushed out, and the filling in of his backstory, are complete. Iago returns home to the depressive notes of Patrick Walton's 'The Great Escape' ('Things are looking down ... eat up all the grey', the lyrics sound), and ascends the stairwell to his aunt's apartment, only to fall asleep, the muted colours of the scene gradually fading to black.

### PLAY

The shift away from backstory and towards the Shakespearian text is presented as an awakening, as up-tempo plaintive strings and aggressive trumpets indicate the arrival of the play proper. Shaken into consciousness by his aunt, Iago springs into

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<sup>19</sup> Ginsborg, *Italy*, p. 85.

life, suggesting a complement of motivation is now fully in place. Shortly afterwards, sotto voce, Iago announces the first strand of his plan to destroy Othello, his martial metaphors reinforcing the idea of a war between men: 'Othello . . . show me what you're worth on the battlefield.' Visual suggestions – dark bridges and neglected backstreets – are clarified in dialogue, as when Iago confides in Roderigo, 'I won't be honest anymore.' The implication is that Iago now realizes that acting with integrity allows for little movement within a nepotistic network (a change in tactics is demanded). The similarity to the play's opening, and the Shakespearian Iago's confession that 'I know my price . . . Whip me such honest knaves' (I.I.II, 49), advertises the engagement with text even as it registers the transition of the character into an alternative mode. In the light of the film's structuring of narrative and motive, we are sensitized with a particular urgency to the processes through which Iago is newly established as dissembler.

More specifically, and introducing into the film what is only a matter of report in the play, the elopement of Desdemona with Othello for a nocturnal assignation is visualized in a sequence that shows them escaping on a gondola together. The chaos of *Othello's* opening is duly caught in shots of choppy canal water and distorted shadows, the effect of which is to suggest disturbed psychic states and unsettled vision (buildings and objects merge eerily into their reflections). In addition, the green-filtered tinge that overlays the episode hints both at Othello's jealousy-to-be and, because we see through Iago's gaze, the latter's own professional and personal jealousy. The legitimacy of Iago's vengefulness is intimated in the camera's concentration on his pursed lips and downcast eyes. Later, Iago describes the white handkerchief as 'the green-eyed monster coming crawling to my aid', going on, 'Jealousy . . . Soon someone else will taste what I have been feeding on.' The consumptive metaphor implies not only how far Iago is himself consumed by jealousy, but also his desire for another to suffer with a similarly debilitating experience.

Martin Orkin and Alexa Alice Joubin note that, in *Othello*, 'modes of racial hatred' are conveyed in 'manifestly offensive utterances [that] . . . reiterate . . . traditional fears of miscegenation, allegations of sexual excess, perversion, bestiality and imaginings of "black barbarity"'.<sup>20</sup> Such associations are encapsulated in the 'sign' of the 'Sagittary' (I.I.I59–60), the fictive inn at which Othello and Desdemona meet – emblazoned, as it is, with the mark of the centaur, a mythological beast suggestive of the 'Barbary horse' (I.I.I13–14) and an intermingled racial and sexual history. By contrast, in *Iago*, while echoes of the Shakespearian 'sign' are hinted at in Roderigo's reference to the 'Calle Moro' ('Moor Street'), racist slurs do not otherwise intrude.<sup>21</sup> The adaptive procedure is to replace the play's racial subtexts with terms of sexual shame. 'How does it feel to be a cuckolded father?', Roderigo taunts from the street adjoining Brabantio's palazzo, adding, 'All Venice is laughing about it . . . [Desdemona's] making a spectacle of herself and your good name.' As the dialogue makes clear, the stress here is on social embarrassment. Typical, then, is the way in which Brabantio chides his daughter when she returns home: 'Think of the neighbours . . . the humiliation', he obsesses. As an integral part of its adaptive approach, *Iago* distances itself from the most objectionable elements of its source, playing up the contemporary and ensuring for Iago unambiguous audience engagement. We see the process at work again during the rousing of Brabantio when a silent Iago watches from the sidelines (he is differentiated here from the verbally abusive 'ensign' (I.I.32) of the play) while a cloaked, bewigged and sunglasses-wearing Roderigo does the necessary work. *Othello*, of course, envisions Roderigo as a duped innocent, but, in a further reorientation of identification, *Iago* represents him as co-conspiring with Iago because he believes in his fellow student's cause. The

<sup>20</sup> Martin Orkin with Alexa Alice Joubin, *Race* (London and New York, 2019), pp. 39, 41.

<sup>21</sup> See Susie Boulton and Christopher Catling, *Eyewitness Travel: Venice & the Veneto* (London and New York, 2016), p. 299.



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adjustment builds on the premises of the preface and makes clear that Iago's desire for revenge is supported, and is supportable.

If Iago is stripped of racism, he is simultaneously purged of misogyny. The play shows us Iago delighting in riling Cassio via a provocatively sexualized construction of Desdemona ('I'll warrant her full of game' (2.3.199)), but, in *Iago*, Desdemona is removed as the inflammatory reference-point. At a bar in a picturesque night-time square, sexual accusations pass instead between Cassio and Roderigo, the latter, theatrically exploiting his gay persona, having been primed to infuriate the former by challenging his masculinity. Once again, it is noticeable that Iago does not participate in the exchange of homophobic and ego-enraging insults ('a flute to play ... behind us' and 'Cassio-Dick here'). The resulting violence is ramped up by the stomping rhythms of the score ('Ces bottes sont fait pour marcher'), the theme of which is made manifest in the camera's focus on Iago stealing Cassio's compact disc (the only record of his work towards the Biennale event) and replacing it with a broken substitute. As a downward tilt reveals the shattered shards of the disc and a tangle of destructive feet, Cassio's fate, it seems, is sealed. 'You're out', explodes an irate Otello, who has witnessed the event and dispassionately rejects his assistant's excuses.

The compact disc is but one of the film's charged – and jealousy-producing – properties. In one of the few discussions of the film, Sujata Iyengar notes that *Iago* 'distributes the handkerchief's function among several items: a Polaroid snapshot of Desdemona and Cassio kissing, taken by Iago in a ... more innocent time ... a lace handkerchief ... stolen by Emilia and planted in Cassio's bed; and the compact disc'.<sup>22</sup> Circulating and splitting in this manner, *Iago* makes the gulling of Otello/Othello particularly persuasive, removing what is often a credibility sticking-point in production. As the film understands it, Otello is tricked at multiple levels, steered into insecurity by Desdemona's urgings ('Call Cassio'), her intemperance and the sight of her and Cassio together. Among the various properties utilized in his

intrigue, Cassio's card-index box of sexual conquests, into which Iago has planted the Polaroid snapshot, looms large. 'Accidentally' coming across the fatal image, but claiming that it amounts to 'nothing', Iago finds his rival more than susceptible to suggestion. 'Nothing? Why were you trying to hide it?' Otello questions. Here, the card-index box works as the filmic equivalent to the play's metaphor of the 'brain' that houses a 'monster' (3.3.118, 111), and the result is an exasperated and disempowered Otello ('What does it mean?' he demands).

Possibly Iyengar underestimates the extent to which the handkerchief in *Iago* remains significant. Notably, Desdemona, lent Othello's words from the play, speaks of 'a family heirloom ... made of silk': in this formulation, she is given the responsibility of explaining the handkerchief, and its history, to the filmic audience. Unlike her more careless dramatic counterpart, *Iago's* Desdemona is represented as aware of the meanings of the 'present' she has been gifted and conscious of what might be involved in its loss. We, too, are made conscious of the handkerchief's symbolic power and thus of the devastating potential of its going astray. In fact, when we arrive at the anticipated seduction/subordination of Otello by Iago (the structurally linked scenes of 3.3 and 4.1), it is no surprise to see how the world-renowned architect's son is already in his fellow student's thrall. In that it has been well prepared for, the shift in the power balance is psychologically persuasive. Immediately after the gulling of Cassio, Iago is applauded by Roderigo as a 'genio' ('genius'), an appellation that testifies to his growing hold over the action. Revealingly, it is shortly before this accolade that Iago breaks the third wall and stares insolently into camera. Surrogating for the play's soliloquies, the wordless close-up both meta-cinematically announces Iago's mastery and complements the film's meta-theatrical language. Looking through stairwells at the effect of his stratagems, for instance, Iago observes, 'I'm drafting Otello's part as well',

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<sup>22</sup> Iyengar, 'Beds, handkerchiefs, and moving objects', p. 31.

his disclosure confirming his combined designer and director role.

Indeed, in the representation of Iago's intrigue, the film is able to rehearse the key set-pieces of the play at breakneck speed, including the attempted rehabilitation of Cassio ('He's already caused enough trouble', a piqued Otello notes) and Otello's quizzing Desdemona about her movements. These ensue in such rapid succession that Iago's grasp of the plot's entanglements seems unassailable. Interestingly, via these episodes, we are reminded of how structurally entrenched corruption and clientelism have become in the Venetian university. Thus, in relation to the Faculty entry, Iago assures Otello, 'I'll have a look at your part . . . then you finish it', an offer that allows him to mimic Brabanzio's earlier advice. 'Make a show of friendship', Iago counsels Otello about Cassio, adding, 'Leaders need to play at politics.' It is as if Iago, now in the position of patron, is turning systems of favouritism and obligation to his own advantage. Typically, the film's realization of the linked scenes of 3.3 and 4.1 is split between two Venetian locales. One moment Otello and Iago look down on Desdemona crossing a bridge from a lofty rooftop with a vista over towers and steeples. In terms of point of view, and aided by blocking that foregrounds his gesturing, it is Iago's narrative perspective that dominates. The next moment, Iago and Otello confer in the latter's apartment, complete with antique prints, leather sofas and fashion-conscious accessories. The sumptuous *Elle Decor Italia* magazine interiors notwithstanding, a sense of Otello's entrapment now obtains, as suggested in the ornate grilles at the windows and the room's rising verticals. Yet, despite the increase in his manipulative stature, Iago remains during these scenes the unhappy outsider. For example, pausing on a romantic bridge that gives onto a Renaissance church's busy façade, Iago informs Desdemona, 'Somebody like me has to work twice as hard to get results', his comment operating to prioritize the continuing realities of class and its excluding effects.

Of course, the issue of who is excluded, and why, is central to *Othello*. Both the dark palette of

the play phase of the film, and possibly Iago's apprehension that 'people' in Otello's iteration of the city are akin to 'slaves', invite us to think more about how *Iago* negotiates the play's racial subtexts. Ayanna Thompson reminds us that 'race-making' takes on different forms at 'different historical moments to create structural and material inequalities', and her comment is useful in sensitizing us to specific articulations of race in the Italy of the early twenty-first century.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps because Italy's modern imperial history was relatively brief (constituted by a period of colonial occupation in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya and Somalia that came to a close with the fall of Benito Mussolini's fascist rule), debate about categories of Italian citizenship and nationhood have raged in recent decades.<sup>24</sup> In particular, the arrival in Italy of Arab and North African migrants – or *extracomunitari* as they are nicknamed – has been accompanied, as Vanessa Maher explains, by an outburst of 'racist and xenophobic reactions' and anti-immigration legislation.<sup>25</sup> An immigration law was passed in 2002; in 2008, as part of his electoral campaign, Berlusconi addressed issues around Roma and Sinti immigration in terms of national security; and in 2009, the immigration law was reinstated and reinforced.<sup>26</sup> Even if it aims to dissociate itself from such developments, as refracted in its attempted cleansing of the play's racist utterances, *Iago* finds it impossible to escape the pressure of its racist contexts entirely. Crucially, both

<sup>23</sup> Ayanna Thompson, 'Did the concept of race exist for Shakespeare and his contemporaries? An introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 1–16, esp. p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Sante Matteo, 'African Italy, bridging continents and cultures', in *ItaliAfrica: Bridging Continents and Cultures*, ed. Sante Matteo (Stony Brook, 2001), pp. 1–22, esp. p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Vanessa Maher, 'Immigration and social identities', in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (Oxford, 1996), pp. 160–77, esp. p. 163.

<sup>26</sup> Montironi, 'Narrating and unravelling', p. 269; Nando Sigona, "'Gypsies out of Italy!': social exclusion and racial discrimination of Roma and Sinti in Italy', in *Italy Today: The Sick Man of Europe*, ed. Mammone and Veltri, pp. 143–57, esp. p. 150.

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contemporaneous projections, and colonial legacies, find release in Cassio, Othello's cousin, his character functioning as the site where some of the most unpalatable aspects of the 'Berlusconi era' meet. As well as to homophobia, Cassio gives vent to frustrations that cluster around the Othello figure. '[Othello has] put me in a real mess . . . My father made it quite clear: no Biennale, no masters in Tokyo . . . No Tokyo, no Japanese girls . . . Have you ever screwed a J\*p? [It's] all thanks to that s\*\*\*\*y n\*\*\*\*r!', he rages. Delivered in his swanky apartment, Cassio's comments continue the narrative of privilege, linking a conviction of entitlement to sexualized assumptions about Asian women and toxic masculinity. In addition, because Cassio is shot here against a backdrop of a poster of a cartoon character from the 1940s and 1950s, Gim Toro, he is tied to constructs of Italy's regressive attitudes. The poster shows a jungle scene in which the stripy topped hero battles tigers as a young Asian woman looks on admiringly.<sup>27</sup> Such is the effect of the juxtaposition that we are invited to see in Cassio a contemporary – and masculinized – expression of Italy's imperial past. Some of *Iago's* repurposing manoeuvres are underlined here – for *Iago* to be empathetic, Cassio must be objectionable. The worse the latter appears, the better the former is presented – *Iago* appearing through comparison as more future-oriented and progressively attuned.

Yet discourses of toxicity are not easily dislodged. At the close of the play phase of *Iago*, the bloodbath of *Othello* is avoided, and no deaths occur. Aggressivity and upset remain as norms as an enraged Othello assaults a furious Cassio and then tears upstairs to the design studio to strike Desdemona and berate her for her presumed infidelities: 'That bitch!', he exclaims. In this way, the key moments of the intrigue are recalled in violent combinations: *Iago's* question ('The truth – is that what you want?') brings us back to his earlier renunciation of 'honesty', while Cassio's realization ('Can't you see he's playing us off against each other?') is the tipping-point that precipitates the student's exposure. The spectacle of Othello wrecking the model, and dashing thereby the team's

Biennale chances, is a climactic moment. Idealism dissolves as does the construct of a world in which 'people' come together for a common purpose in a level environment. In this concluding scenario, the destructive direction of *Othello* is reconceived, the central players crushed but remaining, and the consequences of *Iago's* intrigue still to be fully played out.

### ADDITIONAL ACT

In contradistinction to the play, the film delivers on the expectation that *Iago* will explain himself, reversing centuries of performative silence and concatenating the representation of a type whose behaviours have been contextualized from the start. Against the backdrop of the smashed-up studio, *Iago* makes his frustrations crystal clear. Addressing Othello, he exclaims, 'You . . . you're not . . . capable of managing a project. Weren't you the first to jump at using my work so you didn't look bad? . . . A name's not enough to give you talent!' Turning then to Brabanzio, *Iago* excoriates the Rector for putting 'friends and . . . business' above all else and ignoring 'merit', continuing, 'Without people like you, the world would be a better place and people like me wouldn't have to fight to survive!' Via this rush of eloquence, the film's intersecting motifs of meritocracy, clientelism and corruption, and the compulsion to revenge, are sited at centre stage. In reply, Brabanzio, who has been called on to intervene in the affray, is incredulous, labelling the student a 'terrorist'. The term underlines his perception of an unacceptable 'politics' mobilized in the espousal of a cause, and situates *Iago* wholly outside the system he has consistently chafed against. Adding salt to the wound, Desdemona slaps *Iago* and storms out of the studio, the suggestion being that he is now multiply rejected.

However, by elaborating an additional act, *Iago* pushes through and eventually transforms the

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<sup>27</sup> The poster reproduces the cover of the 12-page issue 63 of *Gim Toro, La divoratrice d'uomini / The Man Eater* (1947).

implications of Desdemona's response. Important here is the provision of a Desdemona–Emilia exchange which complicates the male–on–male dynamic of the adaptation as a whole. True to her Shakespearian counterpart's function as a voice of reprimand and reason in 4.2 and 5.1, Emilia, once the disorder has dissipated, remonstrates with Desdemona in the campus square: 'You knew Iago was dying of love for you . . . you humiliated him . . . [and] didn't think twice about defending those old school-ties boys . . . Come down from your tower', she berates. Picking up on the earlier reference to Desdemona's fairy-tale inaccessibility, Emilia's gendered critique highlights the role of women in a network in which men predominate. Listening to Emilia's words, Desdemona is obliged to confront her own responsibilities. The Rector's daughter, it is implied, is complicit, and in such a way that the nepotism so vital to clientelism and corruption is sustained and enabled.

Reflecting on the end of *Othello* and stage properties, Robert C. Evans notes the 'bed that plays such a prominent role', in a reading that is expanded on by Lynda E. Boose when she singles out 'the imagined chamber . . . [the] forbidden space which [the play] has repeatedly eroticised'.<sup>28</sup> In each of its three phases – preface, play, additional act – *Iago* interpolates the wronged hero's bedroom. With preface and play, the bedroom features to signify Iago's removal from a world of privilege. As the high point of the additional act, however, the movement is reversed: Desdemona leaves her world to enter Iago's (see Figure 2). She seeks him out in his own *sestiere*, her displacement rounding off the film's domestic trajectory. The emphasis on Iago's bedroom as the destination-point of the film recalls the ways in which, in *Othello*, 'prurient descriptions' and 'viewer gratification' consort in a form of early modern 'pornography'.<sup>29</sup> 'You're arrogant and conceited . . . Destroying everything around you . . . You've destroyed my father . . . destroyed my relationship . . . destroyed Otello', Desdemona upbraids. Yet her condemnation quickly gives way to invitation, as, sitting on the bed and revealing herself to be only partially dressed, she states: 'I

want to be with an important man . . . Take me, you've won, promise me you'll always love me like this.'

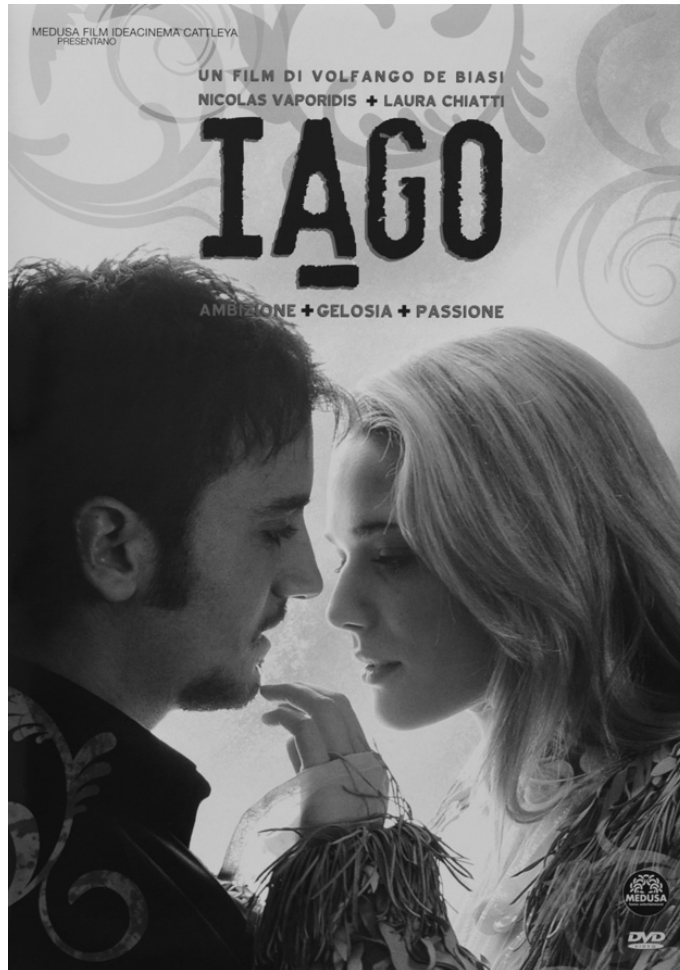
There is much that is unpalatable here, including the representation of Desdemona's submissiveness and the sense of a defeat that amounts to sexual victory. But winning Desdemona means that Iago emerges triumphant, and this is underlined in an interpolated sequence showing Brabantio much reduced – bumbling and clumsy, he hesitates on his stairwell: 'My God, where am I going?' In losing his way – and his place as a controlling *paterfamilias* – Brabantio simultaneously rescinds institutional authority. By contrast, the bedroom motif of a cross-class couple underscores the future promise of the meritocratic city; the values to which Iago still subscribes, it is implied, will democratize the older order. As a reflection of the alteration in mood, the episode is overlaid with an upbeat pop soundtrack: the lyrics to 'Love is noise' by The Verve accentuate being 'saved' by 'righteous anger', living in the 'city', and working as 'one'. As the consummation becomes the culmination of *Iago's* story, the embracing pair is discreetly – theatrically – veiled. The film's ultimate shot – a bright red superimposed curtain being draped over the spectacle of the lovers – self-consciously evokes Lodovico's reference in *Othello* to the 'loading of this bed' (5.2.373) and his demand that the curtains be drawn. At this climactic moment, however, the curtains fall not on tragedy but on a scene of sexual intimacy and romantic commitment which signals a new beginning.

The hopefulness of this ending continues in a series of tongue-in-cheek inserts interspersed over the credits. The final one of these – in a playful nod – returns us to Shakespeare's titular hero. Otello is discovered on a bench looking despairing – for the

<sup>28</sup> Robert C. Evans, 'Introduction', in *Othello: A Critical Reader*, ed. Robert C. Evans (London and New York, 2015), pp. 1–14, esp. p. 9; Lynda E. Boose, "'Let it be hid': the pornographic aesthetic of Shakespeare's *Othello*", in *Othello: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Lena Cowen Orlin (Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 22–48, esp. p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Boose, "'Let it be hid'", pp. 26, 27, 35.

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2 The DVD cover of *Iago* (dir. Volfgango di Biasi, 2009) shows Iago (Nicolas Vaporidis) and Desdemona (Laura Chiatti) locked in an exploratory embrace. Medusa Film / author collection.

first time he is imagined as the archetypally rendered Othello defined by ‘fragmented ... orientations’ who is ‘culturally adrift, alienated and alone’.<sup>30</sup> The inset reminds us that clientelism, and its corruptive consequences, harm even those who benefit materially from it. ‘I’m a loser, a failure, a fake’, Othello moans, but his depressive introspection is immediately challenged by a passing Roderigo.<sup>31</sup> ‘What do you mean?’, Roderigo asks him, ‘You’re a bright guy, full of talent ... You’re the best ... Would

<sup>30</sup> Carol Mejia LaPerle, ‘Race in Shakespeare’s tragedies’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 77–92, esp. p. 89; Ian Smith, ‘We are Othello: speaking of race in early modern studies’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67 (2016), 104–24; p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> His despondency, we realize, is the result of the dressing down he has received earlier at Brabantio’s hands, in a scene that approximates even as it brings forward Othello’s being called to account for his actions before the Venetian senators.

you like to come to my place for dinner?’ Catherine O’Rawe argues that some recent Italian films examining migration represent ‘bonds of affection . . . between male migrants and Italians’ and ‘continue the homosocial thematic’ for which ‘Italian cinema’ is known.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, as Otello eagerly responds to Roderigo’s invitation, ideas of connectivity – if not hospitality and welcome – are foregrounded. The positives of such a discovery of the character never prioritized in *Iago* are reflected in the iconic image of Venice which is now introduced. As the camera switches to reveal Otello and Roderigo seated on the bench together, we move into a wide shot of the magnificent façade of the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute, with its breath-taking vista across the Grand Canal towards St Mark’s Square. It is the picture-postcard view of Venice for which we have waited, affirming that, for the reformed Otello, Venice,

available and authenticated, now properly opens its doors. Incorporating Shakespeare’s tragic hero within a millennial generation defined by same-sex attraction, the film concludes with a fantasy of the possibilities of meritocracy in a contemporary, cosmopolitan and youthful Venice, one that is alive to the prospect of fresh opportunities presenting themselves and further stories evolving.

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<sup>32</sup> Catherine O’Rawe, ‘Contemporary cinema’, in *Directory of World Cinema: Italy*, ed. Louis Bayman (Bristol, 2011), pp. 255–6, esp. p. 256. In this connection, *Iago* bears brief comparison with *Sud side stori* (‘South Side Story’), the Italian adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* which, Maurizio Calbi argues, ‘brings an allegorical dimension to bear on the issues of migration and hospitality it continually foregrounds’ (Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares*, p. 82).