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## **A More Than Double Life**

Unlike faithful Shakespearean adaptations, radical Shakespearean adaptations are afterlives that reimagine a play to either illuminate, complicate, reinforce, or recontextualize its themes for a new audience, time, and place. *A Double Life*, a 1947 postwar film noir directed by George Cukor, radically adapts the Shakespearean play *Othello* to explore how placing the play inside a cinematic medium creates a duality of consciousnesses that serves to de-familiarize identity. Unlike Shakespeare's *Othello*, in which Iago acts as the singular disrupting force that's responsible for Othello's muddled identity, Cukor's *A Double Life* replaces Iago with the institutional force of theater; through overlaying theatrical elements on top of cinematic ones, Cukor constructs multiple, paradoxical planes of reality that ultimately de-center Tony's identity. Tony, the main character, is an accomplished and well-acclaimed actor whose next feat is to play the prestigious role of Othello. However, Tony has a tendency to become immersed in the roles he takes on, and as a result, he is unable to successfully separate his identity as an actor from his identity as Othello. The opening night after-party<sup>1</sup> is the catalyzing moment in which Tony's embodiment of Othello infiltrates his view of reality, turning his ex-wife and costar, Brita, into a real-life Desdemona and Bill, a press agent, into Cassio. While Tony acquires Othello's irrational jealousy in this scene, he doesn't do so at the hands of Iago, but rather the impetus behind Tony's blurred identity is actually the encroachment of theater on the film.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Double Life*, George Cukor, 1927, 43:32-46:59.

At the opening night after-party, the film captures the disorienting conflation of Tony's identity as a performer and as Othello by voicing a collection of theatrical lines from Shakespeare's *Othello* as a sequence of internal diegetic sounds, a cinematic element in which sounds or thoughts inside a person's mind are made audible only for that person and the viewer of the film. When Bill takes Brita to talk to the "Hollywood contingent," Tony's mind becomes compromised by Othello's descent into paranoia and madness. His internal diegetic sounds begin with Othello's line, "Farewell the tranquil mind; Farewell, content" (3.3.350), which in the context of this scene, refers to Tony slipping into the identity of monstrous Othello. The subsequent quotes from *Othello* that Tony pulls from all center around topics of jealousy, sexual desire, and infidelity, prompting Tony, whose identity is now merged with Othello's, to wonder whether Brita, Tony's Desdemona, is seeing Bill, Tony's Cassio. Tony's full transportation away from reality and into the world of the play is further conveyed through the overstimulating sound of theatrical instrumentation, which entirely block out the sounds of the after-party. The use of internal diegetic sounds creates a rapport between the viewer and Tony in which the viewer is fully immersed in Tony's mind as Tony becomes theatrically immersed in the mind of Othello.

The cinematic technique of internal diegetic sounds combined with the theatrical lines being voiced detach Tony from the real world and merge his identity with that of Othello; however, when observed through the lens of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the lines that inhabit Tony's mind actually repel his transformation into Othello and instead endorse his identity as an actor. Although the first quoted line from Shakespeare's text is one of Othello's lines, the following lines are not solely Othello's, but rather toggle almost exclusively between Othello and Iago. The lines do not comprise a single scene in the play, as "Out strumpet" (5.2.79), "Lechery, by this hand" (2.1.249) and "Let us hide our loves" (3.3.421) all take place in completely different acts

and scenes. Moreover, Othello is neither the recipient of nor present for some of Iago's quoted lines, such as "Lechery, by this hand!...They met so near with their lips that their breaths embraced together" (2.1.249-252). Instead of fully existing within the realm of Othello's experiences, Tony's mind is pulling from knowledge that he possesses only through being an actor. As an actor, Tony is aware of what happens in every moment of the play, which necessitates a dissociation from his performance track as Othello. Thus, in the after-party scene, the internal diegetic sounds paradoxically support and clash with the theatrical text, creating an unresolved tension between Tony succumbing to Othello's identity and Tony retaining his identity as a performer.

In addition to Tony's duality of consciousness, the active presence of the theatrical audience in the film further complicates Tony's identity by suggesting that there's a third version of Tony that is both stripped of his identity as Othello and, more importantly, as an actor. The blurry line between the parts of Tony that are performed and the parts that are real is effectively set up through Tony's interactions with the public. Most of the general public's relationship to Tony is solely as a member of his audience, which results in them misguidedly projecting their opinions of Tony's performances of fictional roles onto his true persona. However, others have had contact with Tony outside of the theater and are able to make judgments based on his true character rather than his performed one. At the very beginning of the film, he talks to a group of men, and instead of the shot following Tony when he leaves, it stays on the men as one says, "He's a good actor," and another says "yeah, but he's no good."<sup>2</sup> Both men had the same conversation with Tony but came away with two opposing takeaways because the former's praise is not directed at Tony himself, but at 'Tony the actor,' while the latter spoke of 'Tony the

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<sup>2</sup> *A Double Life*, George Cukor, 1927, 3:33-3:45.

person.’ This discrepancy in opinion is repeated directly afterwards when Tony talks to two women. After Tony leaves, the shot stays on the women as the first exclaims “What a darling!” and the second mutters “Stinker.”<sup>3</sup> Once again, they both experienced the same encounter with Tony, but one’s opinion was governed by his theatrical reputation while the other’s opinion was due to the experience of Tony ghosting her in real life. Thus, Cukor uses the public’s antithetical perspective of Tony to create the sensation of a play within a film; while, as an actor, Tony is able to observe the script of *Othello* as a whole, in the metaphorical script of his real life, only the viewer of the film is let in as an omniscient spectator to observe how the theatrical audience contributes to Tony’s de-centered identity.

Furthermore, since the viewer is able to be both an insider into Tony’s divided mind and an insider into the public’s divided views of Tony, *A Double Life* establishes the viewer of the film as the only party fully privy to the intricacies of Tony’s three-part identity; however, the viewer only becomes capable of witnessing moments of Tony’s defamiliarization that neither Tony nor the public is conscious of by transforming into a theatrical audience. For instance, in the after-party scene, as Tony hears a voice in his mind repeatedly saying, “Let us hide our loves,” he begins to walk closer to Brita and Bill and stops by a reflective surface. The shot uses eyeline matching, a cinematic technique that shows a side view of Tony’s face to imply that he is looking into the off-screen space at Brita and Bill. However, the reflective surface reflects half of his face outwards towards the camera. The frontal reflection of Tony is not visible from Tony’s eyeline, but rather is directed right at the viewer of the film, making the reflection feel like a separate entity than Tony. This moment, in which Tony’s reflection is shared with the viewer and internal diegetic sounds are voicing lines from *Othello*, disorients the viewer and transforms

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<sup>3</sup> *A Double Life*, George Cukor, 1927, 3:45-4:18.

the sensation of a play within a film into that of a play within a play, making the viewer wonder if the reflection is Othello and if they are the spectators in the theater.

Ultimately, the after-party scene encapsulates the slippery multiplicity of consciousness in *A Double Life* by illustrating how the institutional force of theater not only de-centers Tony's identity, but also blurs the line between theater and film. Tony's identity is de-familiarized and the film takes on a double life of its own due to Cukor's ability to mix cinematic sounds, shots, and viewers with theatrical scripts, roles, and audiences. However, while Shakespeare's play certainly complicates the film, in certain ways, this film actually simplifies the play. Since Tony's transformation into Othello causes him to exhibit irrational and heinous behavior, the film uses Othello as a foil for Tony. The film only portrays Othello's identity post Iago's conniving intervention, depriving the character of his initial honor and virtue in favor of simplifying him to signify monstrosity. Thus, the integration of the theatrical realm into the film turns the adapted version of Othello, Tony, into an extremely complex character, while stripping the original Shakespearean Othello of his compellingly complex identity.