

# "Is this the Noble Moor?" Re-viewing *Othello* on Screen through "Indian" (and Indian) Eyes

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## Abstract

Relatively recent derivatives of *Othello* filmed in Britain and the USA, *Othello* (dir. Geoffrey Sax, 2001), and *O* (dir. Tim Blake Nelson, 2001) have re-fashioned the play into contemporary scenarios stressing economic, racial, and gender — political — issues that characterize the multicultural social fabrics in hegemonic countries. Needless to say, such strategies render Lodovico's question near the end of act 4, scene 1 — "Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all-in-all sufficient?" (*Othello*, 4.1.261-62) — more pressing by at once specifying and amplifying the societal and ethnic implications of the terms "noble" and "Moor" in the twenty-first century. This essay examines two other recent films based on Shakespeare's *Othello* that employ adaptative approaches to foreground similar issues: the nearly unnoticed Mexican production *Huapango* (dir. Iván Lipkies, 2003), and to a lesser degree, the critically successful Indian film *Omkaara* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2006). In contrast with the films mentioned above, these pictures were made in developing nations with distinct social and cultural profiles, where the aforementioned economic, racial and gender matters take, or demand to take, forms of their own for significant local appropriation. Among the topics to be explored and illustrated in this essay are the contrasting, yet (socio)logically comparable scenarios wherein the screenwriters re-set Shakespeare's tragedy, which again feature issues that are as much shared as culture-specific — in particular, the issue of violence, both criminal and domestic.

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*In memoriam Francisco José, my true brother.*

The love that cinema showed Shakespeare throughout the 1990s, kicked-started by the release of Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* in 1989, seemingly decreased in the 2000s. Remarkably, however, between 2001 and 2006 five modern-dress and language adaptations of one play were produced: the British *Othello*, by Geoffrey Sax (2001); the American *O*, by Tim Blake Nelson (2001); the Mexican *Huapango*, by Iván Lipkies (2003), which is the "Indian" film in my title; Alexander Abela's *Souli* (2004), a film from Madagascar; and the authentically Indian *Omkaara*, by Vishal Bhardwaj (2006). It is also noteworthy that three out of the five were made outside the

English-speaking world. The two English-speaking productions have drawn limited interest from Shakespeareans.<sup>1</sup> Of the "foreign language" versions, *Omkara* promptly, and deservedly, captured the attention of scholars, while Abela's picture has been scarcely seen and dealt with,<sup>2</sup> and the Mexican production went largely unnoticed until around 2009.<sup>3</sup> Today, *Huapango* is somewhat known in Shakespeare studies,<sup>4</sup> but remains practically unacknowledged in Mexico, as it was from its release.

This multi-cultural interest in re-fashioning the tragedy of the "noble Moor" not only testifies to the fact that "even if *Othello* was not originally a play about race, its history has made it one" (Okri, in Loomba 1998, 150), but also invites an exploration of the ways in which "Shakespeare . . . becomes a means for 'other' people to negotiate their own past and contemporary contexts" (151). Discussing a Khathakali production of *Othello*, for instance, Ania Loomba found that although it "skirt[ed] all questions and histories of difference in its powerful appropriation of this story of difference, it [was also] anxious to craft a vocabulary that would allow it to experiment with plays like *Othello* without violating its own specific codes of signification" (153). Both *Omkara* and *Huapango* similarly appropriate and intelligently "skirt" the "story of difference" inherent in Shakespeare's play, and re-view it on screen "within indigenous performative and intellectual histories" (Loomba 1998, 159) that place these films beyond easy assumptions regarding heritage, mimicry, or the all-important notion of otherness. At present, the "histories" of both Indian and Mexican culture intersect with a dreadful sign of the times: violence, in all its forms; and this demands — among so many other things — intellectual and performative engagement, which these contemporary takes on Shakespeare's tragedy of difference provide in keeping with their own ways and limits, while still displaying a considerable number of points in common.

### 1. " . . . parted with foul and violent tempest"

For present purposes, the violence in *Huapango* and *Omkara* may be catalogued according to three simple categories described by Slavoj Žižek: "subjective" violence, notorious and easy to decry; "symbolic" violence, "embodied in language and its forms" (2008, 8); and "systemic" violence, which comprises "the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of dominance and exploitation" (9). Due to its regulatory nature, systemic violence is often tacitly accepted in the continuum of social exchange; hence, strong displays of sympathy in the face of the blatantly negative consequences of the socio-economic relations at the core of such a continuum are easily made, most often legitimately, while the majority of empowered agents within society remain indifferent to the noxious foundations of such relations. Current social contracts seem, at best,

capable of offering only mitigating responses to the inevitable results of their own imperatives of exploitation, abuse and repression (see Žižek 2008, 9-15, 36).

Gender, racial, and domestic violence are often mixed in social exchange and often linked to *Othello*, where "the racial difference between husband and wife exacerbates the inappropriateness [of his violent acts], since the legitimacy of domestic violence was determined as much or more by the status relation between the two parties as by the severity of the violence" (Dolan 1999, 216). Dolan's comment implicitly imports Žižek's categories, identifying "subjective" and "symbolic" violence by virtue of their evident negativity, but also the "systemic" kind, by assimilating the codes of "honor" that would render violence "legitimate" to the dynamics of domestic coexistence. In *Othello*, however, although the obvious violence invites immediate reprehension, the covert type is not quite clearly indicted but lingers, awaiting the sort of academic exegesis that succeeds reading rather than accompanies the tragic experience obtained in performance. *Othello* harbors a paradox of civilization: "The more admirably idealist we grow, the more we stoke up within us a lethal culture of self-hatred" (Eagleton 2003, 208). *Omkara* and *Huapango* deal with such violence more simply, but very efficiently, by stressing the systemic kind embedded in male "honor" without dwelling on the "nobility" of their "moors." In *Huapango*, however, this kind of violence is even more pointedly shown to reside in male complicity rather than in rivalry, since its Iago-equivalent does not seek revenge against Othello through Desdemona, but the other way around: *she* is his express object of hatred. In *Othello* — and in *Omkara* — the violence of "honor" stems from a multilayered narrative of competition between males and fatally affects the disempowered members of the domestic sphere. But in *Huapango* that violence is jointly exercised without the mediation of true rivalry between the two males upon the female "other" who, although overdetermined by a culture of abnegation and abjection, is ultimately fictionalized by both men as impervious and ungrateful to male devotion — as a "fair and cruel" threat to their supremacy. For reasons of space, and of my evident limitations to engage one over the other, I will explore the Mexican film far more than the Indian.

## 2. ". . . the devil, from his very arm, puffed his own brother"

*Omkara* is set in the rural, conflicted northern region of Uttar Pradesh, boldly exposing its dark political underside through its dialect and profanities. As in his brilliant film *Maqbool* (2003), which is based on *Macbeth*, Vishal Bhardwaj makes Shakespeare's narrative bear on contemporary India through the language of "Bollywood," as illustrated by his ability to integrate the mandatory "item songs" seamlessly into the fabric of his adaptation. Throughout, Bhardwaj finds effective

correlatives for nearly every ingredient in Shakespeare's plot, making key factors intelligently significant to the complex and highly contrasting context of modern India.

Bhardwaj makes Omkara (Ajay Devgan) the chief henchman of a local *Bhaisahib* (Naseeruddin Shah), a mighty politician who dictates Omkara's every move through a ubiquitous cellphone. Early on, Omkara is identified as a "half-caste," and his racial status contributes to the spite that Raghunath Mishra, the *Bhaisahib*'s lawyer (Kamal Tiwari), feels for him almost as much as the fact that Omkara has abducted his daughter Dolly (Kareena Kapoor), with her consent, on the very day of her arranged marriage with Rajju (Deepak Dobriyal). The *Bhaisahib* is temporarily in prison awaiting trial, and while Dolly's father weathers the legal case against his boss, Omkara and his right-hand man Tyagi (Saif Ali Khan) kill the main witness for the prosecution, solving the case in practical, if illegal, fashion. Omkara is a blue-collar agent in a chain of criminal violence that sustains his *Bhaisahib*'s power, while Dolly's father is the white-collar one. Their differences, therefore, are neither absolute nor easily put down to racial terms or vertically defined hierarchies of power.<sup>5</sup> If anything, the corrupt politician relies more on his strong arm from the shadows (figure 1)<sup>6</sup> than on his lawyer, his mask of legitimacy, who beweeeps the elopement of his daughter with the "half-caste dog," eliciting more tolerance than confidence from his boss (figure 2). In the Mexican film, images of weeping men will also prove decisive.

Further on, despite the evident concern that Omkara is defined as a "half-caste" may cause among Indian viewers, his racial status does not seem to bear overly on what brings about the film's fatal ending. In *Omkara* the myth of Iago's "motivelessness malignity" is also openly dismantled. Tyagi is not a "motiveless" devil, and he does not hold a racial grudge against Omkara. Instead, he is identified as Omkara's "brother," his faithful fellow gunman, a top member of Omkara's clan. Bhardwaj motivates Tyagi's revenge by means of Omkara's public choice (figure 4a) of Kesu (Vivek Oberoi) — a younger, more educated man who will obtain the decisive support of the students in the coming elections — as his "right hand guy" or *Bahubali* (figure 4b), overlooking Tyagi's fifteen years of loyalty (figure 4c). Omkara is aware of the risks underlying his decision, which are suggested by the distant but powerful mob that has witnessed and now celebrates the choice (figure 4d). The *Bhaisahib* is likewise aware of such risks, and turns to ask Omkara: "What about Tyagi?" "He's a brother," says Omkara; "he will understand." But Tyagi weighs his disappointment in his brother more than the political advantages afforded by Kesu. The destructive process, then, is set between "brothers" — violent men used to having one another's back — one of whom will no longer trust the other, because the other has chosen to trust outside his circle. A tragedy of difference is thus triggered, but it runs opposite to Shakespeare's. *Omkara* explores

systemic violence more overtly than its source does: it proceeds inside-out instead of outside-in, foregrounding disaffiliation from the original outlawed group over flawed assimilation to the legally hegemonic social body. Thereafter, Tyagi's revenge takes place in expected fashion, with many interesting twists and turns. Despite its debatable moniker, "Bollywood" has a strong tradition of filmmaking, with a syntax and identity of its own. *Omkara* features "a vocabulary that [allows] it to [effectively] experiment with plays like *Othello* without violating its own specific codes of signification" (Loomba 1998, 153).

### 3. "This only is the witchcraft I have used."

What about *Huapango*? To begin with, *huapango* is a basic form of popular music from the Mexican region of the *Huastecas*.<sup>7</sup> Iván Lipkies, the co-writer and director, develops his film around a wide selection from the infinite variety of *huapangos* existing in my country, each one keyed to a particular episode in the film. Employed for love, comedic, parodic, or patriotic songs, *huapango* is also frequently used for the exchange of improvised wordplay by rival performers, in verses often crass, highly misogynist, and homophobic, though clever and funny, as befits a macho culture and tradition. Against the grain of the "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema (mid-1930s to late 1960s),<sup>8</sup> Lipkies includes one such exchange without disguising or tempering its crudeness in a sequence that, significantly, no one finds aggressive or injurious, even the women, the immediate objects of its symbolic violence. The very opposite — a similar but sanitized match of wits — is one staple filmic scene in the memory of Mexicans since the mid-twentieth century: the exchange between Pedro "the bad" Infante and Jorge "the good" Negrete in *Dos tipos de cuidado* (roughly translated as "Two men deserving/inviting respect/caution," dir. Ismael Rodríguez, 1953; figure 5). Lipkies's allusion to Mexico's quintessential "buddy picture" and his extensive citations of the tradition in which it is securely nested are indispensable for understanding *Huapango*. The vast majority of Mexican audiences would surely not miss them, as much of the "sentimental education" in our culture derives from that filmic past.

Thus, the writing, artistic design, direction, and overall production values of *Huapango* align overtly with one predominant genre from the "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema: melodrama, in the specific vein of *drama ranchero* — i.e., a melodrama set in a rural environment — as opposed to another favorite, *comedia ranchera*, which though set in a similar milieu, in most aspects moves logically in the opposite direction, as befits its dramaturgic definition. This is a vital distinction, for *Huapango* complies with features common to both *ranchero* genres, melodrama and comedy, but operates as the former in pointed contrast with the latter. Significantly, the paradigmatic *Dos tipos de cuidado* is a *comedia ranchera*, resembling a myriad other pictures that sing the

praises of a happy-go-macho, Mexican version of Arcadia — a pastoral fiction free of class, racial, and gender issues and other political inconveniences, where buddy-loyalty trumps unfortunate misunderstandings and enables final shots such as figure 5: in the happy end, gallant Jack "good" and gallant Jack "(un)bad" do get their Jills and nothing ever goes ill — or so the self-delusion goes.<sup>9</sup>

*Huapango* thus conveys the *ranchero* atmosphere to perfection, purposefully evoking the site of so many narratives of love, Mexican-style, from supposedly by-gone days. But unlike a *comedia ranchera* and more in keeping with the tradition of *drama ranchero*, *Huapango* not only offers a negligible degree of topical socio-political commentary, but more importantly, forgoes the lightness of pace and tone whereby the *comedias* achieve their mandatory felicitous closure. Instead of an issue-free flow of bucolic playfulness, Lipkies's film turns loose, full-throttle, the energies of Mexican melodrama, the "tropical" passions at odds with one another that fuel the classics of the genre, such as *El peñón de las ánimas* (dir. Miguel Zacarías, 1942) or *Bodas trágicas* (dir. Gilberto Martínez Solares, 1946, a direct antecedent of *Huapango*). For starters, as already suggested, in *Huapango* Iago (therein named Santiago)<sup>10</sup> does not seek revenge against Othello (Otilio) through Desdemona (Julia), but the other way around.

Julia (Lisset) is Santiago's (Manuel Landeta) long-time partner in a company of dancers from Tamaulipas,<sup>11</sup> who are seeking to win a national competition for the third time in a row. But she is also his express object of hatred. Like Tyagi's malignity in *Omkara*, Santiago's is anything but motiveless. His evil passion arises when, just as he is about to propose to Julia during a break from rehearsals, the young woman unexpectedly — and worse, publicly, humiliatingly — announces to the troupe that she is marrying Otilio (Alejandro Tommasi), a cattle-rancher at least twenty years her senior and the wealthiest man in the region. Henceforth the wrath of Santiago, a middle-class general goods retailer, is aimed sharply at the modest Julia, who in his fantasy — treacherously, surely out of greed — has spurned his "true" love. Soon after we learn of Santiago's motives, Julia marries Otilio in great public display of joy and riches; during the splendid wedding feast, Santiago dupes Otilio into unsuccessfully riding a bull, which leaves him severely crippled, confined in a huge cast to a wheel-chair. For this and other reasons, instead of enjoying her newly wedded status, Julia rejoins the troupe.

With the preparations for the competition as background, the plot of *Huapango* then follows *Othello* quite closely, as Santiago effects the prescribed torture of the title character's mind, the manipulation of Cassio — here called Felipe (Alfredo Castillo) — and the production of "ocular proof" (*Othello*, 3.3.365) right on cue. All this leads to Julia's death at the hands of her obsessed husband, who just as predictably takes his own life, while the troupe, even without its best dancers,

wins the contest in a nearby arena. This closeness to Shakespeare's plot, however, is throughout supplemented with fine twists. In *Huapango* Santiago, who never gets to enter the scene of Otilio's crime and suicide, is neither charged with a crime nor arrested, as the original Iago is; instead, right before the film's closing shot, his distraught sister Margarita (Goretti), who is partly an equivalent of Emilia, regrets her prior indulgence of Santiago's actions and promises to "let everyone know" he is guilty, thereupon moving him to a tearful litany of denial. On the other hand, in the closing minutes of *Omkara*, Tyagi is strangely let go unharmed from the scene of the crime by Omkara himself, only to have his throat boldly, and quite justly, cut by his wife Indu (Kokona Sen Sharma, the Emilia of this film), who is next shown about to commit suicide. It is in these subtle, sure-handed, and locally meaningful variations on the basic plot of Shakespeare's play that both *Omkara* and *Huapango* frequently excel.

Nevertheless, the fundamental twist in *Huapango* remains the shift in target of Santiago's wrongdoing from the "moor" to his wife. Santiago's passion is presented not merely as that of a spurned lover but, even worse, as that of a would-be lover, for Julia is never shown to even be aware of his feelings. This is also the stuff that many Mexican songs of unrequited, Petrarchan love are made of; the film contains several examples of them, set to *huapango* music. Generally speaking, in the lyrics of those songs the female who fails to acquiesce to the devoted male's desires is severely indicted for her "cruelty and thanklessness."<sup>12</sup> Santiago, characterized as a firm believer in these clichés, thus becomes the resentful and quasi-demonic villain of our melodramatic tradition. Among other things, once he feels hurt by the "ingrate" Julia, he performs acts of black magic, speaks ungodly words in church, plots and effects Otilio's fall from grace with an evil look, surprises him out of his sleep as Otilio recovers from the accident by suddenly emerging from the shadows beside his bed, and openly harasses Julia with total impunity. Since this "heartless" woman proves unworthy of his "pure adoration," Santiago's evil bent grows beyond doubt and redemption, as must be in melodrama, Mexican style.

But if *huapango* music often serves as a vehicle for tropically-inflicted, quasi-Petrarchan songs, above all it is *always* music for dancing, and the film uses the dance contest as a book-ending device: a rehearsal is the core of the opening sequence, while the closing sequence, the tragic ending, happens as the actual competition takes place. After the credits roll, a powerful, rhythmical tapping of hard heels is heard over a black screen until the camera shows the typical footwear for *huapango*, and then the dancers, practicing energetically in rehearsal clothes. A choreographer named Angélica (María Elena Velasco, also the film's co-writer) interrupts to berate her pupils' sloppiness and then asks her minion Santiago to "show them how." There is no music, only tapping

and stepping to rhythm, and no wardrobe: this is the raw reality within the fiction of the film. At the same time, the sequence suggests that the whole affair is pre-scripted, although undergoing refinement and awaiting actualization. The symbolic content of the dance will *become*. First, it will become as the manifestation of a cultural paradigm — for *huapango*, like much Mexican popular music, flaunts its deeply macho discourse, as the film frequently demonstrates. It is not surprising that, after years of dancing with Julia, Santiago is positive that she must love him. Consistent with this fantasy, he has even fetishized Julia and keeps a private altar with pictures of their joint victories (figure 6). Tellingly, the altar hosts additional icons; some appear to be legitimately Catholic while others seem characteristic of regional witchcraft.

But the dance that is taking shape will also become the *reality* underlying the fiction of both *Othello* and *Huapango*: a reality that unmasks the fictional niceties of the dance and discloses its true contents. The death of Julia at Otilio's hands and his ensuing suicide will not be rehearsed fictions, but the real things; not "tragic destiny" but the outcome of systemic violence, the reality that intersects the artistic product — as Julia dies, the dance concludes at the site of the competition, earning the company their third victory in a row. Lipkies creates a splendid contrast between "art" and "life," a comment on the gap between the idealized work of art and its real colors and consequences. The seductive energy of *huapango* comes alive in the here and now of a dance — a fiction sublimating a violence historically idealized as "civilizing" foundation — while its reality occurs unbridled in the form of a criminal action that, even when fantasized as "justice," precludes civilized construction. Thus, *Huapango* "un-moors" Shakespeare's play to focus on what may be termed the lady's tragedy, not the lord's. Gender, more than class or race, is at the heart of this narrative of senseless violence.

#### 4. "Like the base Indian..."

In the main parts of *Huapango*, class markers suggest contrast rather than create strong tension; they are far more topical than truly thematic within the film. And the same applies, in general, to ethnic markers. The signature villain of Mexican filmic melodrama transferred almost untouched to television and the ultra-popular genre of soap-opera, from which Lipkies's *Huapango* fully recuperates it to close a cycle of national self-deception: the fair-skinned and clear-eyed actors playing the leads (Otilio, Santiago, and Julia) are far more characteristic of prejudiced, audience-pleasing casting than truly illustrative of our very complex ethnic palette. Because of its near lack of emphasis on ethnic distinctions, save for a few topical hints, to foreign eyes *Huapango* may seem strangely uninterested in addressing racial issues. But in a sphere as biased and hypocritical about race, class, and gender as Mexican society is, double standards are *the* standard, the safeguard of

systemic violence. If overtly the film is loaded with displays that are critical of misogyny, it is also inevitably underscored by similarly critiqued indices of classism and racism.

At first sight, it may look as though Lipkies and Velasco have reduced Shakespeare's masterpiece to melodrama, Mexican soap-opera style. Clearly, this was one of the assumptions that made the film a failure with Mexican audiences and critics: a deeply rooted prejudice among "discriminating" people against whatever smells, even faintly, of commercial entertainment. On the other hand, many rejected the very idea that a pointedly Mexican film could be made from a Shakespeare play, simply because "it isn't Shakespeare" — an attitude, like the former, reeking of pseudo-intellectual prejudice. But a third brand of prejudice may have played an even larger role in this film's being a total box-office flop: over the last forty years *Huapango*'s co-writer, María Elena Velasco, has been best known as a comedienne whose feature character is an "Indian" — more specifically, a parodic characterization of one among the many deprived native Mexican women who move to cities in search of relief, usually by pandering or begging at street corners. Velasco has played this character under the name *La India María* (figure 7) for most of her career — which explains the lame joke in my title — and is readily identifiable to all Mexican eyes as a staple of popular entertainment, especially on variety or sit-com TV shows, and low-budget, low-brow movies.

However much criticism may be justifiably raised against Velasco for stereotyping the women she purports to vindicate, for decades, peaking in the 1970s and 1980s, *La India María* has been a popular icon of social "truths" (all truths being relative) in Mexico and the rest of Spanish-speaking Latin-America, as well as to Latinos in the USA — offering a prime example of the gap between a performative-filmic culture deeply rooted in the "unrefined" popular mind and one held by audiences that are more "demanding." A glance over the Web suffices to confirm Velasco's impact: there are hundreds of clips of her work on YouTube, some indicating half-a-million hits, surrounded by numerous positive comments and lively discussions; many users proudly hail her as their true representative.<sup>13</sup>

But Velasco's talents and accomplishments are not confined to her parodic persona. As a token of her range, she has also directed many of her own movies and is actually the most prolific Mexican woman film-maker in history, regardless of judgments about quality (cf. Rashkin 2001, 76). Still, to many prejudiced minds, her personage and pseudonym are inseparable from vulgarity, bad taste, garishly folkloric nonsense, and despicable illiteracy — in a Mexican word, she is an *India* ("Indian" or "native"), a term we never use to mean a native from India but rather as a racial slur relating to the original inhabitants of Mexico, suggestive of all the derogations

above. How could she ever write anything worthwhile? Thus, the nearly absolute disregard for *Huapango* in its own country was, to a certain extent, "racially" motivated, in spite of the fact that the quality of *Huapango* begins, if anywhere, with Velasco's deep knowledge and sharply contemporary interpretation of Shakespeare's play, her keen understanding of Mexican cinema and its social implications, and her consequential high-quality screenwriting.

Furthermore, *Huapango* cannot be listed among the growing trend of more glamorous Mexican films recently embraced by the "inclusive" segments of Hollywood and sidekicks, even when some of those films arguably exploit pseudo-intellectual urban folklore of the same or worse kind as the films of *La India María*.<sup>14</sup> And *Huapango* does not fit that mold because it looks too much like an old-fashioned *ranchera* movie — i.e., like a film set in a rural landscape from the mid-twentieth century, the kind that Mexicans between thirty-five and fifty-five, like Lipkies and myself, grew up watching. That resemblance is definitely true, but also deliberate.

### 5. "O curse of marriage . . ."

However simple Santiago's motivation is, his story of revenge against a *different* "moor," a *female* (a gendered) "other," is complex, far from soap-opera, finely crafted from Shakespeare's play, and in many ways works against Shakespeare's play. Therein lies the highest merit of this script, the "Indian" script: it consistently subverts familiar signs of Shakespeare's plot, turning the tables on easy assumptions and expectations. For starters, in *Huapango* "Desdemona" is not demoted from her original niche but re-placed in a "higher" one. Marrying Otilio is desirable, not socially demeaning; it is an exceptional event, as in *Othello*, but unlike in that play, it is exceptional because it fulfills the ambitions of any woman in this environment, as shown by the varied reactions when Julia announces her wedding. Otilio is rich and powerful, respected and admired, a perfect provider. He is the best "catch" in town, as he complies with and reinforces all expectations of modern matrimony, especially its retributive/commercial aspects. Julia's parents, furthermore, attend the wedding gladly, even joyously; and before the wedding, Otilio shows Julia a large house that he has bought for her as a wedding gift. In *Huapango*, there is no Brabantio; his complaints and expressions of shame and racial hatred, and his curse against his daughter simply cannot exist. More significantly, though maybe less conspicuously, Velasco and Lipkies cancel one of *Othello*'s most interesting marks of otherness and outsidership: his lack of an appropriate place in which to reside with Desdemona.

Among many other variations that Velasco and Lipkies play on Shakespeare's plot, one stands out: the marriage of Julia and Otilio is never consummated, an ironic comment on the conventional value of virginity: she actually dies a virgin, a sacred figure in Mexican religious and

social iconography, here immolated by her own worshipper. In *Omkara* something similarly ironic may be said to happen, though conversely and more in keeping with Shakespeare's layout. Dolly and Omkara elope on the day she was to marry Rajju, to whom she was duly betrothed, and they live together as a couple before their wedding takes place near the end of the film. But Omkara kills Dolly that night, when their henceforth unlawful marital situation should have become legitimate. In *Huapango*, by contrast, the wedding takes place at church. Afterwards, outside it, the groom displays his horsemanship — in a shot (figure 8a) recalling images that made Mexican cinema the most popular in the Spanish-speaking world of the mid-twentieth century (figure 8b) — and then performs a symbolic abduction of the bride (figure 8c), a reverse allusion to their elopement in *Othello*. In *Huapango*, Otilio and Julia marry happily and legally before the whole town and then *play* an action that, originally illegal and "subjectively" violent, is symbolically received with admiration; an act that exemplifies systemic violence and was glorified as a "gallant" gesture in Mexican cinema for ages.

At the wedding feast, under pressure from Santiago and friends to display his manliness, Otilio consents to ride a bull that leaves him severely injured and confined to his bed and bedroom for several weeks with a monstrous, sexually satirical cast on his leg (figure 9) — hence, the lack of consummation of his marriage. The "general" is thus reduced to a helpless spectator and will decline into the dark that Santiago gradually brings into his house until he becomes a pathetic figure, permanently drunk, lost in the shadows of his room (figure 10). Otilio's condition enables a witting or unwitting, but relentless critique of the male paradigms of the "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema, when the Mexican industry ruled supreme in Spanish-speaking cinema with dozens of films about the rugged and manly life in the country and urban films depicting the survival of the strong in mean streets, with the "better man" always coming out on top and the woman often following behind her man's horse (figure 11).<sup>15</sup>

Allusions to that era abound in *Huapango*. Comparing figures 12a and 12b suggests that the film's cinematography evokes the highly recognized and influential work of Gabriel Figueroa, who teamed up with Emilio Fernández for some of the most successful Mexican pictures of the 1940s, such as *Flor Silvestre* (1943) and *Enamorada* (1946, whence figure 11 derives), as well as with Luis Buñuel in *Los Olvidados* (1950). Likewise, the male characters of *Huapango* strongly resemble in their general looks the stars of that time, such as Pedro Armendáriz, a staple in Fernández's films, or the legendary singers and actors Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante (see figure 5). Moreover, *Huapango* uses music and lyrics of particular significance in connection to some scenes, again in keeping with the codes and vocabulary of classic Mexican cinema, yet subverting its paradigms. By

means of quiet self-irony, *Huapango* questions the values underscoring the films of the Mexican "Golden Age" and undermines structures that have survived for generations — above all, those highlighting, praising, and ultimately promoting hard-core machismo. The strongest instance is the brief, splendidly ironic, almost documentary sequence near the end of the film, where we see boys and girls between six and twelve happily rehearsing to the tune of a particularly misogynist *huapango*.

Lipkies also carefully develops a subtle complicity between Santiago and Otilio, the poster-boys of their kinds: the rich and respected man here, there the master dancer with killer looks and charm. Unsurprisingly, their complicity starts at the wedding, when they share a drink and Santiago makes a lewd remark about tonight being Otilio's "big night" that, although overheard and disliked by Julia (figure 13a), is positively received by Otilio with a look of knowing approval (figure 13b). The same happens twice more: first, as Otilio is surprised out of his sleep by the presence of Santiago in the dark — he has come to share yet another bottle with Otilio, who seems satisfied with that explanation; and then when these two big boys "playfully" appreciate a "beautiful" handgun. This "game" quickly leads to Santiago's slander of Julia, however, and ends with Santiago's face and voice visually replacing the threatening weapon — previously framed to look as though it were aiming at Otilio's head in anticipation of his actual suicide (figures 14a and 14b) — next to the ear of his otherwise great buddy (figure 15). The film often pairs Otilio with Santiago by framing them together or by visually correlating their mutual regard or approval, thus bringing to mind some classic couples of "buddies" in the history of Mexican cinema. Thereby, however, *Huapango* also reminds us of many instances of male collusion that have presided over gender relations in Mexican society, profusely represented in our cinema, virtually always in the "positive light" shed by handsome and charming leading men. In *Huapango*, however, Santiago's charm is confined to his looks and foiled by his hypocrisy, while Otilio is every way the public man of integrity who nonetheless is violent and crude in private. In *Huapango*, a joint act of confirmation of homosocial premises and energies protects male predominance through secrecy and the confusion it provokes in the "other."

This intimate complicity spreads until a whole "social network," so to speak, becomes complicit in the tragedy, if unwittingly so. Velasco has fragmented Shakespeare's Emilia and Roderigo into several parts, all of which at one point or other accommodate Santiago's wishes or play into his hand. Julia wants to stay home and take care of Otilio, but Angélica and the mayor of the town (Alfredo Sevilla) persuade him to "give her permission" to come back to rehearsals, and so she does. During rehearsals, Santiago grows aggressive and crass (figure 16a), and Julia thinks about quitting the troupe after strongly rejecting his cynical advances — a major transgression of her

conventional role. However, although everyone notices, no one complains or intervenes: Santiago is the pet of the choreographer, and of some of the dancers, too. Julia remains Santiago's partner because she owes it not only to her crew but also to Otilio, who has an invested political interest in sponsoring the festival, as his secretary Felipe (the Cassio of this film) argues; eventually, she is persuaded to stay in the dancing company (figure 16b). Later, with help from some prostitute friends, Santiago manages to get Felipe drunk and then angrily dismissed by his crippled boss. At yet another moment, Margarita, Santiago's sister — and captive housemaid — agrees to plant a blouse that Santiago has stolen from Julia at a place where it may eventually reach Otilio and provide "ocular proof." Finally, there is Nacho (Rafael Romero), the openly homosexual dresser of the company, who talks Julia out of leaving Otilio for good after he strikes her: "He loves you so," the gay man says, "and it hasn't been easy for him, being in these circumstances. Then again, he still hasn't made good on his duties, has he? What do you say? Let's give him a second chance, shall we?" (*Huapango* 2003); in the context of the film, Nacho's use of the first person plural is pointedly meaningful. Nacho then proceeds to re-do Julia's hair for the decisive dance (figure 17). As Louis Montrose observes, "Experiences of historical and cultural exclusion of otherness may . . . provoke a compensatory embrace of the dominant culture, a desire for acceptance and assimilation" (1989, 25). This is true of Nacho, of course, but more importantly of Julia: every time she seems close to rejecting the cumulative demands of self-abnegation made of her, she invariably succumbs to social pressure and to her own gender-history of self-effacement.

Santiago's incremental victories happen within a simple but crucial framework for the crisis of modern marriage: "When the wife demands the entitlements associated with being an individual, at least since the early modern period, or when these entitlements are too egregiously negated her, the fragile equilibrium of marriage falls apart" (Dolan 2008, 7). This condition, which Dolan (following Regan 1999) attributes to the fact that women are "often assigned the job of preserving marriage at their own expense" (7), connects with Santiago's success inasmuch as it is continually helped by the fact that Julia never quite crosses the line between merely sensing and actually growing aware of her "entitlements as an individual." She dies not only due to the tacit conspiracy between Santiago and Otilio, but also for giving in to others' "noble purposes" that infallibly cancel her potential for self-determination. In turn, Santiago and Otilio commingle easily in terms of "entitlements" as individuals precisely because they can, eyes closed, identify the *same* "corrupting" energy in the female "other": both suppose that Julia has betrayed them; by both she is constructed as an "ingrate," as a fundamental threat to the homonormative foundations of society.

## 6. "But this denoted a foregone conclusion."

In the end, the macho men of *Huapango* are employed to decry the paradigms of classic Mexican cinema. Upon receiving "ocular proof" and before killing Julia, Otilio fully partakes of Santiago's delusions: earlier, the dancer was shown to imagine Otilio as his rival during a rehearsal; now, as he cries in his dark corner while holding the torn blouse, Otilio pictures Julia with Felipe (figures 18a and 18b). This is not unusual for movies based on *Othello*. In *O*, for instance, Odin (Mekhi Phifer) cannot help but see Cassio (Andrew Keegan,) instead of himself, in the mirror when he is in bed with Desi (Julia Stiles), which leads him to grow sexually violent towards her (figures 19a and 19b). What is remarkable about the Mexican production is its unflinching characterization of Otilio as not only metaphorically impotent but also pathetic, undeserving of sympathy — nothing like a "noble Moor." The infection of his mind is complete, his connection — or "marriage of true minds"? — with Santiago is consummated, and his ensuing attitudes and actions are nothing short of grotesque and disgusting. Crippled and impotent, isolated, powerless, and increasingly degraded in his drunkenness, Otilio falls into a metaphorically beastly condition derived more from complicity with his "buddy" than from the evil insidiousness of a disgruntled and subtle subordinate. *Huapango* submits its "moor" to a relentless critique of his willing gullibility hardly applied to any other member of the distinguished line of filmic *Othellos*. Unlike that of Shakespeare's Othello and Iago, the relationship between Otilio and Santiago functions almost horizontally, rather like the one between Omkara and Tyagi — which renders both films more sharply critical of systemic male violence by characterizing their "moors" as oriented more to domestic aggression than as partially pushed and cornered unto it both by the doings of a petty but lethal schemer and the weight of social and ethnic outsidership. Where Othello is, at least partly, a victim, the Indian and the "Indian" "moors" are more straightforward perpetrators, even if, to a degree, blindfolded ones. On the other hand, Santiago's only reaction after the tragedy is to sob and repeatedly murmur, in infantile monotone, "I didn't kill them" (*Huapango* 2003; figure 20). These grown men cry far worse than the lawyer in *Omkara*.

The remarkable sequence of Julia's death closes this process: the fiction of love perfected into dance during rehearsals is now performed to perfection — as in the movies! — on the scaffold at the arena where the contest is held. The final dance is made to alternate with the death of Julia, the reality of this movie's fiction, in a splendid job of editing that takes us from one location to the other in a fascinating crescendo. Julia is now gone from the contest, following Nacho's advice, to "rescue" her marriage and does not dance the final, decisive number with Santiago. Thus, while an alternative pair of dancers, a fiction of love and lovers, performs the closing *huapango* at the arena, in the dark of the house things happen contrariwise to Shakespeare's plot: here, in the reality of this film's love and lovers, it is Julia/Desdemona who awakens Otilio/Othello with a tearful plea. But

he, after praising her beauty and calling her endearing names, strangles her in a grotesque dance interspersed with increasingly intense takes of the *huapango* of seduction that is being performed on the scaffold. For every shot of Otilio's brutally real violence, there is a cut to the increasingly tense and emotional tapping and stepping of the dance, of the fiction of love and seduction, until the accompanying music stops and the soundtrack consists only of the hard beats of the dancers' hard heels, evoking the aural input of the opening sequence but now with artistic perfection, as Julia ceases to breathe. Near the end of her agony, Julia's hand runs down Otilio's face, from his forehead to his lips, just as it did twice before, though then with love and joy (figures 21a, 21b, and 21c), thus completing the narrative and symbols of Lipkies' film: Julia's three caresses — as Otilio's fiancée when he presents her with the house; as his wife, at the wedding reception; and now, as the object of his violence — are perfectly differentiated, yet at once united in tragic commentary regarding their potential meaning vis-à-vis the reality that now cancels all positive options that are so beautifully and powerfully, though also ambiguously, offered in the fiction of the dance.

Although to some *Huapango* might seem to fall in the frequent trap of "erasing the racial politics of *Othello*" and thus "flatten it into a disturbingly misogynist text" (Loomba 1998, 162), the film effectively appropriates Shakespeare's play as "a means for 'other' people to negotiate their own past and contemporary contexts." Its outcome does not derive from a reductive interplay of "good" and "bad" characters engaged in a war of raw, exacerbated emotions, but from a long, historically blind endorsement of the worst possible paradigms of gender relations in its given society. The film historicizes, constantly undermines, and dissects those models down to their deplorable foundations.

In this respect, *Omkaara* and *Huapango* articulate well with one another. For example, an early shot from *Huapango* (figure 22a), in which Julia — standing behind the bars of a window in the luxurious house that Otilio had given her — cries out that she is marrying "the best man in the world" bears an interesting likeness to one of Dolly arriving at the prison where the *Bhaisahib* is locked up in order to confront her father about her elopment (figure 22b). Likewise, Julia is later shown surrounded by male bodies during a rehearsal (figure 23a), while Dolly is framed to similar effect inside the prison (figure 23b).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the looks of complicity exchanged by Santiago and Otilio here and there have something in common with the way in which Bhardwaj frames Dolly's father's fatal advice to Omkaara regarding his daughter's potential to "betray more men": as the half-caste approaches his now authorized wife-to-be on the other side of the street, the father's car cuts into the frame, and the men are shown almost to share a common space (figure 24), while the sad figure of the renegade daughter is merely a distant reflection (figures 25a and 25b). The

lawyer, the man who "legitimizes" the brutal and ruthless world in which Omkara and Tyagi find and lose whatever used to make them "brothers," looks at his disowned child with an expression that seems to prove that his hatred for the half-caste daughter-abductor can still make room for a bit of male-bonding. At the same time, however, the look in the eyes of Omkara is impossible to discern — a masterful decision by Bhardwaj, who will nonetheless clarify our doubts about it with the final shot in his film: Dolly, still wearing her bridal clothes, dead on her bed, swings above the underlying body of Omkara (figures 26a and 26b), as if they were the testimony of a strange cult in which goddess and worshipper can never find grounds to come together in terms other than those of a received fantasy. The final shot of *Huapango* speaks the same language as the camera, full-tilt overhead, pans over the dead couple, showing Julia, still in her gorgeous and dignified *huasteco* costume, and Otilio in his robe, pajamas, and cast, the hole in his head making a sharp contrast with the flowers on her head, looking somewhat like a dog at her feet — crippled, useless, a sad tribute at the shrine that he created for his virginal wife after killing her (figure 27).

Like *Othello*, both *Huapango* and *Omkara* make systemic violence prevail over subjects that only too late awaken to their tragic outcome. Unlike in Shakespeare, the *Othello* characters of these films are less tragic figures than criminals — blinded, yet still criminal. Both films "un-moor" the "Moor of Venice" by adapting the title part as a more sharply defined "other" than the still hard-to-pin-down dramatis persona that Shakespeare wrote. But this sharpens the spectator's attention, not only to the tragic conditions but also to the effects and implications of his crime, an artistic goal less grandiose but made more urgent by the current social and domestic violence in both the Indian and the Mexican contexts. In the criminal world of *Omkara*, male standards apply in full strength of violence as the driving force of social relations, while in *Huapango* they seem even more harmful, since their violence is concealed in the fabric of social convention. The final words of Tyagi to Omkara suggest what brings about these similar processes of destruction and self-destruction — "My truth and my lies have all got blurred together" (*Omkara* 12006) — just like the fantasies of Santiago, which from the fiction of a rehearsal, on screen become the reality of a fiction of love that has been real too long.

### Notes

1. Among them, see Barbara Hodgdon (2003) on *O* and Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe (2007) on Sax's *Othello*.
2. See, however, Burnett 2008.

3. This paper was originally presented in the panel "Un-mooring the Moor Beyond Cultural Borders," which I organized for the 2009 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Washington, D.C.
4. Douglas Lanier has included the film at least since 2009 in his excellent lectures on the history of *Othello* on screen, and Burnett has presented papers including the film at least three times in international events since 2010; both must be preparing or publishing their studies as I revise this.
5. See Nishi Pulugurtha 2009, especially 107.
6. Figure 1 is interestingly similar to figure 3 (Santiago and Rodrigo from *Huapango*): both show silhouettes of male complicity in the dark.
7. Comprising the south of the state of Tamaulipas, and the northeast sections of San Luis Potosí, Querétaro and Hidalgo, as well as the north of Veracruz, in eastern Mexico.
8. For general information on this subject, see García Riera (1992).
9. For a thorough discussion of the genre, see Ayala Blanco (1993), especially 54-55.
10. To a Spanish speaker, the name Sant-Iago (Saint Jacques or Saint James) constitutes a self-evident irony. Additionally ironic — and mere coincidence in Shakespeare, though arguably an in-joke of the film — is the well-known Spanish tradition that identifies Saint James as a "Moor-killer" (Santiago *Matamoros*).
11. Tamaulipas is the easternmost state on the Mexico-U.S. border, and perhaps the most severely hit by the current wave of criminal violence; curiously, one of its main towns is called Matamoros. *Huapango*, released in 2003, makes no reference whatsoever to such violence. On the other hand, the film was not shot in Tamaulipas but on locations in or much closer to Mexico City.
12. Significantly, a song Otilio sings to Julia at their wedding feast is not a *huapango* but a waltz and bespeaks a love "triumphant."
13. For an entrance point into this phenomenon, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d26MMTRALkc>.
14. Case in point: *Amores perros*, dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu (2000). For information on recent Mexican filmmaking, see González Vargas, Carro, and García Tsao (2006).
15. A telling piece of trivia: the motto of the State of Jalisco's Association of *Charros* (roughly, "cowboys," now a category indicating men very adept at horse-riding and at a variety of Mexican rodeo activities) remains "*Patria, Mujer y Caballo*" ("Fatherland, Woman, and Horse"), a variation on the old motto of the National Federation of Charros, where the last two terms were actually inverted.

16. Curiously, throughout *Huapango* Otilio calls Julia *muñequita* — literally, "dolly."

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