//AUTHOR AND AUTHORITY.
JOHN GIELGUD'S PROSPERO IN PETER GREENAWAY'S
PROSPERO'S BOOKS//

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RESUMEN: En 1991, el director Peter Greenaway hizo, a partir de *La tempestad* de William Shakespeare, una película experimental y visualmente audaz, titulada *Prospero's Books* (*Los libros de Próspero*), con John Gielgud en el papel de Próspero. Filmada en 35mm y editada haciendo uso extenso del procesamiento digital de las imágenes, *Prospero's Books* es una fantasmagoría tecnológicamente avanzada que revela los múltiples aspectos del *meta-masque* de Shakespeare. En la película, Gielgud da voz a todos los personajes, convirtiendo *La tempestad* en un acto creativo que nace y tiene lugar en la mente de Próspero. *Prospero's Books* se interroga, entonces, sobre qué significa ser autor, actor y director, haciendo de la obra de Shakespeare una reflexión metalingüística.

ABSTRACT: In 1991, film director Peter Greenaway turned William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* into an experimental and visually daring film called *Prospero's Books*, starring John Gielgud as Prospero. Shot on 35mm film and edited making extensive use of electronic image processing, *Prospero's Books* is a technologically advanced phantasmagoria that reveals the multiple aspects of Shakespeare's meta-masque. In the film, Gielgud voices all the characters, thus turning *The Tempest* into a creative act that unravels inside Prospero's own mind. This way, *Prospero's Books* questions the roles of the author, the actor and the director, taking *The Tempest* as a pre-text to a meta-linguistic meditation.

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In 1991, at the age of 87, Sir John Gielgud, the doyen of British actors, was finally given the long-sought chance to star as Prospero in a film adaptation of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Back in 1965, Sir Gielgud had worked with Orson Welles on *Chimes at Midnight*, a film centred on the Shakespearian character of Falstaff where Gielgud played Henry IV. He then made arrangements for a screen adaptation of *The Tempest* to be directed by Welles in which he himself would star as Prospero. Since *Chimes at Midnight* had not been received well, plans for a further Welles-and-Gielgud film taken from Shakespeare were quickly dismissed. (Mangan, 2004: 331, 456)

During the following twenty years or so, Gielgud approached (or was approached by) directors such as Alain Resnais, Giorgio Strehler and Derek Jarman who were interested in casting him as Prospero in their own renditions of Shakespeare's play – but Gielgud turned down all the projects, waiting for the right time to come. "Quite soon", Gielgud recalls, "Peter Greenaway rang me with the offer not only of Prospero, but of reading the whole of the rest of the text on the soundtrack." (Morley, 2002: 454) Gielgud and Greenaway had already joined forces by working on a groundbreaking hi-tech TV film based on Dante's *Inferno* (*A TV Dante*, co-directed with Tom Phillips, 1989), and Greenaway's film version of *The Tempest* was designed to be twice as daring and experimental. In Gielgud's own words: "[Greenaway] has some most exciting ideas about a possible fantasy version of The Tempest which, of course, I've always longed to do – especially if it is not a theatre version of the whole play which would, I think, be rather a bore" (Mangan, 2004: 470).

Needless to say, Gielgud took the part, and the project for an ultimate *Tempest* for the big screen, now entitled *Prospero's Books*, went into production.

Shot in Amsterdam, *Prospero's Books* was edited in Japan, where Greenaway applied electronic image processing to traditional 35mm film, through the use of the then-pioneering Hi-Vision and Graphic Paintbox technologies. This allowed Greenaway to compose multiple layers of images within the same frame, thus creating the peculiar visuals *Prospero's Books* is renowned for.

The visual references to paintings, illustrations, sculptures and monuments that literally crowd every single frame in the film are too numerous to mention. Prospero's library is designed after Michelangelo's Laurentian Library, while the film's imagery draws upon Bellini and Mantegna, Veronese and Bronzino, Rubens and Rembrandt not forgetting Roman architecture, Piranesi's drawings of imaginary buildings and Blake's engravings – all lit by Sacha Vierny's dense cinematography that mimics the hues and shades of Renaissance chiaroscuro (Bogani, 2004: 111-118).

The imagery of the film is rich and refined, and seems to be the product of Prospero's own imagination, nurtured (albeit at times anachronistically) by the content of his beloved books. Back in Milan, Prospero's passion for knowledge made him a wise man but a weak politician, allowing for his dukedom to be usurped by his brother Antonio. The island of his exile is now the place where Prospero can rule *thanks to* (and not *in spite of*) his competence in magic, mathematics and literature – a personal and political revenge on those who do not value the liberal arts. (De Gaetano, 2008: 133-134) Prospero constructs his world – both his inner self and the realm surrounding him – via a continuous re-indexing, re-ordering and restructuring of his own cultural references, in a fashion which is not dissimilar to the one employed by Greenaway in the construction of his film: "With the conceit of the books, Greenaway institutes Prospero as a postmodern figure, someone who creates – as Greenaway himself does – by picking and choosing from a world of works by other artists in other centuries." (Lawrence, 1997: 161)

Though Shakespeare never states the exact number of books Prospero was allowed to take on the island (I.2, 161-168), Greenaway provides his Prospero with twenty-four

volumes "that", Prospero says, "I prize above my dukedom." (I.2, 167-168) Predictably, Greenaway focuses on books, libraries and writing – his abiding major obsessions: the title of the film directly refers to Prospero's volumes, while the aforementioned lines are spoken and written by Prospero at the very beginning of the film. The books that structure Prospero's library and therefore inform his knowledge are not ordinary printed volumes: each one of them illustrates, represents and/or is made of the object of its investigation. (Greenaway, 1991: 17-25)

The Book of Water, for instance, is a waterproof book about seas, rivers, rainstorms etcetera; *The Book of Colours* does not contain any writing but is instead a proper colour palette on paper; *The Book of the Earth* comes with pages smeared with soil, sand and minerals; *The Book of Languages* contains smaller books that speak in tongues once opened; *The Autobiographies of Parsiphae and Semiramis* is an erotic book fetishistically scattered with locks of hair, blood and semen; *The Book of Games* contains game boards to play with; *A Book of Mirrors* is made of looking glasses, which reflect the reader as he was, will or could be – and also meta-represent the act of turning *The Tempest* (or any other Shakespeare play) into a film, the many permutations of each possible film rendition. (De Gaetano, 2008: 190) *A Book of Mirrors* might as well be called *The Book of Adaptations*.

Among Prospero's books is also *A Book of Thirty-Five Plays*, a folio edition of Shakespeare's plays. All of the Bard's plays are there, except one: *The Tempest*. Towards the end of the film, as a counterpart to the loss of his magical powers, Prospero drowns all but two his books. (V.1, 56-57) Among the surviving ones, the narrator says:

> is a thick printed volume of plays dated 1623. There are thirty-five plays in the book, and room for one more. Nineteen pages have been left for its inclusion, right at the front of the book, just after the preface. And this is the thirty-sixth play, *The Tempest*. Whilst all the other volumes have been drowned and destroyed, we still do have these last two books, safely fished from the sea.

Once printed and thus part of the *Book of Thirty-Five* [now, thirty-six] *Plays, The Tempest* will be "at the front of the book", thus becoming not the last but the first play in Shakespeare's canon – a play that contains all the other plays, a play in which all the themes, motifs, characters and stock-characters, plots and sub-plots, moods and genres can be found. Thus Prospero becomes a sort of parallel Shakespeare who summarizes the whole oeuvre of the Bard and who is, at the same time, both the writer and the subject of his own play,[1] emphasising the much-discussed issue of the autobiographical elements in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Gielgud's Prospero is dressed like, and carries the props of, the Venetian Doge Leonardo Loredan as painted by Giovanni Bellini in 1501 circa. "Doge" and "Duke" (the position Prospero held in Milan before being usurped by his own brother Antonio) are terms sharing the same origin coming from the Latin word "Dux", meaning "chief, leader, commander". Prospero, then, might be the former Duke of Milan, but still is the actual and current Doge of the island – of *his* island. He is a proper commander, exerting his power over natural elements, subjects and slaves.[2] In the play, in fact, Ariel addresses Prospero as a "great master [and] grave sir" (I.2, 189) to whom "I have done [...] worthy service." (I.2, 248) Prospero keeps Caliban "in service" (I.2, 286) and considers him "my slave." (I.2, 310)

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[1] "Prospero is himself a text in a world of texts." (Lawrence, 1997: 163) "Heavily influenced by books, Prospero is as much written as writer." (Keesey, 2006: 101)

[2] "If thou neglect'st or dost unwillingly / What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps.» (I.2, 370-371) «[E]xactly do / All points of my command.» (I.2, 503-504). «[G]raves at my command / Have waked their sleepers.» (V.1, 48-49)

Caliban describes himself as a "subject" and Prospero as "a tyrant, a sorcerer, that […] has cheated me of the island." (III.2, 40-42)[3]

Prospero is therefore a ruler in a world that is informed by his own book-fed creative fantasies. Far from being a deity, though, Prospero is:

> conditioned by the values of his time, by Renaissance beliefs both enlightened and benighted, by books as questionable as the Shakespeare plays that have influenced us. As Greenaway has said, "*Prospero's Books* is a film about "You are what you read." (Keesey, 2006: 100)

The creatures that people the island; the naked men and women wearing ruffs (a very Elizabethan touch, of course); the island's palaces, their rooms and their décor; its topography, indefinable and undefined – all of them have popped out (sometimes literally) of Prospero's books. As we will see, the shipwrecked Antonio and his crew might be projections of Prospero's imagination. Even the ontological status of Prospero's daughter Miranda, who was supposedly exiled with her father, and that of Ariel and Caliban, whom we are told Prospero found on the island on his arrival, are meant to be questioned: are they real or not? Is anything real in *Prospero's Books* or is it just a Borgesian phantasmagoria taking place inside Prospero's mind? (Bencivenni–Samueli, 1996: 51-55, 85)

The whole idea behind *Prospero's Books* seems to be based on a simple yet mind-blowing pun: Prospero, a sorcerer and an alchemist, does not make use of his magic to conjure up *a* tempest, he conjures up *The Tempest*. He does not simply evoke and create a storm, but the whole Shakespearian play associated to it. So, the identity Prospero = Shakespeare, which many critics support, is here performed once and for all. The idea, once again simple but revealing, of having John Gielgud voice (and not voice-over, as it is usually said) every character in the film, puts Prospero in a position of power, establishing him as the bearer of a distinctive form of creative and political totalitarianism. In *Prospero's Books*, then, author and authority come to coincide.

As Amy Lawrence writes, in reference to Greenaway's film: "Because Prospero is a sorcerer-magician, when he calls out the words that start the tempest and wreck a ship, the events happen." (Lawrence, 1997: 141) As we have seen, Lawrence's sentence could be read as follows: "Because Prospero is a sorcerer-magician, when he calls out the words that start *The Tempest*, the events happen, that is, the play/film begins". In the play, the tempest conjured up by Prospero is clearly defined as a performance: "Hast thou, spirit, / Perform'd to point the tempest that I bade thee?" (I.2, 193-194) In Shakespeare and in Greenaway, Prospero is "the poet who is creating the play." (Zimbardo, 1968: 234) Since Prospero is not a man of science but a man of "prescience" (I.2, 180), he has knowledge of things *before* they happen. Therefore, for him "all time is present and all the action fore-known to and controlled by him." (Zimbardo, 1968: 234) This is particularly clear in the film: at the sight of Prospero's hand writing the word "Boatswain!" which opens the play (I.1, 1), we come to understand that, thanks to his prescience, Prospero foresees the development of his plot to bring Antonio and his crew to the island – that is, Prospero foreknows *The Tempest*.

Both in the play and in the film, all the events and all the characters' actions are already perfectly outlined, present and formed in Prospero's mind. Events just need to be evoked and provoked, while characters await cues and direction. At this point, whether the resulting episodes are real or imaginary is of no importance. *Prospero's Books* therefore represents a multiple meta-linguistic projection: Gielgud's on-screen Prospero clearly

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[3] That Prospero, who is in essence a colonizer, acts as a tyrant especially towards Caliban goes beyond doubt. In the end, though, Prospero shows "difficulty in mastering the slavish aspect of human nature, and […] abandons the task." (McGrail, 2002: 132)

mirrors Shakespeare but is also an introjection of Greenaway, the off-screen director who finds an alter-ego in Prospero, to whom he delegates the direction of *The Tempest*.

Like many other Shakespeare works, *The Tempest* sees the staging of a play within the play. In act IV, Prospero summons Ariel and other spirits to perform a masque celebrating Ferdinand's and Miranda's engagement. He refers to it as "my present fancies" (IV.1, 122): such masque is therefore a projection of Prospero's thoughts, which Ariel and his fellow spirits help materialize. Being, in fact, a concrete manifestation of Prospero's thought flow, the masque stops abruptly when his attention is drawn to Caliban's ongoing attempt on his life. (Mullini, 1989: 27)

Following Enid Welsford, who defined *The Tempest* as a "masque transmuted" (Mullini, 1989: 36), Roberta Mullini argues that the whole play might be read as a "masque exploded" (*ibid.*), a macro-masque in which the typical "ascending movement from chaos and absurdity to peace and order" (Frye, 1976: 169), as Northrop Frye would put it, is reproduced and re-iterated on a larger scale.

Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*, then, takes Welsford's and Mullini's theories to extremes: if Shakespeare's Prospero is a skilled stager of masques and if *The Tempest* can be regarded as a macro-masque, then Prospero, the masque-stager, is responsible for the staging of the whole play. Greenaway's film definitely turns *The Tempest* into a meta-masque: a film (which is, in turn, a masque) about the staging of a masque (*The Tempest*) in which a masque is staged.

According to R.A. Zimbardo, "the heart of the play [...is] the eternal conflict between order and chaos, the attempt of art to impose form upon the formless and chaotic, and the limitation of art in this endeavour." (Zimbardo, 1968: 234) Zimbardo wrote her essay in 1963, long before Greenaway's films ever came into being, and yet her analysis of *The Tempest* clearly states what the last Shakespearian play and the most experimental works of the British director have in common, that is, a shared view of the world as Chaos to be reduced to Cosmos. (Bencivenni–Samueli, 1996: 83-92) In a chaotic society or environment, the enacting of ceremonies and rituals, and the observance of symmetry and geometrical precision are fundamental in the restoring of order. Many aspects of the film represent, each in their own way, the triumph of order: be it Greenaway's perfectly symmetrical sets; the characters' movement in incessant slow-paced processions; the impeccable costumes and the sculpture-like hairdos; the constant process of re-framing through the use of technology and image manipulation, already shot scenes; or Prospero's substantial immobility and his mastery and control over the natural elements. On the other side, Caliban, with his disjointed movements and animal-like dancing, is one of the disturbances that disrupt the film's accurate symmetries, thus representing disorder.

Prospero's centrality as the keeper of order is clearly asserted through Gielgud's physical centrality in the cinematic *cadre*: Gielgud's Prospero always stands at the centre of the frame. When Greenaway's trademark slow-paced dollies are launched across seemingly endless corridors, Prospero is placed right in the middle of the screen, baroquely surrounded by stark naked dancing extras that fill the empty space around him and make of Prospero the pivotal point of the scene. Greenaway himself defined Gielgud as "the still, calm figure in the midst of all my pyrotechnical extravagance – whatever else is going on in the film, it is always Gielgud you watch." (quoted in Morley, 2002: 456) Prospero proves to be close, in purpose and attitude, to director Peter Greenaway. Greenaway's aesthetic credo consists in indexing, systematizing, collecting and sampling, drawing long lists of names and objects, such as the titles of Prospero's books, of course, but also the content of Tulse Luper's ninety-two suitcases, to which he dedicated a trilogy of multi-screen films in 2003.[4] He makes an encyclopedist's attempt at geometrizing reality through the use of cinema (or

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[4] *The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 1: The Moab Story*; *The Tulse Luper Suitcases,Part 2: Vaux to the Sea*; *The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 3: From Sark to the Finish*. (all directed by Peter Greenaway, international co-productions, 2003)

"New Cinema" as he calls it), the same way Prospero tries to shape events (following the suggestions coming from his books) by directing Alonso's and Antonio's ship to the island. *Prospero's Books* is a complex film, but its complexity is controlled (De Gaetano, 2008: 192): each and every element is framed, re-framed, multi-framed.

Both *The Tempest* and *Prospero's Books* are set during a time in which magical beliefs were finally giving way to science – and, at least up to Prospero's renunciation of his magical powers (his "Arts"), the play dwells on the line between the two opposing disciplines. As mentioned above, *Prospero's Books* was edited in Japan, where Greenaway could access those then-sophisticated technologies that went under the names of Hi-Vision and Graphic Paintbox. In the Japanese laboratories and editing rooms, entire sequences were transferred from film onto high-definition tape, processed through several computers (which offered every possible manipulation of the images) and then re-transferred onto film. This allowed Greenaway to create complicated patterns of overlapping images, to combine live action with graphic elements, to animate pages from Prospero's books, to superimpose different takes of the same shot. Quite often, the overlaying and superimposed scenes are not synchronous: in the same frame and at the same time, two slightly different versions of the same event take place – they might be two different imaginative renditions of the same occurrences as pictured by Prospero (or two slightly different films of *The Tempest*).

Greenaway's mixture of traditional cinema and innovative editing procedures represents a really daring attempt to tackle the most evasive of Shakespeare's plays, which director Peter Brook used to describe as "baffling and elusive" and ultimately "unplayable". (Brook, 1996: 94-95) Greenaway's method, like Prospero's, is a combination of art and science, of inspiration and technique (Phelan, 1992: 44): the mixed media he uses is the on-screen correlative to *The Tempest*'s staging of changing times and shifting perspectives. By putting multiple layers of images within the same frame, Greenaway creates a stratification of imagery and suggests the multiple levels of meaning implied by Shakespeare's play. Greenaway's multi-screen and picture-in-picture technique breaks the two-dimensionality of the screen and lures the audience into going beyond it, investigating the very nature of the images. By doing so, Greenaway implies the need to transcend the text, meaning the text of *The Tempest*, in order to achieve a deeper and innovative interpretation of the play, allowing the viewer to perceive new and unexpected significance.

In 1961, Florence Warner Brown reviewed Gielgud's performance in *Ages of Man* (a show collecting excerpts from Shakespeare's monologues) focussing on the actor's voice:

> in the cultivated excellence of voice as an instrument for speaking the poetic verse he was unique. One finds oneself listening to him as to a virtuoso on the violincello [*sic*], so great is his perfection of this art, and so dear and lucid his speech. (Warner Brown, 1961: 134)

As we have seen, one of the peculiarities of *Prospero's Books* is Gielgud's voicing of all the characters in the film. Gielgud's vocal performance, though, is not to be mistaken for dubbing, nor is it a sophisticated voice-over, since it was not recorded during post-production: Gielgud, in fact, performed and recorded all of the play's lines before a single scene was shot, and later the rest of the cast mimed to Gielgud's pre-recorded voice (Balbirnie, 1991: 81), in what must have been a major lip-syncing act – a radical device which allowed Gielgud, and therefore Prospero, to control the whole play. (Keesey, 2006: 119)

"A particular wish of mine", Greenaway has said, "was to take maximum advantage of [Gielgud's] powerful and authoritative ability to speak text – verse and prose." (Lawrence, 1997: 140) Gielgud's voice, as Greenaway suggests, expresses power and authority, especially when declaiming Shakespeare's lines. Thus, *Prospero's Books* delivers the

expression of authorial subjectivity (Prospero's, Shakespeare's and Greenaway's) through Gielgud's vocal, rather than physical, performance.

By recording every character's lines before a single scene was shot, Gielgud was given the chance to influence, manipulate and direct the other actors' performances: deprived of their own voices, the actors had to stick to Gielgud's cadence, rhythm and intonation, lip-syncing on cue. It is not only a question of characters being voiced by an authoritarian (albeit authoritative) *über-character*: the groundbreaking use Greenaway makes of Gielgud's voice allows Gielgud to express his mastery of acting but above all to deliver a subtle and profound discourse on the very nature of acting and performing. Prospero's pre-recorded lines definitely sanction the identity Gielgud = Prospero, and the whole film becomes a long and passionate acting lesson. Thus, Gielgud teaches his fellow actors how to speak the poetic verse throughout the film, thus creating a legacy for younger actors to follow.

What the film stages at its very end is not only a bare and stripped-down rendition of Prospero's closing monologue: we see Sir John Gielgud stepping out of Prospero's costume, getting rid of the meta-textual and allegorical burden of his character (thus revealing "the baseless fabric of this vision" [IV.1, 151]) and performing the final embodiment, that is, Gielgud playing Gielgud. Through Prospero's words, spoken straight to camera, Gielgud is saying his own farewell to acting, his voice "tempered [for the first time in the film] by age and emotion." (Lawson, 2000: 143) Trapped in a cinematic frame inexorably shrinking and receding to the back of the screen, Gielgud takes leave of the audience and at the same time entrusts us with his most precious heritage: in the closing image of Ariel running free (and regressing into a child) we can clearly distinguish the gifts of Inspiration and Poetry finally disclosed and surrendered to the world.

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