

THE TEMPEST: Reflective Assessment

THE TEMPEST: Determinism, Ideology and History as Cyclical

Of the few attempts to bring Shakespeare's final solo-authored play to the silver screen, most film versions have fallen into the art house niche of cinema. Both Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway's versions of the play risk alienating the viewer due to their tendencies to include controversial production choices (in the Jarman) or baffling editorial choices aimed at the intelligentsia (in the case of *Prospero's Books*). Bearing the relatively concise cinematic production history of the play in mind, this attempt to restage Shakespeare was predominantly aimed at making the concepts and dialogue accessible and relevant for a modern audience. The time period, chronology of the action and the motives of the characters have all been rethought, yet the language itself has been largely left unaltered. Additionally, edits have had to occur in order to fit the standard 90 – 120 minute suggested time taken into consideration by production agents.

During the early planning stages of the script the fundamental concepts to be presented had to be decided. Determinism, manipulation and ideology were three key ideas that had to be predominant within the screenplay. Shakespeare's play dealt with similar issues but by transposing the story to the modern period certain parallels were able to be drawn from the material. Finding the correct time period was one of the decisions that required extensive thought and research. The one thing that had to be within the film was some form of large ocean passenger vessel – potentially either the semi-archaic liner style ships or a contemporary, modern cruise liner (an early idea revolved around the status of an inactive ship – whether such an environment could be classified as an island). Originality meant that the decision was vital – placing the story on an early 20th Century liner could risk the film becoming too similar to *Titanic*, placing it on a modern day cruise liner and parallels to *Poseidon* could be drawn. However, once deciding upon an early 1930s setting, other issues of the era began to ally themselves with characters and situations from the play.

The 1930s period essentially became the springboard for the characterisation and set pieces within this adaptation. Although the political turmoil of the period was also explored in Richard Loncraine and Ian McKellen's *Richard III*, *The Tempest* allows for a

different approach – one more akin to the magical realism of postmodern fiction. The backdrop of early fascist Italy gave a motive for Prospero and Miranda's hasty exit of the country and also allowed for the inclusion of book-burning. Prospero's fixation – his self-declared love of his books – lends a new level of urgency to escaping Italy if there is the possibility of their destruction. This decision also led to the method of book destruction in the final moments of the film acting as a linking device to Prospero's brother, Antonio, as well as a further layer of characterisation for Caliban. While Antonio destroys books in the name of fascism, Prospero enacts the same gesture as an act of liberation and forgiveness.

One of the major devices that needed to be included was the use of mirroring and repetition. The conclusion to the film heavily implies that the tragedy of the plot is simply a moment in the cycle of human tragedy – that events are destined to repeat *ad nauseum*. In this respect, this retelling of *The Tempest* works in conversation with *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* opens discussion about the true nature of free will within humanity. *The Tempest*, however, is focused on the problems of control – a presupposition that partially directed this adaptation to use the backdrop of dictator-led ideologies as its setting. What ties both plays together, however, is the struggle for power- both *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* feature the successful usurpation of prominent characters. Duncan and Prospero are directly linked through their usurped status and this motif was extrapolated in the final sequences of this particular adaptation (ie. it is implied that Ferdinand will attempt usurpation of Antonio as revenge for the final betrayal of Prospero). What was initially planned to be an ending that would focus on the reality of the play – positioning and subsequently questioning the events as seen through Prospero's view – developed into an ending that questions the complicated and power-hungry nature of humanity. Polanski's film version of *Macbeth* posits a repetitive and unbreakable cycle of greed and destruction and in applying a similar prospect to *The Tempest* a comedy is changed irrevocably into tragedy.

This *Macbeth*-inspired genre change allowed for other elements of the play to be extrapolated, intensified or reworked. *Macbeth*'s exploration of free will allowed the rogue characters in *The Tempest* – Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo – to be written with a new found vitriol. The backdrop of the political turmoil of Europe in the 1930s – 1940s

perfectly suited Caliban's Communist background in the film, as well as allowing the conveniently apt 'red-plague' he wishes on Prospero to take on a whole new semantic meaning. Prospero and Antonio remain linked in their tendency to achieve dictatorial status, opening the question of how far ultimate power can indeed influence instinctual human behaviour. Prospero almost assumes the role of the three witches from *Macbeth* – using his power to manipulate and lead towards the endgame of his grand scheme – but the free will of some characters seems to render this attempt partially unsuccessful, as opposed to the fated ending of *Macbeth*. However, the ending devised for this version of *The Tempest* essentially resets the characters back to the cycle of usurpation and dictatorial control. Caliban is given freedom in exchange for revenge at the price of subservience. Ferdinand and Miranda, while embodying potential hope for the future of Naples, also signify the possibility for future conflict over positions of power. Overall, an open ending was the only way to explain (or elaborate upon) some of the choices made by Shakespeare. Antonio's silence after Prospero's forgiveness could be interpreted in many ways but, to enhance the tragedy of this adaptation, the silence is portrayed as a lack of closure to the conflict between brothers.

By adjusting the period in which the film is set, certain thematic nuances found within the play are altered or unfortunately lost. Shakespeare's *Tempest* contains a strong thread of colonial discussion which is not easily apparent in this adaptation. Instead, the dialectics of race and colonisation are replaced by ideology and control – Caliban becomes a Slavic migrant worker with three white masters over the course of the film. However, his situation is made even more tragic by his poor choice of ideology. Caliban begins as a Communist under the forced power of Prospero yet, at the end, he becomes a follower of Antonio simply for revenge. Earlier ideas in the concept stages of the adaptation had Caliban and Ariel disappearing, the ship sinking and then the two reappearing just before Prospero's death. However, as the imagery of war and conflict began to gestate, aspects of reality began to take prominence in the screenplay - Ariel remains the only truly character who can be defined as a spirit. This might also be due to the fact that Ariel is one of the few loyal characters in the play and thereby no political ideology really fit his personality. Caliban, with his desire to share the wealth with the

sailors, violence, drinking, and his manipulation by Prospero/Stephano/Antonio seemed to fit in well with the stereotype of the underprivileged but steadfast Communist.

The character of Ariel went through many changes between the planning stages and various drafts of the screenplay. The original intention was to have Ariel communicate solely through the ship's PA system but this was rejected due to the necessity for Ariel to leave the ship at some points. Instead, Ariel was turned into the spirit of the ship itself. This connection also raises questions of illusion and insanity; if Prospero has indeed confined himself in his 'poor cell' for 12 years then it is not improbable that he has a certain connection to the ship itself – in this case going so far as to manifest itself in hallucinatory visions. This production choice also provides a direct tie between Prospero's past and present as well as his studies – throughout the film we see him involved with blueprints, models and designs of the ship. Having Prospero as the architect of the Ariel also continues the themes of control that are so prominent in the story.

Various alternate scenes have been altered or excised from original drafts (any major omissions or changes can be found in the production notes) in order to keep the characters and narrative elements cohesive. The original opening to the film originally focused around isolation and the sound of static (the static representing the continued presence of Ariel). However, the fundamental aspects of the screenplay remained relatively unchanged throughout, achieving the aim of pushing *The Tempest* further into tragedy. Comedic aspects still remain, but they are largely sidelined in favour of the more tragic characters. By creating such a calming build up to the ending – combining lighting, music and sparse dialogue – the power of the final few moments is intensified.

Overall, the attempt to rework *The Tempest* as an unflinching tragedy works largely on the basis that the historical backdrop of World War 2 allows for such a bleak outlook. However, by selectively editing, restructuring and reordering the dialogue it is hopefully evident that a contemporary, big budget and accessible version of *The Tempest* can be realised.

[Word Count: 1558]