

## **MEDIA TEMPESTS: PRELIMINARY NOTES TO A COMPARATIVE READING OF SOME FILM ADAPTATIONS OF THE EIGHTIES IN GREAT BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES**

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper two British movies — Derek Jarman's *The Tempest* (1980) and Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) — will be compared to the American Mazursky's (1982). Their different settings of the island, in particular, will reveal different cultural attitudes towards a number of issues: if the Greek island of Mazursky underlines the Atlanticism of the play associated to a realistic European recolonization, Jarman's and Greenaway's postmodern choices — although often in conflict — emphasize the dreamy, fantasmatic quality *The Tempest* shares with the movies.

**Keywords:** *film adaptation, performance, recontextualization, postmodern strategies*

### **1. The wonder of *The Tempest*. Adaptation as a cultural process**

Derek Jarman's 1979 *The Tempest* and Peter Greenaway's 1991 *Prospero's Books* posit themselves neatly at the extreme ends of the eighties, a *fin-de-siècle* decade crucial for the new world order (or we might say loss of order). The years of Reaganomics and of Mrs. Thatcher's regime foreshadow the fall of the Berlin Wall, the decline of the Soviet Union and the reconfiguration of the Warsaw pact European countries. The end of the post-war "balance" between opposite ideological systems was to mark the unhindered triumphant affirmation of a world market economy based on and hastened by the new mass media, in particular the world wide web — a more and more tumultuous *sea-change* which was to plunge the planet into the future.

The British film adaptations of *The Tempest* by Jarman and Greenaway, on the one hand, and the American *Tempest* by Paul Mazursky (1982), on the other, testify — my paper will try to articulate this issue — how far apart the

answers of the European cinema and the Hollywood movies of the eighties were with regard to that change.

Until the eighties British cinema had not enjoyed a great reputation. François Truffaut had despisively qualified the British as “notoriously unvisual, unartistic, and uncinematic”.<sup>1</sup> Britain’s isolationism had prevailed both in neoromantic post-war movies which (as in the case of L. Olivier’s *Henry V*) tended to relieve the country from the sufferings of the war, or in the local realism of the film adaptations of the theatre of The Angry Young Men. Except for the short avant-garde experience of the *Close Up Circle* in the 30s, British cinema had eschewed the European New Wave (started in France), centred on the role of the *auteur* and on the primacy of the image over the written word.

In the 80s, though, a significant number of filmmakers – Jarman, Greenaway, Terry Gilliam, Frears, Kureishi among others – gave rise to a British New Wave. The rebirth of a British visual culture finally settled Britain in the main stream of the *engagé* European cinema. But the primary cause for this rebirth was not just the influence of the European *maestri* (Pasolini and Eisenstein for Jarman, Bergman for Greenaway), but also British pop art, which combined an interest in popular consumer culture with the avant-garde tradition. Pop art entered British culture in 1956 with the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, where a Giant Robbie the Robot (a character from the American sci-fi adaptation of *The Tempest*, Fred M. Wilcox’s *Forbidden Planet*, 1956) welcomed the visitors.<sup>2</sup> This reference to *The Tempest* – almost at the origins of the British New Wave<sup>3</sup> – is, I claim, more than accidental. First of all, Hollywood will keep privileging sci-fi adaptations of *The Tempest*, with cult movies such as *The Lawnmower*.<sup>4</sup> But, more significantly, what looks like an insignificant detail may suggest that *The Tempest* has a necessary rather than accidental role in the development of British cinema. The choice of that text by two leading filmmakers of the British New Wave did not mean just to rely on a written theatrical text, but to recognize a cultural paradigm of the Elizabethan stage which with its practices and politics of representation and communication had laid the foundation of modernity. Orson Welles’ famous aphorism that Shakespeare wrote for the cinema without knowing it, then, is more than a joke. *The Tempest*, among Shakespeare’s plays, is the most spectacular and the most

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Wollen, “The Last New Wave: Modernism in the British film of the Thatcher Era” in *Fires were started. British cinema and Thatcherism*, Lester Friedman (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 1993/2006), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Peter Wollen, “The Last New Wave”.

<sup>3</sup> For a definition of British New Wave see also Thomas Cartelli and Catherine Rowe, *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> See Mariacristina Cavecchi and Nicoletta Vallorani, “Prospero’s Offshoots: From the Library to the Screen”, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 35:4 (Fall 1997).

metatheatrical due to the illusionistic and manipulative power of the scientist-artist. Paradoxically, in the end, the movie adaptations of *The Tempest* in the eighties made the so-called uncinematic British cinema aware that its culture was founded on the most radical visual tradition.

## 2. Visual culture and the Brave New World

In the process of its interpretations and adaptations<sup>1</sup>, the “newness” (“O brave new world, That has such people in’t!” [5.1.183-4]) inscribed in *The Tempest* has produced two main different, though not exclusive, perspectives on what is meant by modernity and its foundations in early modern age. One is a geopolitical notion of modernity, privileged by the radical postcolonial and historicist readings: the discovery of America, the New World, starts reshaping a world where a Europe of conflicting nation-states establishes its hegemonic dominion on the rest of the globe. The other identifies modernity with the instauration of the New Science<sup>2</sup> whose metaphor in *The Tempest* is Prospero’s “so potent Art” (5.I.50). In this case modernity has, in some ways, more temporal than spatial connotations: the manipulative power on nature of the modern “studious artisan”<sup>3</sup> – the Prosperos, the Leonardos, the Galileos – steers humankind towards an irreversible and infinite process of change, a tempest, whose ultimate outcome is our postmodern condition where the boundaries between mind and nature, human and artificial, real and virtual, medium and message are more and more rapidly on the verge of merging.<sup>4</sup>

Both Derek Jarman’s and Peter Greenaway’s movies feature Prospero’s magic at their centres. Greenaway explicitly admits that the technologies he so enthusiastically experiments in his electronic *Last Tempest* are the legacy of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. Jarman thought Shakespeare was familiar with the occult philosophy of Agrippa, John Dee, Giordano Bruno: “Ten years of reading in these forgotten writers together with a study of Jung [...] proved vital in my approach both to *Jubilee* and *The Tempest*.”<sup>5</sup> In a 1982 interview, he admitted: “the masque, that’s what I love, and the magic”, but, when David Bowie once called him “a black magician”, he protested: “the film is the magic, the dark art, not its maker”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> By which what is meant by now are all the acts of manipulation of the text in time. Cf. Cartelli and Burt.

<sup>2</sup> Denise Albanese, *New Science, New World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> John Milton in *Paradise Lost* qualifies Galileo thus.

<sup>4</sup> Aldo Schiavone, *Storia e destino* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Derek Jarman, *Dancing Ledge* (London: Quartet Books, 1984/1991), 190.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Alexander Walker, *National Heroes. British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties* (London: Orion Books, 2005), 230.

“The masque, that’s what I love”. Not only Jarman’s *The Tempest*, but also *Prospero’s Books* are masques. Both film directors chose this dramatic genre to re-present Shakespeare’s play at least for two reasons: first of all, they intended to keep the festive atmosphere of fun and entertainment of the celebrative occasion for which the play was written (everybody knows about the protestant wedding of James I’s daughter Elizabeth with the Palatinate Elector), secondly they must have still thought of themselves as the heirs in the movies of the well known dispute between Jonson and Jones – the first to adopt and create elaborate masques in England over the roles of the word, with its appeal to thought, of the image, the setting, able to fascinate the eye. “The settings of Shakespeare films always clash with the language: spirit turns to icy matter and falls like hail”, Jarman stated. “For the *Tempest* we needed an island of the mind that opened mysteriously like Chinese boxes: an abstract landscape so that the delicate description in the poetry full of sound and sweet airs, would not be destroyed by any Martini lagoons.”<sup>1</sup>

But the aesthetic emphasis the two British filmmakers give to images and innovative technologies of representation is not in contrast with their radical adaptations of the Shakespearean play, which both turn out to be, though in different ways, firm and savage critiques of the Thatcher regime.

### 3. The three movies

The platitudes of Mazursky’s New York bourgeois comedy sharply contrast Jarman’s punk camp and Greenaway’s electronic-oriented adaptations, making the similarities of the two British movies much more visible than their too often acknowledged antithesis.

Mazursky’s domestic drama is an exemplary lesson of Hollywood disengagement: it is the stale contemporary case of the psychological breakdown of Prospero/Phillip (John Cassavetes) – a rich and successful New York architect – who finds a refuge from his mid-life crisis and conjugal dissatisfaction on a Greek island. There he lives an arcadic life with his impatient teenage daughter, Miranda, his divorced mistress Aretha (Susan Sarendon), who resents the never explained Phillip’s vote to celibacy, and Kalibanos, a local goatherd, who unsuccessfully tries to seduce Miranda, unexpectedly enticing her by his Sony TV. Phillip’s “enemies” (his wife Antonia, an actress, and her lover Alonso, an unscrupulous estate entrepreneur, played by Vittorio Gassman), who had attempted to steal Phillip’s daughter Miranda, sailing on a luxurious yacht together with Alonzo’s teen-age son, Freddy, and various members of Alonzo’s

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Jarman, *ibid.*, 184.

entourage, including two buffoons (Trinc and Sebastian) are caught by a tempest and accidentally shipwreck on Phillip's island. Here, in the end, Miranda and Freddy fall in love without Phillip's intervention, and the married couple get together again before going back to their old lives in New York, which does not seem to suggest a Brave New World at all.

The Shakespearean relation between the Old and the New World is, in a way, reconverted: America seems, in this case, the point of departure, while a Greek island of the old, actually, of the ancient world becomes the destination. But Mazursky's odyssey is neither a journey for discovering new lands nor a classical *nostos*. Prospero/Phillip moves in a world where the only possible journey is the globalized movement of mass tourism. The Greek island is, in fact, a natural oasis and an arcadic dream only in the self-deceiving imagination of the "innocent" American: "Nature says the truth, why man doesn't?" Phillip declares. On the contrary, Greek islands are already caught in the web of mass tourism and communication as Caliban's TV testifies.

In Mazursky's film, the Renaissance Magus is reduced to an impotent escapist New Yorker.<sup>1</sup> Phillip/Prospero's position is best represented by the opening scene where the slow landing on the island is prepared by a long shot of a perfectly flat Mediterranean: the omission of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* incipit

– the storm – clearly suggests the disengagement of the average American of the eighties who does not get involved and does not take sides. That position is largely reflected and encouraged by Hollywood. Mazursky's loose and contemporary adaptation follows on the whole the Hollywood linear pattern of narration which supports confidence in progress and faith in ultimate ends (either metaphysical or human), and the notion of a stable and fixed heterosexual identity based on gender opposition. That pattern of representation creates the observer's passive gaze which – according to Laura Mulvey's lesson – ratifies gender hierarchy. The American domestic adaptation is, in fact, concerned primarily with recovering the stability of the heterosexual married couple.

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<sup>1</sup> The review of the movie in *The New York Times*, was not indulgent: "It's even more depressing to suspect that the filmmaker sees the Prosperos of our time as being nothing much more than overachieving, middle-class neurotics. It would have been better if Mr Mazursky and Leon Capetanos, who collaborated with him on the screenplay, had kept the source of their inspiration to themselves and written a comedy to stand on its own." Vincent Canby, "'Tempest' opens with Nod to Shakespeare", August 13 (1982).

Opposite concerns hold the centre of Jarman's and Greenaway's *Tempests*: their discontinuous and fragmented narrations break with the constitutive elements of Hollywood cinema to convey their radical political and aesthetic positions. "[Jarman's] *Tempest*", Paola Colaiacomo dryly points out, "is northern, anticlassical, anti-Roman and anti-Greek."<sup>1</sup> The filmmaker himself acknowledges: "I sailed as far away from tropical realism as possible."<sup>2</sup> The film is set, in fact, on the northern coasts of Warwickshire in the old aristocratic mansion of Stoneleigh Abbey. This choice reflects Jarman's main preoccupation with the contemporary condition of England at the dawn of the Thatcher Era, when the optimism of the sixties was rapidly changing into the bleak despair of the punk generation. "What was basically changed for everybody is that the expectation, the belief that everything is getting better, has given way to the knowledge that everything is getting worse."<sup>3</sup> This proves true only if *The Tempest* is considered in close association with Jarman's previous movie *Jubilee*, 1977. The two films form a dyptich: the former a utopic, the latter a dystopic adaptation of the Shakespearean text. *Jubilee* – written on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Elizabeth II's reign – features an Ariel who, conjured up by the magician, John Dee, will show Elizabeth I "the shadow of this time". The bleak representation of a contemporary corrupted London ravaged by a self referential, violent young generation with no faith, with "no future" is, in this way, presented as the outcome of the premises and of the promises of the Elizabethan age, especially challenging the modern idea that history is a teleological narrative of progress. (The same actors change roles in the two films.) To this sombre vision of the outward world in *Jubilee*, Jarman's *The Tempest* opposes a warm internal setting. Stoneleigh Abbey turned for Jarman a particularly suited setting to connect with the Elizabethan age because at its entrance a real portrait of Elizabeth – James I's daughter – was hanging on the wall.

The setting was a crucial element for Jarman as a filmmaker. "The settings of Shakespeare films always clash with the language: spirit turns to icy matter and falls like hail."<sup>4</sup> Jarman's *The Tempest* is a highly poetic work which succeeds in combining creatively and harmoniously Shakespeare's words with bodies moving in enchantingly designed settings. The filmmaker builds the set

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<sup>1</sup> Paola Colaiacomo, "'The Tempest' di Derek Jarman" in *Shakespeare al cinema*, ed. Isabella Imperiali (Roma Bulzoni), 149. (my translation)

<sup>2</sup> Derek Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, 184.

<sup>3</sup> George Melly, *Evening Standard*, 18 October (1976).

<sup>4</sup> *Dancing Ledge*, 184.

through a series of *tableaux vivants* or moving pictures, which is pure cinema. His shooting technique is almost amateurish and this is what most distinguishes his filmography from Greenaway's. "The film is constructed extremely simply with masters, mid-shots, and close-ups. The camera hardly ever goes on a wander. This is deliberate, as I have noticed that if one deals with unconventional subject-matter, experimental camera work can push a film over into incoherence."<sup>1</sup>

The tempest in Jarman's production is presented as Prospero's dream. The filmmaker shot the storm in externals in the fashion of a documentary movie and gave it an oneiric dimension through the use of blue filters. The same color pervades the external spaces of the island where Prospero's enemies move as if in a submarine dimension which hinders their movements and communication. So, the tempest in Jarman's case is an internal dimension which is then projected onto the outside. The breath of the dreamer is accompanied by electronic sounds in its soundtrack. This way, Prospero becomes at the same time agent, spectator and victim of the storm. The dreaming magician's words, "we split, we split" may allude both to the cry of the shipwrecked and to Prospero's nervous breakdown.

Jarman openly welcomes the Shakespearean theme of forgiveness: "'the rarer action is in virtue, than in vengeance.' The concept of forgiveness in *The Tempest* attracted me; it's [...] almost absent in our world. To know who your enemies are, but to accept them for what they are [...] is something we sorely need. After the chill wind that blew through *Jubilee* came the warmth that invaded *The Tempest*."<sup>2</sup> This statement would be enough to deny the frequent and sometimes moralistic definition of Prospero as a sadistic tyrant. But when Prospero brutally stamps on Caliban's hands (to give the example most often quoted), his action may be read more as a parodic sign of a weak magician than of a brutal master. In the film, on the whole, the prevailing mood is the festive, joyous and playful atmosphere of a masque, "the sense of fun" a group of actors/friends were having, playing and working together thus echoing what should have been the enthusiasm of an Elizabethan company of players. That is what gives the film its special camp flavour and its avant-garde homosexual radicalism.

The actors/characters wear costumes which refer them to different periods of time: a young Prospero, in Robespierre-like clothes, recalling the French Revolution; Miranda is performed by the popular punk singer Toya Wilcox, who wears punk dreadlocks, but also, at the wedding, a nineteenth-century lady dress; the time-weary Ariel is in a contemporary worker's white overalls; the sailors are homoerotic mariners who wear real uniforms of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 202.

British Navy. Past and present, high and low merge in the enchanting settings where a Venetian eighteenth-century fireplace burns in a room covered with hay and logs to chop. The discontinuous narration is paralleled by the discontinuous representation of identity, making uncertain the time, sex, or generation to which characters belong. The audience's gaze is split, too: Ferdinand's body which, Venus-like, rises naked and blue-filtered from the waves of a cold North Sea, is the sexualized object of desire of the film. The spectator's eye is contradictorily directed both towards Ferdinand's male body and to Prospero's controlling gaze on Miranda. David Hawkes' synthetic remarks may, at this point, be entirely accepted:

Jarman's treatment of *The Tempest* (1979) exemplifies his view of the connections between the early modern theatre and the postmodern cinema. By drawing out those aspects of the play – its homoeroticism, its overall concern with sexual dynamics and power relations, and its juxtaposition of narrative with spectacle – which are also pertinent concerns of the cinema, Jarman affirms a kinship between his own work and the early modern theatre, and thus distances the audience from the conventions of narrative cinema.<sup>1</sup>

The final wedding masque is a true camp coup de theatre: in the presence of all the characters at a banqueting hall, the crew of the sailors – mechanically, but also tenderly – perform a kind of Russian dance in a ring-a-rang-a-roses, when the famous blues singer, Elizabeth Welch –playing the wedding goddess in a saffron dress – erupts on the scene under a shower of tinsel petals giving a memorable performance of “Stormy Weather”. Her caressing voice and her soft gestures help establish an aura of final reconciliation and reparation, a feeling of a recovery of a lost sense of community. But this feeling of a conquered Utopia does not lack irony. The song is, after all, a smart parody of the tempest: through Elizabeth Welch's extraordinarily sweet smiles, the song keeps repeating that “it rains all the time”. The final masque roused the audience's enthusiasm at the première of the film at the Edinburgh Festival (August 14, 1979): it is not by chance that the movie enjoyed success in Europe, but it proved a failure in America. In an interview almost at the end of his life Jarman explained that *The Tempest* is too wild a text for the American taste.

The film closes round in a circle: as in the beginning Prospero's eyes are closed, his face is calm while whispering perhaps Shakespeare's most celebrated lines:

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<sup>1</sup> David Hawkes, “‘The shadow of this time’: the Renaissance cinema of Derek Jarman” in *By Angels Driven. The films of Derek Jarman*, ed. Chris Lippard (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1996), 107.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
 As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
 Are melted into air, into thin air:  
 and, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
 The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
 Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
 And, this insubstantial pageant faded,  
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
 As dreams are made on; and our little life  
 Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1. 148-157)<sup>1</sup>

Jarman prefers “Sleep” to “free” (which ends Shakespeare’s epilogue) as the final word of his *The Tempest*. In so doing, he gives to its ending a centripetal energy, an inward and backward circular movement which once again challenges the “progresses” of consumer cinema.

To the centripetal thrust of Jarman’s movie, Peter Greenaway’s *Prospero’s Books* opposes a strongly centrifugal energy. The two *auteurs*, both educated in art academies and both painters, share the aesthetic fascination with visual arts. If in Jarman’s *Tempest* the narrative developed in a discontinuous series of *tableaux vivants*, *Prospero’s Books* is an outburst and infinite proliferation of phantasmagorical images. But in Greenaway’s film, words – oral and written – feature on the same foot as images: the twenty-four books – *the Tempest* being one of them – hold the centre of the film. They are the texts Gonzalo “had furnished” Prospero when, chased by his dukedom, he, together with his daughter, were left adrift.

Knowing I loved my books, he furnished me  
 From mine own library with volumes that  
 I prize above my dukedom ( 1.2.166-168)

These lines – either voiced by *the* Shakespearean actor, John Gielgud, or written on the screen, or on pages in a precious seventeenth-century calligraphy, or as words overlapping other images – keep haunting the film. The filmmaker explicitly makes this point: “...a project that deliberately emphasizes and celebrates the text as text, as the master material on which all the magic, illusion and deception of the play is based. Words making text, and text making pages, and pages making books from which knowledge is fabricated in pictorial form – these are the persistently forefronted characteristics.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All the quotations from *The Tempest* are from The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Frank Kermode (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Greenaway, *Prospero’s Books. A Film by Shakespeare’s The Tempest* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1991), 9.

In his movie Greenaway establishes with the Shakespearean text a centripetal and centrifugal relationship. On the one hand, we see Prospero/Gielgud/Shakespeare, sitting in his cell – Antonello da Messina’s Saint Jerome’s study – engaged as an author in writing *The Tempest*. Immediately after writing, he reads the lines aloud. The lines give origin to the performance of the play where Prospero figures as an actor. In this case, Greenaway’s adaptation sounds almost like a theatrical kind of Shakespearean movie. On the other hand, *The Tempest*, together with the other books, explodes in a flux of images, rich in cultural and iconographic associations, identifiable as the archive of European Renaissance knowledge. All of them – objects, architectures, spirits, characters of the play – form a continuous stream which moves in the labyrinth spaces of Michelangelo’s Laurentian library which Prospero has reshaped as his “island”. The images are presented in layers of frames, in frames within frames (suggesting the Shakespearean practice of *the play within the play*), written over or written about. Such a quantity of images justifies Greenaway’s detractors’ charging him with formal bulimia. In this adaptation, the spectator is, in fact, faced not just with a discontinuous narration, but he is plunged into an almost infinite stream of associations and combinations where he/she is free to surf. In Greenaway’s hands Shakespeare’s text changes into a hypertext.

But Greenaway is more than a vacuous and narcissistic formalist. The filmmaker, the twentieth-century Prospero, creator and manipulator of forms and meanings, brings to theatre the contemporary electronic technologies of communication and reproduction.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, if the text is presented as what everything depends on, it is, at the same time, very far from being a fixed and stable originator of signs and meanings meant by an author. If the 24 books give Prospero, the seventeenth-century magician/scientist, the knowledge and the power to raise the tempest, they too are presented as involved, transformed, even torn by and drowned by it.<sup>2</sup> At the end, Prospero throws the books clamorously in the channel of the Laurentian library where only the Shakespearean Folio, with the “last tempest” will be rescued by Caliban. It might mean the last rescue.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Peter Donaldson, “Shakespeare in the Age of Post-Mechanical Reproduction: Sexual and Electronic Magic in *Prospero’s Books*”, in *Shakespeare in the Movie: Popularizing the plays on Film, TV and Video*, eds. Lynda Boose and Richard Burt (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Water*, for example, which is the first to appear on the screen, is animated, its pages are strongly shaken by winds and showers, on its soaked pages images of storms and shipwrecks overlap with images of the shipwrecked enemies of Prospero.

Greenaway's adaptation, rather than celebrating the books, announces their end at the threshold of a technological revolution which will especially concern the systems of representation, consumption and conservation of the text.

In the cultural process of reception and adaptation, *The Tempest* seems, we may conclude, to occupy a particular position in the early modernity as well as in our contemporary age. It points both to an ending and to a transformation configuring itself as a paradigm of metamorphosis. In *Giant Robbie the Robot* (echo of the Ariel of Fred M. Wilcox's *Tempest – Forbidden Planet*, 1956) Shakespeare's play announces the post-war movie revolutions: it lends itself both to Hollywood metaphors and to the magical and technological recreations of two of the most "excessive" British auteurs.