

An isle full of noises, sounds and sweer airs:  
Shakespeare's *The Tempest*  
and Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Red*

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In his 1977 pioneering study of Shakespeare and film, entitled precisely *Shakespeare on Film*, Jack J. Jorgens established a useful distinction between *presentation*, *interpretation* and *adaptation* as three possibilities for cinematic versions of plays and novels, in decreasing degree of faithfulness to the original work (12-14). In this sense, Alden Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan point out that “*Adaptation* seems to have been the key to successful cinematic representation of *The Tempest*” (200). In fact, the filmmakers that have approached this play have always *adapted* it very freely to the silver screen. Even the films that are most easily recognizable as presenting Shakespeare's work, Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) and Derek Jarman's *Tempest* (1980), have taken great liberties. In Jarman's film, for instance, the wedding masque takes the form of a show in which Elizabeth Welch sings a version of “Stormy Weather” while the rest of the characters dance happily. Significantly enough, a film clearly acknowledged as a cinematic presentation of *The Tempest*, *Forbidden Planet* (Fred McLeod Wilcox, 1956), takes place in outer space.

In the field of film studies more and more attention is being paid to Shakespearean adaptations, appropriations and spin-offs. Thus, we find frequent references to the indebtedness to *The Tempest* of extremely varied films, such as Paul Mazurski's *Tempest* (1982), the Western *Yellow Sky* (William A. Wellman, 1948), or even *The Jackals* (R. D. Webb, 1967), and hosts of Shakespearean scholars have analysed them thoroughly with the original play in mind. Given the growing interest in the subject in recent years, I find it surprising that almost nobody (a short review by Vicente Molina Foix would be the exception) seems to have noticed the parallelisms and connections between Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Red* (1993) and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In my opinion, they are not merely coincidences, but the result of Kieslowski's conscious attempt to impregnate his film with echoes of this play that constitute the “noises, sounds and sweet airs” which I refer to in the title of this paper.

*Three Colours: Red* is the last film in the trilogy *Three Colours* which, taking as a leit motif the three colours of the French flag, presents a reflection upon the three emblematic concepts of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity (*Red* deals with the last one). To begin with, I cannot help mentioning a first (non-textual but con-textual) parallelism between *The Tempest* and *Red*. Both works were the farewell of their authors to their Art since, after finishing them, both retired to the countryside to live their last peaceful days. Kieslowski, who often declared himself to be a reader and a true admirer of Shakespeare, repeatedly said that *Red* would be his last film; his death in 1996 has definitely made it so, and it is tempting to remember Prospero's words at the end of *The Tempest*, when thinking about his future life he envisions a time when “every third thought shall be my grave”). In each one of these last works we find a central character (Prospero in *The Tempest* and the judge in *Red*) who is in control and in the end gives up his power. Many film critics have seen in the judge the alter-ego of the director, in the same way that Shakespearean critics such as Thomas Campbell or Frances Yates have in the past seen in Prospero an imaginative

paradigm of Shakespeare himself as a poet. In both cases critics have insisted on the identification (in Shakespeare's case somewhat problematic) between creator and character in the work.

In *Red* Kieslowski presents the story of Valentine, a young model who meets a retired judge after running over his dog. He lives surrounded by books in complete isolation, devoting his time to spying on his neighbours' phone conversations. After that meeting a chain of strange coincidences develops, ending with a shipwreck which brings together Valentine and Auguste, a young law student. The most obvious parallelism of the story with *The Tempest* lies in the character of the judge, who resembles Prospero in several aspects. Both were former authority figures that now live on a distant island, a real physical one in the case of Prospero and a spiritual one in the case of the judge, who lives in his house isolated from the rest of society. In both cases this "exile" has been motivated by usurpation: Prospero was deprived of Milan and the judge lost the woman he loved when a more powerful man crossed her path.

The character of Valentine parallels Miranda in *The Tempest*. Although she is not the daughter of the judge, who explicitly says at the beginning of the film that he has no daughters, her close relation with him in the course of the story develops a father-daughter bond that makes him into a symbolical father figure for Valentine, whose real father is deliberately shown as being absent. While Kieslowski gives us some pieces of information about her mother and brother nothing is said about Valentine's father, only that he might not have been her real father.

Valentine is a modern independent woman. As a Miranda figure she is certainly a 20th century politically correct Miranda. However, she still has to learn from her father-figure, like Shakespeare's Miranda, discovering in this way a new reality she did not know, and reacting in a similar way. Thus when they first see their fathers' activities their initial reaction is horror. Miranda is horrified when she sees the tempest provoked by Prospero's magic, just as Valentine is horrified when she discovers the judge spying on his neighbours. After this horror both Miranda and Valentine have the same sympathetic reaction, and they ask Prospero and the judge to stop, since "the direful spectacle (...) touch'd/ the very virtue of compassion in [them]" (I, ii, 26-7). Similarly, both Valentine and Miranda serve as the dramatic excuse for the playwright and the filmmaker to tell us about the past. Right after rising the storm at the beginning of *The Tempest* Prospero tells Miranda about Milan and their past. In the same way, in *Red* the judge is giving an account of his own story to Valentine, precisely in a theater, when a violent storm which foreshadows the end of the film breaks out.

The basic situation of the central male characters in *The Tempest* and *Red* is therefore similar. Both are entirely devoted to their art, traditional magic for Prospero and the magic of information for the judge who spies on his neighbours through their phone conversations. Both will renounce their activities voluntarily in the end, and the resolution of the story will be closely dependent on this renunciation. The parallelism between both activities (Magic and spying) is, in my opinion, very wisely established by Kieslowski, and it presents interesting implications. Just as Shakespeare provided Prospero with Magic, the most powerful weapon he could conceive to restore the previous order, Kieslowski gives the judge the most precious source of magic power possibly available nowadays: information. Information becomes, in this way, 20th century magic. The information that the judge gets by eavesdropping on his neighbours is the source of his power, and gives him a magic aura similar to that of Prospero. The judge, for instance, seems to be able to foresee the reactions and behaviour of those he spies.

The parallelism between the magic of these two characters is also emphasized by Kieslowski. *The Tempest* opens with an example of Prospero's magic power, the storm that sinks the ship. Similarly, *Red* also begins by showing the essence of the judge's power, when we are taken in the astonishingly visual sea-voyage of a phone call through the phone lines, listening to a mixture of voices, conversations and echoes. But, besides, Kieslowski suggests in the film that the judge has some special powers not connected with the phone conversations, and that these powers guide the actions of the characters to the final resolution, when the encounter between Valentine and Auguste ("our brave new" Miranda and Ferdinand) takes place after the shipwreck. Just as we see the storm in *The Tempest* as the result of Prospero's magic, Kieslowski makes it clear, too, that the judge has a mysterious influence on the shipwreck of the ferry in *Red*. There is no other

justification for his apparently absurd insistence on knowing the exact date and time of the ferry she is going to take to go to England. The final storm in *Red* is also the result of some supernatural force. Kieslowski shows the phone call made by the judge to a weather service center, which informs him that the weather forecast announces a wonderful day on the date of Valentine's trip, and there are hints that he engineers the change in the weather that causes the shipwreck to bring Valentine and Auguste together.

Another moment when we are suggested that the judge has supernatural powers is in the initial encounter with Valentine. He seems to use his dog, Rita, to attract Valentine toward his house. She apparently runs over the dog, and takes her to her master's home where the doors are wide open and the judge is obviously waiting for Valentine. Kieslowski gives hints that the accident is not the product of chance, but the effects of a plan carefully designed by the judge. In fact, when Valentine gets in her car that day she feels a strange inexplicable disturbance, and a few seconds before she runs over the dog, her car radio begins to emit strange noises which distract her and make her run over the dog. These sounds are exactly the same ones we will hear in the judge's home. Valentine will keep Rita since the judge does not want her anymore, and a second time the dog will attract Valentine to the judge's house. In a way, the dog functions with Valentine as an Ariel that conducts her to the judge, just as Ariel leads several characters toward Prospero. Ferdinand's words about Ariel in *The Tempest* could be uttered by Valentine about "thence I have follow'd it, /or it hath drawn me rather" (I, ii, 396-7), and on the other hand, Prospero also uses spirits in the form of dogs at the end of *The Tempest* (IV, i) and Ariel himself even barks in one of his songs (I, ii).

In *The Tempest* Ariel is a presence that takes different shapes. In *Red* an Ariel-like presence is suggested by Kieslowski's use of the camera, as, for instance, when at one point it shows Auguste and then moves away in a remarkable travelling up without any cut and, with the smoothness of a bird's flight takes us through the window into Valentine's room to witness a phone conversation with her boyfriend. On several occasions the subjective camera suggests the point of view of an unseen character, as if the judge were a presence following her around. Another example is the moment when we see Valentine from behind a swing door through a subjective camera that does not correspond to the point of view of any character, suggesting in this way that someone is constantly watching and, at certain points, controlling her actions just as Prospero does with the rest of the characters in *The Tempest*.

The presence of the judge marks the action of *Red* in the same way that Prospero controls the events in *The Tempest*, including the "restaging" of his usurpation through the conspiracy of Antonio and Sebastian and that of Caliban, since this is an opportunity (as Orgel points out) "to rectify and to revise the past" (15). And this is exactly what the judge does in *Red* through the figure of Auguste, a law student that can be considered as an alter ego of the judge. What we see of the student's life re-enacts that of the judge, even in the smallest details. (Thus, for instance, before a crucial examination both dropped a book which opened exactly where the exam questions were shown, both like the fictional musician Van den Budenmayer, and both fall in love with a blonde woman two years older than them who eventually leaves them for a wealthier man.) Just as in *The Tempest* the restaging of the usurpation leads to a different ending thanks to Prospero's intervention, in *Red* the Judge also pulls the strings of his characters in order not to repeat his own story in Auguste. This time, as the judge envisions in a dream, the young lawyer will not be exiled from the kingdom of love and will find the happiness the Judge could not enjoy. What has been said about Miranda and Ferdinand is equally valid for Valentine and Auguste: they "[embody] the hope without which we could not live" (James, 152).

However, as recent criticism on *The Tempest* has pointed out, the hope and the restorative vision which appears at the end of *The Tempest* is limited. As Orgel says, at the end of the play "repentance remains (...) a largely unachieved goal, forgiveness is ambiguous at best (and) the clear ideal of reconciliation grows cloudy as the play concludes" (Orgel, 13). We only have to think in this sense of the suspicious silence of Antonio or the uncertain destiny of Caliban. This may be the reason why we readers can sense the "overwhelming impression of sadness that the play transmits through its happy ending" (Marienstras, 183). And this is exactly the feeling we get at the end of *Red*, where we find the same restorative vision that is clearly present in *The Tempest*

and, at the same time, on a deeper level, a much bleaker and gloomier vision of this restoration. *Red* has an apparently happy ending in which the heroes of the trilogy *Three Colours* reappear, miraculously saved from the shipwreck, and the audience is expected to share the Judge's smile of satisfaction. On second thoughts we remember that, in order to join Valentine and Auguste, more than 1400 innocent people have drowned. Can such a terrible disaster be a happy ending for a film that is, paradoxically, about fraternity?

I have only mentioned some of the more relevant parallelisms between *Red* and *The Tempest*. Other elements that could have been studied include the use of water imagery, the central role played by music in both works, or, crucially, the issue of forgiveness versus revenge that seems to mark both stories. Significantly enough, the judge is happy to remember how once he acquitted a sailor even though he was guilty; his lenient sentence, however, allowed the sailor to start a new life and find a new place as a constructive member of society.

Going back to the first idea that I presented at the beginning of this paper that *The Tempest* has always been adapted very freely, my claim is that, on the whole, there are enough similarities, echoes and intended reverberations of important aspects of *The Tempest* in Kieslowski's *Red* to justify an attentive reading of the film with Shakespeare's play in mind. I believe that a cross-study of these two works would enrich both the field of Shakespearean criticism and film studies, and this paper is a first approximation to the topic.

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