

ISSN 1751-8229
Volume Four, Number One

Shakespeare's Politics of Invisibility: Power and Ideology in *The Tempest*

Étienne Poulard – Cardiff University, United Kingdom

'Thought is free'—*The Tempest*

Introduction

'Use your authority!' (*The Tempest*, 1.1.20-21).ⁱ The boatswain's ironic appeal to Gonzalo in the very first scene of *The Tempest* sets the tone and uncovers the most pervasive theme of the play: power relations. His cruel emphasis on the powerlessness of the Italian statesmen at the hands of the raging elements highlights the complex status of authority. The struggle for the control of power on the island invites socio-political readings of the play. In the second part of the twentieth century, one of the main concerns of modern criticism has been to undermine Prospero's dominant discourse, pointing at the emergence of alternative voices. The present article reasserts the supremacy of his vision and its ineluctability by focusing on the paradox of authority, which raises a number of unsolved questions: how does the hard kernel of authority subtly move from invisible power to invisible ideology? But also, how does Prospero manage to sustain a consistent vision and what does it tell us in terms of dynamics of power?

Michel Foucault's maxim that 'visibility is a trap' (1977: 200) takes all its significance in Prospero's ocularcentric regime, where the sovereign's 'faceless gaze' operates 'like thousands of eyes posted everywhere' (213-4). The ultimate aim of this article, however, is to transcend Foucault's closed-circuit dialectics of power and resistance by offering an ideological reading of *The Tempest*. Ideology critique expressly rejects the Foucauldian rhetoric of 'micro-power': thus, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek writes that 'The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape' (1999a: 45). In this light, social reality appears as inexorably ideological, which I argue is the central motif structuring *The Tempest*. The first part of the article addresses power in terms of visibility, suggesting that Shakespeare's drama uncannily anticipate Foucault's panopticism. However, Shakespeare's fascination for the 'sovereign eye' (Sonnet 33) also contains a deep-rooted suspicion of vision, inviting reflections on the ideological status of the gaze. The second part explores the dynamics of the 'sovereign construct', endorsing Žižek's theory that the hard kernel of ideology is invisibility. The main concern here is to challenge traditional approaches to power and their excessive reliance on visibility. Thus, I ultimately suggest that power is not so much everywhere but *elsewhere*.

I -

'America is neither a dream nor a reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved' (Baudrillard 1986: 32). Like Baudrillard's America, Prospero's utopia is a hyperreality. Etymologically, 'utopia' means 'good place'—for Prospero, the island is a place of redemption, where he can prospectively plan his triumphal return to Milan after twelve long years of exile. Shakespeare's great utopian laboratory offers the perfect setting to experiment with new ways of wielding power. Thus, *The Tempest* is more than a *play* in the usual sense: its huge socio-political implications transcend its historical context and the topical references to Jacobean England significantly anticipate modern theories of power. Interestingly, Prospero's great vision has a flip side as it bears the mark of the impossible—utopia also means 'no/place'. This ambiguity between presence and absence brings visibility to the fore in the power dynamics of the island. Prospero's dramatic staging of the 'magus persona' suggests an acute paranoia about optics: his rule works through eminently visual devices. Besides being cliché, the items he relies on—such as his 'magic garment' (1.2.24) or his magic wand—have a very specific function: they assert the identity of the magus, from which he draws his symbolic authority.ⁱⁱ Nonetheless, these very simple codes convey a strong ideological message: they stage an "external" ritual [which] performatively generates its own ideological foundation'

(Žižek 1999b: 66). Even though Prospero has no legitimacy whatsoever as a magus, it is precisely the fake 'magus persona' that grounds his authority, ultimately justifying his totalitarian regime. His cheap junk jumble conveys a clear visual message ('Look at me, I am a magus and I am almighty!' etc.); these codes of power are the exterior signs of ideology at work. The most powerful visual code of Prospero's ideology lies in his books. The book is the ideological instrument *par excellence* because it is the ultimate signifier of language. In this sense, the creature Caliban is the perfect *medium* for ideology as his whole social perception relies on the king/subject relation. Being enslaved to Prospero's books and, consequently, to his language, he is unable to escape the magus' control without finding an ideological symbol surrogate. Hence, Caliban's pledge to Stefano that 'I'll swear upon that bottle to be thy true subject' (2.2.116) expresses the need for a prosthetic ideological symbol in his rebellion: by symbolising the shift from order to anarchy, the bottle becomes a substitute for Prospero's book. Caliban clearly expresses his awareness of the function of Prospero's books as instruments of power: he begs Stefano to kill him, 'Having first seized his books' (3.2.84), and stresses the importance 'First to possess his books, for without them / He's but a sot' (87-9).

Prospero's books also symbolise his control over the world of spirits. Thus, his scopic regime entirely rests on the agency of Ariel, the invisible eye of his power carrying out orders 'with a twink' (4.1.43). Ariel's ethereal nature is striking in contrast with Prospero's gaudy and eye-catching trinkets: 'I drink the air before me and return / Or ere your pulse twice beat' (5.1.104-5). Prospero's most significant demand is that the spirit should be 'subject / To no sight but thine and mine, invisible / To every eyeball else' (1.2.303-4). Ariel is Prospero's omniscient eye, his secret agent and the cornerstone of his visual government. From that perspective, the island emerges as a model prison of the gaze. On Shakespeare's island, the hard kernel of power lies in the sovereign's ability to see without being seen, thus replicating the conditions of a modern carceral universe. Caliban's paranoia is very symptomatic of this dystopian system, as he is always aware that '[Prospero's] spirits can hear me' (2.2.3). Prospero's ocularcentric surveillance system foreshadows Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (which was devised in 1785, i.e. almost two hundred years after Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*) and illustrates its most alienating effects. If the Panopticon 'was built beside the Thames to realise More's utopian dream of a transparent hive' (Wilson 2007: 122), it would very soon become the main symbol of Foucault's power dialectics. In this light, Prospero's obsession with visibility is disturbingly Foucauldian. His awareness that power has to be both ubiquitous and invisible to be effective makes *The Tempest* the great precursor to *Discipline and Punish*. The sovereign's use of the body as a site of subjection allows him to enforce his vision on his subjects through radical brainwashing. Caliban's discourse bears the mark of a

constant fear of being physically punished: 'From toe to crown he'll fill our skins with pinches, / Make us strange stuff' (4.1.231-2), 'I shall be pinched to death' (5.1.279), *etc.*

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault points at a fundamental shift in the organisation of the carceral system in the eighteenth century. Intrinsically 'a machine for dissociating seeing from being' (Wilson 1993: 154), the Panopticon allows the physical apparatus of power to become virtually invisible. In this sense, *The Tempest* essentially anticipates Bentham's Panopticon. Foucault's dialectics suggest that the omniscient eye of power was born with the Enlightenment and its totalitarian regime of truth: what the French thinker failed to acknowledge, however, is that the late Renaissance was the panoptic era *par excellence*. The Foucauldian shift from sovereignty to surveillance is consistently dramatised in Prospero's ocularcentric regime. It is certainly not a coincidence that Elizabeth's motto, which appeared in some of her portraits, was *Tutto Vedo* ('I see all'). Besides, how not to read the Duke's 'millions of false eyes' in *Measure for Measure* (4.4.56) as a topical reference to the Virgin Queen's famous eye-covered cloak?ⁱⁱⁱ If Shakespeare's is a 'theatre of surveillance,' as Richard Wilson puts it, it is mainly because it testifies to 'the panopticism symbolised in the sovereign's cloak of eyes' (Wilson 2007: 116-9). Written around 1603, *Measure for Measure* is Shakespeare's first dramatisation of the invisible dynamics of power. The accession of James I to the throne in the same year is very significant to grasp the political scope of a play paying tribute to 'the old fantastical Duke of dark corners' (4.3.147)—a very canny allusion to King James' famous scopophobia. The play stages a sovereign deliberately shunning physical power for the reason that 'I love the people, / But do not like to stage me to their eyes' (1.1.67-68).^{iv} However, the Duke's covert purpose is eminently political, as he is aware that the paradoxical condition of the expansion of power is invisibility.

Instead of the ostentatious presence of the medieval monarch, the hidden king will be nowhere and everywhere at once, his strength all the more godlike for being suspended and concealed (Wilson 2007: 94).

The same motif of a 'faceless gaze' is addressed in *The Tempest*. However, it is technology, the crucial device in Prospero's surveillance apparatus, that makes *The Tempest* so relevant to contemporary reflections on power and ideology. Technology is symbolically embodied in Prospero's magic, thus allowing him to reach an absolute degree of control and visibility. Foucault famously wrote that 'Power is everywhere, because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault 1980: 137), implying that there is no escape from power. Technology allows him to create and sustain an invisible wall that dissociates seeing from being—the aim being to blur the origin of power, so that the subjects can never really tell where authority is. In the modern dynamics of power, it is essential that the sovereign's all-seeing gaze should remain unseen. However, and this is what constitutes the main paradox of authority in the play, Prospero himself seems to ignore what underlies this

power optics. However, his erratic moods and sudden fits of anger clearly announce the return of the repressed. The ‘observation strange’ (*The Tempest*, 3.3.87) characterising his scopic regime marks the compulsion to look at things from an angle, which is indeed the main cause/effect of ideology.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek writes that ‘ideology is not simply a “false consciousness”, an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as “ideological”’ (1999a: 21). The aim of the present article is precisely to demonstrate that *The Tempest* stages power relations which are always inscribed within a larger ideological discourse. By constructing his discourse of power as the dominant one, Prospero shapes the boundaries of his ideological experience. His displaced perspective is the point of origin of the web of power relations constituting the social reality of the island. Žižek’s definition of reality implies the notion of a pre-existing perspective, of an angle from which we look at the world, a subjective bias that allows us to apprehend it. This distortion not only precedes every social interaction, but it is absolutely necessary for us to make sense of the world. Similarly, the impossibility of looking at things ‘objectively’—that is, not through the lens of ideology—is a recurring concern in Shakespeare’s plays. This awareness is conveyed through a general suspicion of the eye and its capacity to see things ‘the way they are’, in all objectivity: Shakespeare’s theatre is fascinated with the ‘perjur’d eye’ (Sonnet 152). *Richard II* provides one of Shakespeare’s most eloquent monologues, foreshadowing Lacan’s split between the eye and the gaze (Lacan 1973: 79-136). By suggesting that the eye both distorts and shapes reality in the same movement, Bushy’s speech points at the fact that the experience of vision is inherently ideological:

Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows,
Which shows like grief itself but is not so.
For sorrow’s eye, glazed with blinding tears,
Divides one thing entire to many objects—
Like perspectives, which, rightly gazed upon,
Show nothing but confusion; eyed awry,
Distinguish form. So your sweet majesty,
Looking awry upon your lord’s departure,
Find shapes of grief more than himself to wail,
Which, looked on as it is, is naught but shadows
Of what it is not. Then, thrice gracious Queen,
More than your lord’s departure weep not: more is not seen,
Or if it be, ’tis with false sorrow’s eye,
Which for things true weeps things imaginary.

(*Richard II*, 2.2.14-27)

What is suggested here is that ‘form’ can only be distinguished by altering one’s gaze and looking at things from an angle: our *vision* of the world is literally shaped by a pre-existing and necessary

perspective. As in Hans Holbein's famous picture, *The Ambassadors*, it is necessary to look from the sides to 'Distinguish form.' Both Bushy's speech and Holbein's painting illustrate the impossibility of looking at things objectively and suggest that reality lies in perspective—which is the core feature of ideology. The ideological gaze is 'literally a gaze capable of seeing nothingness, i.e., of seeing an object "begot by nothing",' Žižek notes in his well-named book on Lacan *Looking Awry* (1991: 9). Žižek's concept of ideology draws heavily from Lacanian psychoanalysis and its subtle negotiations between the orders of the Symbolic and the Real. The notion of perspectives 'rightly gazed upon' conveys a major paradox as it would amount to facing the Real and its horrendous vacuity: a vision that would 'Show nothing but confusion'. Significantly, one of the fundamental axioms of Lacanian psychoanalysis is that 'the Truth arises from misrecognition.' From this perspective, 'Looking awry' constitutes the unavoidable and necessary 'mistake' which allows us to make sense of reality. It seems a bit vain to speak about a mistake *stricto sensu*: if there is a mistake, Žižek explains, it is rather to be found in our unfortunate compulsion to 'overlook the way our act is already part of the state of things we are looking at, the way our error is part of the Truth itself' (1999a: 57-9). Prospero's illusion of power rests on the same dynamics, and his overlooking of the fact that misrecognition is part of the truth has dire psychological consequences. In the middle of the masque staged in the honour of the union of Ferdinand and Miranda, Prospero is suddenly stricken by what seems to be an irrational fit of anxiety. This fit precisely originates in his unconscious acknowledgement of the ideological distortion he has imposed on reality so far. His illusion of power *qua* absolute visibility crumbles when he finally acknowledges 'the baseless fabric of this vision' (*The Tempest*, 4.1.151)—a vision 'which, looked on as it is, is' indeed 'naught but shadows / Of what it is not' (*Richard II*, 2.2.23-4). Shakespeare's specular theatre consistently identifies the gaze with the look of the Other, thus foreshadowing Lacan's paranoia about optics. Such a visual regime constructs the gaze as the supreme cause/effect of ideology. The playwright's acutely Žižekian reflection on power and visibility suggests that there is nothing behind the pseudo-veil of ideology. Thus, if '*Richard II* proves beyond any doubt that Shakespeare had read Lacan,' *The Tempest* confirms that he had also read Žižek (Žižek 1991: 9).

In Foucault's theory that power is an effect of difference, resistance is the crucial instance of differentiation within power. Similarly, the presence of conflicting ideological discourses is what allows a dominant ideology to be sustained on the island; and ideology clearly works through difference. In their landmark postcolonial essay on *The Tempest*, Francis Barker and Peter Hulme note that usurpation is the main political theme pervading the play (Barker and Hulme 1999: 32-48).^v The possibility for usurpation is precisely what allows Prospero to legitimise and sustain his totalitarian rule on the island—which is also a core feature of the Machiavellian discourse on power. With its ominous dialectics of a power that always already includes its own resistance,

Shakespeare's 'prince of power' (*The Tempest*, 1.2.54) bridges the gap between the Machiavelli's absolute ruler and Foucault's omniscient eye. In the play, resistance is embodied by Caliban, who represents the main dissident voice. His threatening integration of Prospero's rhetoric makes him a dangerous insider to the established system:

You taught me language, and my profit on't
Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language.

(1.2.366-8)

Caliban's use of the coloniser's language illustrates to perfection the potential for resistance contained within power. Prospero's response to Caliban's harangues mainly consists in violent outbursts of rage: 'Thou most lying slave' (1.2.345). His bellicose disposition hardly conceals his terror at the monstrous appropriation of his imperial language (English or Italian, depending on the layer of textuality) by 'this thing of darkness' (4.1.278). Yet, obeying Foucault's power dynamics, Caliban's conspiracies necessarily fail as his antagonistic discourse only consolidates the sovereign's ideological narrative. Caliban's role is essential in terms of resistance, however: by depriving Prospero of his unique, all-encompassing discourse, he reveals the existence of alternative voices on the island. Thus, at least three different versions of the past coexist on the island: Caliban's, Ariel's and Prospero's. However, Prospero's version oddly prevails despite its blatant unreliability and inconsistency. In an interview about his new documentary on America, Adam Curtis tells Charlie Brooker:

The way power works in the world is: they tell you stories that make sense of the world. That's what America did after the second world war. It told you wonderful dreamlike stories about the world... (2009)

There could not be a better way of describing the way ideology works: in order to assert a coherent and acceptable ideological discourse, power must conceal its violent origins. In this sense, Prospero's own 'dreamlike stories' about the island aim at consolidating his ideological discourse (ideology is the sublime authority orchestrating power relations). His appropriation of the past also reveals how ideology compulsively infiltrates and rewrites history according to its own standards, in order to construct a credible narrative. Thus, although Caliban's claim to the island may appear as more justifiable ('This island's mine by Sycorax, my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me' (1.2.334-5)), Prospero turns it to his advantage. In Prospero's version, Sycorax is the malevolent witch-mother, a figure of absolute chaos and evil. By constructing her as his mirror image, he clearly presents his own reign as providential. While it was 'the foul witch Sycorax' (259) who imprisoned Ariel 'Into a cloven pine' (279) for twelve years, 'It was mine art / [...] that made gape / The pine

and let thee out' (293-5), Prospero fulminates. In a way, Sycorax is ideally dead as she is unable to contradict his version of history, which allows him to re-shape the past to his advantage. Prospero's scapegoating of Sycorax and her offspring Caliban in order to sustain his fantasy of absolute power confirms Žižek's formula stating that 'there is no ideology that does not assert itself by means of delimiting itself from another "mere ideology"' (1999b: 72).

However, the presence of alternative discourses on power fuels Prospero's anxiety (cf. his irrational outburst of anger at Caliban's uncanny command of English/Italian). In Act two, Gonzalo's would-be political manifesto (2.1.147-156) interestingly reflects the multitude of ideological *visions* co-existing on the island. Echoing Montaigne's essay *Des Cannibales*, Gonzalo's pre-Communist vision of the island implies 'No sovereignty' (156)—'Yet he would be king on't' (157), Sebastian tauntingly remarks. Indeed, Gonzalo's apparently simplistic fantasy gives a rather accurate image of the actual organisation of power on the island, an experimental space where there is a king but no substantial sovereignty. Thus, the episode turns into a metadramatic commentary on the paradoxical nature of authority—which is a central Shakespearean leitmotiv. In 'The Spectre of Ideology', Žižek suggests that the task of the "postmodern" critique of ideology' is to

designate the elements within an existing social order which—in the guise of 'fiction', that is, of 'utopian' narratives of possible but failed alternative histories—point towards the system's antagonistic character, and thus 'estrangle' us to the self-evidence of its established identity (1999b: 61).

This statement is essential to our reflection on power and visibility because it reveals the double-sidedness immanent to these 'alternative histories'. While fulfilling the Foucauldian dynamics of a power that includes its own resistance, these narratives also constitute a major step in decentring power from itself. They question the self-evidence of a power that precisely establishes itself as unquestionable. The most common strategy of totalitarian ideology is to substitute reality by perniciously infiltrating all the layers of social discourse. In this sense, the proliferation of alternative voices on the island conveys a global feeling of ideological estrangement. While these minor discourses seem unlikely to subvert power from within, they have an indirect and unconscious impact on it: they reveal its ideological structure. This revelation can only have tremendous psychological repercussions on the flesh and blood sovereign: indeed, the acknowledgement of the existence of an ideological kernel both within power and sustaining it may eventually prove fatal. Once again, visibility appears as an essential feature of the dynamics of power, but in a new light. In 'The Spectre of Ideology', Žižek writes that '*the very logic of legitimizing the relation of domination must remain concealed if it is to be effective*' (1999b: 61). Thus, invisibility represents the hard kernel of ideology—which is a rather optimistic and constructive statement in terms of resistance, as we shall see. This logic suggests that power always already the germs of its own decay. By also implying that there is always a choice for the subjects, such logic reasserts the

potential for genuine resistance—a resistance that would no longer be the instrument of power. The first step in distancing oneself from power is to make the dynamics of the sovereign construct visible.

II-

In the modern power dynamics described by Foucault, the sovereign physically disappears while his power paradoxically expands. This reading focuses on the body as exclusive site of subjection. However, the sovereign's authority is rooted in a pervasive ideological discourse, which entails a more abstract side to power; and as such, locating power in the physical body of the sovereign seems irrelevant. Ideology critique addresses the concealed flux of power relations underlying the highly mediated body of the sovereign. Transcending the traditional body natural/body politic duality, the 'sovereign construct' is directly inscribed in the dynamics of the 'body ideological'. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek decisively remarks that “‘being-a-king’ is an effect of the network of social relations between the “king” and his “subjects”” (1999a: 25). This definition sheds light on the fundamental notion of intersubjectivity, where ‘being-a-king’ corresponds to a globalised paradigm regulating power relations. It is a reading that relies on Foucault's thesis that power is an effect of difference where the king's position is justified by the existence of subjects, thus forming an intersubjective relation. However, the constitution of such a relation between two social entities implies the crucial notion of a choice. The possibility for a choice reveals the revolutionary potential pre-existing in the intersubjective relation—which already constitutes a first step out of Foucault's bleak power dialectics. The most difficult part, however, is for the subjects to acknowledge the fact that there *is* a choice: it is precisely the role of ideology to spread the idea that power goes ‘without saying’. The fundamental strategy of a dominant ideology is to posit itself as non-ideological and indispensable at the same time. The best example today would be capitalism: we tend to overlook the fact that capitalism is a specific (though globalised) discourse that could potentially be challenged—this *overlooking* precisely constitutes the basis of ideology. Thus, Žižek observes that the subjects compliantly accept the intersubjective relation ‘as if the determination of “being-a-king” were a “natural” property of the person of a king’ (1999a: 25). The medieval and early Renaissance kings put on stage in Shakespeare's history plays manage to sustain the intersubjective relation through the ideological narrative of Divine Providence. In the seventeenth century and throughout the Enlightenment, political thinkers like Milton, Locke or Rousseau consistently deconstructed this narrative by stressing that the king/subject relation is primarily the result of a contract implying an active decision.^{vi} The subjects' blind acquiescence in entering the relation might suggest either a general lack of confidence of the masses in their revolutionary potential or a tremendous lack of

imagination. However, Žižek more convincingly identifies the denial of this potential with a typical postmodern dead end, namely cynicism. In his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk puts forward the thesis that 'ideology's dominant mode of functioning is cynicism.' He illustrates his argument by reversing Marx's anthemic maxim, '*they do not know it, but they are doing it*', which becomes: 'they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it' (Žižek 1999a: 29). This conscious denial also reveals the presence of fetishism in the relation, of a masochistic kernel of enjoyment conditioning the feeling of enslavement. These two parameters suggest that the subjects themselves play an active role in sustaining the dominant ideology. In this light, the 'foul conspiracy / Of the beast Caliban and his confederates' (4.1.139-40) would be a deliberate move of lame resistance, aiming at sustaining the reality shaped by Prospero's ideological narrative. So, it seems that a majority of subjects seek to preserve the ruling ideological discourse by relying on it to regulate their social reality. Ultimately, we seem to value the ideological narrative produced by the established power because we assume that it will protect us against a fantasised vacuity—the vacuity of the Lacanian Real. Žižek warns against this excessive reliance on established power as 'reality machine'.

In *The Tempest*, power undergoes a globalisation from supervision to hypervision—Prospero's eminently physical supervision of the island is transcended by a wider, visionary approach to power, structured according to an ideological mode of vision. This hypervision also conditions the sovereign's ignorance of the mechanism underlying his own ideology. While ideology is ubiquitous, it is also fundamentally invisible: the social reality of the island is determined by power dynamics which are themselves dictated by ideology. From this point of view, the island becomes a pure ideological signifier to fix Prospero's fantasy: a *hyperreality*. In his famous book, *Simulacra and Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard foreshadows Žižek's reflections on power and virtual reality by observing that 'it is always a false problem to want to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum,' precisely because the simulacrum is bound to supplant the original (Baudrillard 2001: 185). Žižek is always eager to point out that ideology supplants retroactively our fantasy of an 'original' reality: ideology (always already) *is* reality. It is the inexorable bias, the necessary 'mistake' preceding our perception of the world. It is this so-called 'mistake' that keeps us from seeing that there never was an original, unbiased reality. If the social is inherently ideological, Baudrillard concludes that 'this is ultimately why power is so in accord with ideological discourses and discourses on ideology, for these are all discourses of *truth*' (2001: 185). This reveals an uncanny affinity between Prosperoland and Disneyland. Baudrillard depicts Disneyland as a condensed signifier of America's hyperreality. Officially, Disneyland is supposed to be a caricature of a fantasised American myth of origins: this gross misrecognition only confirms that the

ideological origin of America is precisely to be found in Disneyland. Interestingly, Baudrillard's reflection concurs with Foucault's analysis of the actual role of prisons in society:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, which *is* Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral) (Baudrillard 2001: 175).

Along the same lines, Shakespeare's cheap-junk tropical island is the ultimate simulacrum for power relations—did the peevish playwright have in mind to provide an allegory of British imperialism on his simulacrum-island? The spatiotemporal setting of *The Tempest* itself is hyperreal: the play's strict adherence to time units (the time of the play is supposed to match the time of the audience) and its attempt at recreating reality within the boundaries of a claustrophobic open space are somehow excessively 'real'. This concentration has the effect of a magnifying glass; it is exactly the same thing as observing mice interacting in a cage. Significantly, the fact that this 'guinea pigs' pattern also applies to Prospero himself opens up a whole new perspective in terms of power relations. The 'reality effect' mechanism suggests the presence of a greater, all-encompassing paradigm, transcending the boundaries of our structural understanding of the world. Could it be that there is a supreme, and of course invisible, authority above the sovereign construct? Yes? Who pulls the strings then? In *Twin Peaks*, the log-lady innocently remarks that

There is as much space outside the human, proportionately, as inside. Stars, moons and planets remind us of protons, neutrons and electrons. Is there a bigger being walking with all the stars within? (Lynch and Frost 2007)

(Like Socrates, the log-lady always seems to ask the right questions.)

The notion that social reality is inexorably ideological has huge implications in terms of power, and notably the fact that ideological discourses and discourses on ideology are all primarily 'discourses of *truth*'. Read from a certain perspective, Baudrillard's statement actually opens the possibility for a way out of the good old postmodern dead end that celebrates the instability of meaning as ultimate discourse of truth. This statement allows the possibility for a meaningful change to take place where power would no longer be a unique and unsurpassable regime of truth. A possibility to challenge such a regime emerges, provided that we take ideology seriously—by considering it not as a bias but rather as a constructive starting-point, a vector of change: 'The point [...] is to identify the Real of what seems to be mere discursive fiction, and to change it,' Heiko Feldner and Fabio Vighi write in *Žižek Beyond Foucault* (2007: 28). In this sense, belief—pure, irrational, Pascalian belief—appears as the essential condition of effective change. There is another essential conclusion that can be drawn from Baudrillard's statement: if it is possible to identify the Real in discursive fiction, then it is also possible for the sovereign-*in*-power to locate a fantasmatic ideological kernel within power (ideological is to be read in its 'original', Marxian sense

this time, i.e. as 'false consciousness'). This obscene supplement, which can only be seen by 'looking awry', is the result of a paranoid hallucination. Power is like a time bomb as it contains the potential to stop believing in its own great narrative. By overlooking the fact that ideological discourses are all discourses of truth, power becomes its own worst enemy. In this sense, Žižek fundamentally disagrees with the Foucauldian conclusion that we are irremediably caught in an endless web of interactions between power and resistance. If 'Foucault does not consider the possibility of an effect escaping, outgrowing its cause' (Žižek 1999c: 256), Žižek suggests the terrifying idea that power could potentially generate its own excess:

One is tempted to reverse the Foucauldian notion of an all-encompassing power edifice which always-already contains its transgression, that which allegedly eludes it: what if the price to be paid is that the power mechanism cannot even control *itself*, but has to rely on an obscene protuberance at its very heart? In other words: what effectively eludes the controlling grasp of power is not so much the external In-itself it tries to dominate but, rather, the obscene supplement which sustains its own operation (1999c: 252-4).

This 'obscene protuberance' refers to the presence of a maddening supplement in power, always already preceding it—a sort of evil double. By constantly spreading and permeating every inch of reality, ideology reveals itself as an organic substance working on its own: *it's alive*. In its own way, *The Tempest* also deals with the idea of an obscene supplement pervading power, a supplement sustaining its own operation and generating its own excess at the same time—a modern *pharmakon*. Ultimately, Prospero's mistake lies in his failure to acknowledge the truth inherent to every ideological position. His great power renunciation staged in act four is a blatant refusal to face the ideological truth of reality. Confronted to the insubstantiality of his environment, his illusion of absolute power suddenly vanishes. His 'so potent art' (5.1.50) turns into an instrument of damnation, convincing him that 'my ending is despair (epilogue, 15). The 'obscene supplement' is also a cornerstone of Lacanian psychoanalysis, conjuring up the cryptic *objet petit a*, 'Which, looked on as it is, is naught but shadows / Of what it is not' (*Richard II*, 2.2.23-3). If the *objet petit a* is so central to ideological discourses, it is because it *is* the 'sublime object of ideology' which 'serves as the fantasmatic support of ideological propositions,' Žižek notes in *The Parallax View* (2006: 41). The vacant space it occupies in vision—a blind spot—demarcates the pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment as absence. In Holbein's painting, the skull symbolises this empty shape as an ambiguous space of desire and death. In *Richard II*, 'looking awry' is the cause/effect of ideological perspective. In this light, the misrecognition by the sovereign of their own ideology defines, as much as it enacts, the essence of the ideological. Prospero initially overlooks the fact that power contains its own excess, its own potential for transgression, and this ignorance turns out to be the very condition of the success of his absolute regime. Shakespeare's acutely psychoanalytical dramas stage the impossibility to come to terms with this organic excess subverting power.

Hamlet. The King is a thing —
Guildenstern. A thing my lord?

Hamlet. Of nothing.

(*Hamlet*, 4.2.26-28)

As Claudius or Richard II, Prospero is a 'king of nothing' because he is only a medium for ideology, the agent of its symbolisation. An example taken from American popular culture may help us understand to what extent the king is a hollow portrait. In *Ghostbusters 2* (Reitman, 1989), the evil painting is only a façade, a gateway to the origin of evil *qua* pure ideological substance. Vigo the Carpathian, the sombre sovereign represented on the picture, is the arch-figure of the puppet king. Behind the painting flows the pink river of slime, the ideological origin of evil—an unnameable, unsymbolisable origin *per se*. Although Vigo looks evil and his eyes flash rays of lightning threateningly, his function is purely mechanic: he constitutes a physical interface between the Symbolic world of New York and the Real in its most traumatic form, i.e. the secret slime river flowing behind the painting. Interestingly, the Ghostbusters team succeed in thwarting the evil ideology by *consciously* making the connection between the painting and the slime river, between the physical façade of power and pure unintelligible ideology. Understanding that Vigo is only a medium for ideology allows them to trace evil to its very root (the slime river). Thus, singing songs of love and fraternity will have a direct impact on the slime. Along the same lines, Prospero's conception of his power as non-ideological is absolutely essential to keep at bay the self-destructive mechanism of the *pharmakon*. The illusion of power functions precisely because it is experienced as real, and the sovereign remains a 'prince of power' as long as he is able to ignore his status of ideological puppet.

From this point of view, *The Tempest* transcends the Foucauldian power dynamics by staging the self-alienating excess contained in power. Prospero's fantasy of a power that is both ubiquitous and invisible replicates unconsciously the hardcore mechanism of ideology. His illusion of power relies on sublimation, which is the appropriate psychoanalytical term to describe the principle of invisibility underlying ideology. Žižek expressly refers to ideology as 'a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence' (1999a: 21). Of course, the term 'participants' includes both the subjects and the king—the two main instances constituting the relation of intersubjectivity. Thus, the 'non-knowledge' of the ideology feeding power and giving substance to the sovereign is the very condition of social reality: and this is *especially* true for the ruler himself. While ideological sublimation underlies, regulates, and in the end justifies power relations, this constructive principle has an intrinsic flip side: by conditioning the whole of social experience, sublimation also necessarily embodies 'the death drive at work, leading the subject towards fascination and destruction' (Cléro 2002: 72). Thus, sublimation names the

unnameable as it is intimately bound up with the order of the Real—broadly defined by Lacan as that which escapes symbolisation. While the Real is essentially elusive, it cannot be reduced to a mere paradigm of exteriority as it transcends the traditional inside/outside dichotomy. It would be more accurate to define it in terms of what lies beneath the surface—remember the pink slime river in *Ghostbusters 2*. The Real sometimes manifests itself in the Symbolic order through pernicious incursions, thus illustrating ‘the death drive at work’. Indeed, these terrifying and nonsensical eruptions suggest that power contains its own principle of death. *In life is death*. The antagonistic breaches through which the Real infiltrates our everyday ‘reality’ (the Symbolic) fill us with terror as they remind us of the inexorable movement of entropy inscribed in all things. In *The Tempest*, the sudden irruption of the Real plunges Prospero into a distracted melancholy: ‘Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled’ (4.1.159), he tells the young couple during the celebration. If he appears to be ‘in some passion / That works him strongly’ (142-3), it is because, significantly, his fantasy of absolute control dissolves. The smooth surface of the Symbolic suddenly cracks and the viscous magma of the Real begins to spout through gaping holes, leaving Prospero somewhat ‘distempered’ (145) and ‘vexed’ (158). These desultory incursions testify to the interiority of the Real, which ultimately stands for the self-fracture or fundamental inconsistency of the Symbolic. Subsequently, Prospero’s anxiety originates in the *pressentiment* that something terrible is happening: ‘all, all lost, quite lost!’ (190). But what exactly is lost?

It is fundamentally impossible for the sovereign to acknowledge the network of authority, for ‘if we come to “know too much”, to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself’ (Žižek 1999a: 21)—which is exactly what happens at the end of *The Tempest*. Prospero ultimately ‘comes to “know too much”’ and the consequences of this impossible acknowledgement are catastrophic. Facing the illusory nature of his power, the island becomes nothing more than what it is: a Hollywoodian cardboard setting, an ‘insubstantial pageant’ (4.1.155). In one of Shakespeare’s most inspired metadramatic tirades, Prospero’s vision is sucked within the vortex of the Real and reduced to airy nothingness:

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-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,

Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And like 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.
(4.1.148-58)

This disillusioned flight of lyricism testifies to the intrinsically theoretical nature of the play and of the power relations it stages. It also appears as a profound ode to virtual reality, an uncanny and early grasp of the postmodern soul—Shakespeare is now often credited for being the father of poststructuralism. The short circuit taking place in Prospero's vision is an anti-climactic epiphany, illustrating the surfacing of latent ideology and causing the whole edifice of power to topple. Lacanian psychoanalysis posits a parallel between ideology and desire: these two notions are defined by perpetual deferral. In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek remarks that 'Every ideology attaches itself to some kernel of *jouissance* which, however, retains the status of an ambiguous excess' (1997: 50). Prospero's fantasy of power as absolute realisation contains the ambiguous excess of this *jouissance*—indeed, power is not something that can fundamentally be 'achieved' as it is the result of an intersubjective relation. Sublimation is the principle that conditions the 'reality effect' on the island, sustaining Prospero's illusion of an 'achieved' power. His renunciation enacts the endless deferral of enjoyment: 'But this rough magic / I here abjure' (5.1.50-1). Interestingly, his abnegation is enacted through the rejection of the very same ideological codes that sustained his authority earlier: he thus makes the official pledge that 'I'll break my staff' (54) and 'I'll drown my book' (57). Hence, Prospero's ideological sequence oddly follows the Lacanian sequence of desire to the letter. It is precisely when he reaches the possibility of realising his fantasy of absolute control that doubts starts to assail him, precipitating the mechanism of self-destruction contained in power.

Ultimately, the dissolution of his desire to rule and control leads him to set (almost) all his subjects free and to forgive (almost) all of them. This sudden forgiveness seems irrational and gratuitous; however, the happy ending conceals a dreadful re-appropriation of power. Jacques Derrida's controversial intervention at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in 1994 can help us make sense of Prospero's unexpected decision to forgive—a seemingly inadequate decision for such a 'prince of power'. Derrida points at an essential paradox by

suggesting that forgiveness is practically impossible since the only thing to forgive is, precisely, the unforgivable. Thus, genuine forgiveness should be absolute and unconditional: however, Derrida notes, 'each time forgiveness is effectively exercised, it seems to suppose some sovereign power.' Indeed, what allows Prospero to *exert* forgiveness is precisely his position as a sovereign. So, the ideal forgiveness would be 'a forgiveness without power: *unconditional but without sovereignty*' (Derrida 2001: 59). Prospero's forgiveness, however, is disturbingly grudging and ambiguous:

I do forgive
Thy rankest fault—all of them; and require

My dukedom of thee, which perforce I know

Thou must restore

(133-6)

By contradicting his previous renunciation of power and its dodgy promise of a post-ideological future, this paradoxical promise corroborates Žižek's statement that 'the starting point of the critique of ideology has to be full acknowledgement that it is easily possible to *lie in the guise of truth*' (1999b: 61). Prospero never really offers the post-ideological world that his theatre of redemption seems to promise. Significantly, his 'unconditional' forgiveness does not extend to Caliban, 'this thing of darkness' which 'I / Acknowledge mine' (278-9)—*visions of Prospero back in Milan, displaying Caliban as a sideshow monster*. The 'thing of darkness' that Caliban embodies is the fundamental blind spot in Prospero's vision, allowing power to shift somewhere else. On the one hand, his renunciation appears as a big publicity stunt, but it is also an unconscious response to the sudden shift taking place in the ideological scheme driving him. The possibility for an immediate and genuine resolution puts him at risk of facing the mechanism of his desire and its 'non-sensical pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment,' which is 'the last support of the ideological effect,' Žižek ultimately warns (1999b: 124). In the end, Prospero's ideology is simply transferred from the island onto Milan. His forgiveness only expresses a will to step out of ideology—a childish and impossible move as '*the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it*' (Žižek 1999b: 60). The never-ending nature of ideology suggests that it is always in reconstruction somewhere else. Thus, Prospero's grudging forgiveness is only a cover, skilfully concealing ideological deferral: as its etymology suggests, the utopia (no/place) entails a sense of perpetual deferral.

Conclusion

A close examination of *The Tempest* and its utopian laboratory reveals the extent to which Prospero's authority is rooted in optics. His ocularcentric regime foreshadows Foucault's all-encompassing power, which operates 'like thousands of eyes posted everywhere'. The physical disappearance of the sovereign constitutes a major paradox as his authority expands all the more: thus, 'power is everywhere, because it comes from everywhere'. At the same time, the absence of a definite centre of authority fosters a power struggle on the island. The emergence of several conflicting visions is what significantly allows us to identify ideology in *The Tempest*. Prospero's dominant discourse feeds on the alternative voices contesting his authority, thus confirming the Foucauldian idea that resistance is the legitimising instance of power. However, power obeys a larger perspective that transcends the supervision of the physical sovereign. This hypervision encapsulates the web of power relations constituting social reality. If reality is inherently ideological, then 'looking awry' enacts the ideological perspective underlying power: power itself is the result of an ideological distortion engulfing both the king and his subjects in a maddening vortex. At the same time, ideology transcends the flesh and blood ruler: 'being-a-king' is the paradigm of social relations constituting the sovereign construct. The two essential features of ideology are its ubiquity and its invisibility. In this sense, the most fundamental condition of ideology lies in the sovereign's pre-requisite ignorance of his ideological stance. On the other hand, we generally take it for granted that the subjects should be naïvely oblivious of the ideology pervading their social reality. Nothing could be further from the truth, Žižek contends, as there is a great deal of cynicism and fetishism in the subjects' compliance to the dominant ideology—thus, 'they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it' becomes the post-Marxist formula to describe the postmodern ideology of cynicism. The elusive nature of ideology is embodied in the sovereign's scopic drive, drawing a clear parallel between ideology and desire: they cannot be directly confronted, so they obey a mechanism of elusion. As a result, power is endlessly deferred and re-constructed in another place, which defines power as essentially absent. Ultimately, the dynamics of ideology reveal that power is not so much everywhere, but fundamentally *elsewhere*.

This uncanny elsewhere-ness suggests that power has neither a beginning nor an ending: escaping the grasp of the sovereign and reproducing itself *ad libitum*, it is fundamentally out of control. This unstoppable proliferation also generates a maddening supplement, an excess in power.

[T]hen the key question to be raised is how we can conceive of a political intervention which breaks free from the vicious circle whereby regimes of power reproduce themselves by continuously creating and obliterating their own excess (Feldner and Vighi 2007: 98).

First of all, a sustained awareness of the mechanism underlying power seems essential: if power is an effect of the intersubjective relation between king and subjects, then it should be possible to withdraw from the relation (in theory at least). In *The Tempest*, however, the vicious setting of the island makes it an inescapable prison, barring any possibility for the subjects to escape. In the face of such a totalitarian regime, Žižek suggests subtraction as an alternative (2006: 271-329). Subtraction (or 'Bartleby politics') mainly consists in passive resistance, a general reluctance to comply with the established Ideological State Apparatuses. It also 'implies attempting to suspend the vicious circle whereby regimes of power reproduce themselves by concealing their own basic aimlessness' (Feldner and Vighi 2009: 1). Perhaps this is the ultimate message of *The Tempest* after all—indeed, the play's ideology discourse is very relevant to our globalised world. Today, there is an urge to resist the pervasive ideology of capitalism and its harmful consequences. 'Resisting' capitalism does not mean becoming an old school Communist, brandishing stupid and outdated Marxist slogans (one of the main achievements of the capitalistic ideology is precisely to convince us that if we do not embrace it, then we are this retarded Communist that nobody really wants to be—the American government, notably, has been very good at that throughout the twentieth century). Modern resistance is more about integrating the fact that there are alternatives to capitalism, because capitalism is only one ideological mode amongst others. By leaving us on the threshold of a resolution, *The Tempest* ultimately conveys a message of hope, an invitation to transcend the prevailing politics of cynicism and to search out new political answers to contemporary issues; this is why the play is ultimately so relevant to our times of economic crisis and cynicism. Emphasis needs to be put on our capacity to think as individual citizens because our politicians are too short-sighted to propose effective solutions. We need to think with confidence, simply because 'we can'—as Barack Obama's electoral slogan reminds us (disregarding how cheesy it may sound to post-9/11 cynical ears). In keeping with *The Tempest*'s motto that 'Thought is free' (3.2.123), Jonathan Freedland's recent column in *The Guardian* is a hopeful invitation to think freely: indeed, 'The very first step is for all of us to believe that change is a possibility' (2009).

i **NOTES**

All quotations from Shakespeare are from the Norton edition, based on the Oxford Shakespeare.

- ii Illusion is the essential device in Prospero's strategy of control. His magic itself works through illusion: for instance, he shamelessly dismisses the storm of the first scene as an optical illusion, 'performed to point' by Ariel (1.2.195).
- iii Cf. the famous 'Rainbow Portrait' (1600-02) of Queen Elizabeth I, attributed to Isaac Oliver.
- iv This very topical reference refers to King James' disguise mania: he used to mingle with his subjects in order to observe them and discover their hidden intentions. His paranoia was rooted in the general climate of political conspiracy, which culminated in The Gunpowder Plot (1605)—a notorious plot by a group of provincial English Catholics to assassinate the king.
- v The essay suggests that the plot of *The Tempest* is triggered by an initial usurpation (Antonio casting off Prospero), which seems to repeat endlessly throughout the play: in Sebastian and Antonio's failed attempt at killing Alonso or, more significantly, in Caliban's mutiny against Prospero. In his account to his daughter Miranda early in the play, Prospero explains that 'The government I cast upon my brother / And to my state grew stranger' (1.2.75-6)—a highly ambiguous statement that could be interpreted as referring to Prospero's mental disorder.
- vi John Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649); John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right* (1762).

REFERENCES

- Barker, Francis and Peter Hulme (1999) 'Nymphs and Reapers Heavily Vanish: the Discursive Contexts of *The Tempest*', in R. S. White (ed.), *The Tempest: New Casebooks*
- Baudrillard, Jean (1986) *Amérique*, Grasset et Fasquelle
- Baudrillard, Jean (2001) 'Simulacra and Simulations', in *Selected Writings*, Stanford University Press
- Curtis, Adam (2009) 'The United States of America', *The Guardian Guide*, interview by Charlie Brooker 20th June, p. 12
- Derrida, Jacques (2001) *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, London: Routledge
- Foucault, Michel (1977) *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Foucault, Michel (1980) *The History of Sexuality: Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Feldner, Heiko and Fabio Vighi (2007) *Žižek Beyond Foucault*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Feldner, Heiko and Fabio Vighi (2009) 'Slavoj Žižek's Bartleby Politics and the Economic Crisis', *The Exception Magazine*, 19th February, available from: <http://exceptionmag.com/politics/perspectives/000365/slavoj%C5%BEi%C5%BEeks-bartleby-politics-and-stimulus> [accessed 13 June 2009]
- Freedland, Jonathan (2009) 'The very first step is for all of us to believe that change is a possibility', *The Guardian*, 24th June, p. 32
- Lacan, Jacques (1973) *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, text established by Jacques-Alain Miller, éditions du Seuil
- Lynch, David and Mark Frost, directors (2007), *Twin Peaks* [DVD] episode 9 ('log-lady introduction'), France: TF1 Video
- Oliver, Isaac (c. 1600) *Rainbow Portrait* [Painting], Hatfield House, Hatfield
- Reitman, Ivan (1989) *Ghostbusters II* [DVD], US: Columbia Pictures
- Shakespeare, William (1997) *The Norton Shakespeare*, S. Greenblatt, W. Cohen, J. E. Howard and K. E. Maus (eds.), New York and London: Norton
- Wilson, Richard (1993) *Will Power*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf
- Wilson, Richard (2007) *Shakespeare in French Theory: King of Shadows*, Oxon and New York: Routledge
- Žižek, Slavoj (1991) *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge (MA) and London: The MIT Press
- Žižek, Slavoj (1997) *The Plague of Fantasies*, London and New York: Verso

Žižek, Slavoj (1999a) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, London, New York: Verso

Žižek, Slavoj (1999b) 'The Spectre of Ideology', in Edmond and Elizabeth Wright (eds.) *The Žižek Reader*, Oxford, Malden (MA) and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing

Žižek, Slavoj (1999c) *The Ticklish Subject*, London and New York: Verso

Žižek, Slavoj (2006) *The Parallax View*, Cambridge (MA): MIT Press