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**THE SAME, YET DIFFERENT: CARYL PHILLIPS'S SCREEN
ADAPTATION OF V. S. NAIPAUL'S *THE MYSTIC MASSEUR***

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In spite of an abundant fictional production—a dozen novels and several volumes of short stories—V. S. Naipaul had not had any of his works adapted for the cinema until Ismail Merchant, of the famous Merchant-Ivory film company, decided a few years ago to make Naipaul's first published novel, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), into a movie. Attracted to the story by its comedy elements but also by its main character, Ganesh, whose social ascent is helped by a boundless energy and an imagination germane to his own,¹ Merchant approached St Kitts-born Caryl Phillips to write the screenplay. That Phillips accepted the offer readily may have come as a surprise, if not a shock, to critics and scholars of Caribbean literature, for the younger writer is not exactly

1. Phillip Williams, "Crossing Boundaries: The Reinvention of Auteur Ismail Merchant", *MovieMaker Magazine*, 2.4., www.moviemaker.com/hop/12/auteur.html

known as a Naipaul fan. Admittedly, Naipaul and Phillips have a few things in common, such as their birth in the Caribbean, their education at Oxford, their ability to move with ease between fiction and non-fiction, and not least perhaps a worldwide recognition for their finely crafted prose. And yet, their visions of the world and of literature are as widely apart as can be, a divergence that cannot be explained by the fact that the two writers belong to different generations. Naipaul is known for an altogether pessimistic, often aloof, if not misanthropic view of human nature, and for his disillusioned statements on the future of the novel as a genre which, for him, ultimately fails to pin down reality.¹ Though Phillips is not reputed to be an incurable optimist, he is viewed as a compassionate chronicler of human survival to the sufferings inflicted on man by man, and as a writer for whom "novels are an incredibly democratic medium" since they give "everyone [...] a right to be understood".² In short, as Phillips himself declared in a talk published in 1992, "[their] outlook on most things, literary and otherwise, differs quite radically".³

Why, then, did Phillips finally agree to adapt *The Mystic Masseur* for the screen? Regardless of Ismail Merchant's persuasive power, he seems to have been influenced by the qualities of the novel. As he points out in his foreword to the script, "Here was a book which could not only be filmed, but one that was rich in character, in comedy, and full of pathos". Moreover, like other early novels of V. S. Naipaul, it seemed to portray, Phillips insists, "a Trinidad

1. V. S. Naipaul, "Delivering the Truth: An Interview with Aamer Hussein", *TLS*, 2 (September 1994): 3-4 (p. 3).

2. "Caryl Phillips Interviewed by Graham Swift", *Kunapipi*, 13.3 (1991), 96-103 (p. 98).

3. Caryl Phillips, "West Indian Writing Abroad: Naipaul and the New Generation", *Caribbean Review of Books*, 3 (February 1992): 16, 19, 24, 25, 27 (p. 16).

that the author had some affection for",¹ a feature that, as Phillips deplores, was to disappear from Naipaul's later writing.² Finally, in Phillips's decision was also the hope of seeing Caribbean life at last represented for an international audience as something else than "an exotic backdrop for stories of people whose lives are not invested in the region".³ This film could therefore hopefully contribute to changing people's uninformed view of that part of the world as characterized exclusively by beaches, carnival and Calypso, a preoccupation that also underlies many of Phillips's artistic undertakings, whether his fiction, his non-fiction or his work as an editor.

Fidelity is one of the major issues that come to mind when one examines the cinematographic adaptation of a literary work. On the surface, Phillips's screenplay is quite close to Naipaul's book in its episodic structure and rhythm. According to Phillips, *The Mystic Masseur*, with its well-established "sense of drama", did not require a complete reworking of the plot; there was no need for him to "'break' the novel and make something afresh".⁴ Moreover, given the intellectual tension between the two writers, there must have been on his part a conscious effort not to betray his elder's text, but, on the contrary, to attempt to serve its humour and humanity with loyalty, a duty of faithfulness that he probably did not feel to such an extent when he adapted his own novel, *The Final Passage*, for television in 1996.

1. Caryl Phillips, "Foreword", in Gérard Besson and Caryl Phillips, *The Mystic Masseur: Essays and Excerpts from the Screenplay* (Cascade, Trinidad: Paria Publishing, 2001): 5-7 (p. 6).

2. Caryl Phillips, "V. S. Naipaul", *A New World Order* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001): 209.

3. Phillips, "Foreword", 6.

4. Phillips, "Foreword", 6.

This being said, however, a closer look at the script reveals several meaningful, if sometimes minor, changes. Some of them are obviously imposed by the film format. For example, while the dialogue in Trinidadian English is counter-pointed in the novel by a narrative in Standard English, the film is almost exclusively spoken in vernacular, with the exception, particularly in the second part, of some voice-overs by the narrator, a student at Oxford University, and of the lines spoken by Mr Stewart, a crazy Englishman who thinks he is an Indian but nevertheless "does talk normal".¹ For one commentator this new linguistic distribution has preposterous results for it makes us patronize the characters, "as if", he writes, "we [were] observing [them] through the windows of a tour bus".² I cannot agree with this criticism, for it looks upon Trinidadian English as being *per se* an inferior language, while it views what it calls the "fluent prose" of the narration in the novel as "graceful". If I agree that such a change is ineluctable given the film format, to me, if anything, it confers respectability on the local language. Thus, even if the accent of the actors does not always sound Trinidadian, the language they use stands in its own right, no longer an exotic version of a norm imposed from abroad, what Ganesh in Naipaul's novel calls "good English" (*MM*, 78) and, at one point, attempts in vain to adopt in everyday conversation. Perhaps meaningfully, the dialogue in the film is free from the malapropisms and other errors, such as "edication" (*MM*, 102), "antheology" (*MM*, 93) or "correctest people"

1. Caryl Phillips, adapt. *The Mystic Masseur*, by V. S. Naipaul, unpublished screenplay, December 2000, 13. Further references to this screenplay will be mentioned in the text with the abbreviation S.

2. Stanley Kauffmann, "Naipaul, Stoppard – and Winslet", *The New Republic* (13 May 2002): 24.

(*MM*, 153), which Naipaul had put in the mouths of the Trinidadian villagers with the sarcastic effect one can imagine.

Nevertheless, most departures from the original novel cannot be attributed only to the new medium. They can, of course, be read as further proof of the gap that separates the two writers. But, I would argue, they could also be viewed as an attempt, albeit unconscious, on Phillips's part, not to settle old scores, or rectify anything, but to enter into some dialogue with Naipaul. In other words, the changes introduced by Phillips could be regarded as an unintended acknowledgment of some common ground for discussion resting on a shared Caribbean legacy and on a common exilic condition.

The remainder of this paper will focus on a few selected areas where Phillips's script clearly modifies Naipaul's text. I will attempt to analyse how these changes shed light on the writers' divergent philosophies and, in view of the argument outlined above, how they can help to interrogate Naipaul's 1957 novel or even dynamize some of the buried clues it contains. After examining the structure of the two versions, i.e. the novel and the script, I will concentrate on their treatment of gender, family, and race, three major areas of disagreement but also possible exchange between the two artists.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the novel and the script lies in their overall structures. Even though Phillips follows the novel almost step by step, he places its very last scene, in which Ganesh Ramsumair, now called G. Ramsay Muir, is welcomed by a fellow Trinidadian in an English station, right at the beginning of the film. As one can easily imagine, this alters the tone of the whole narrative. The revelation of Ganesh's new name, coming as it does, at the end of the novel, works as a final straw

to the satire built by Naipaul throughout the book, and it somehow brings home unequivocally that Ganesh is a charlatan, who is only interested in his own advancement and is ready to jettison his identity in exchange for some recognition from the colonial power. By putting the revelation at the start, Phillips in a way deflates Naipaul's satire, but, more importantly, stands Ganesh's tale on its head, as it were, allowing us to see it from a different perspective. So, if the new structure makes for a rather flat, unsurprising ending, in which, a critic writes, "cynicism has been defanged",¹ it also presents the story of Ganesh's ascent to power in a more tolerant way, allowing the rest of the film to explain the process of colonial alienation that affects Ganesh as both victim and agent.² This, of course, highlights a major difference between Naipaul's and Phillips's views of human nature. If both novelists often depict human foibles and weaknesses, Naipaul tends to be content with exposing them in all their crudeness, while Phillips generally uses his narrative as an attempt to understand why people behave the way they do, which does not mean that he condones or judges their behaviour in any way. So, in a way, Phillips's adaptation brings the tale beyond what George Lamming has described as "castrated satire", which, for him, cannot on its own inform an important work of art.³

1. Brandon Judell, "The 'Mystic' Producer; Ismail Merchant's 'Mystic Masseur' Reshuffles Naipaul", *IndieWire*, www.indiewire.com/film/biz/rev-020502-MysticMasseur.html

2. There is another difference, which has less impact on the dramatic effect of the film. While in the novel Ganesh's MBE is announced from early on (*MM*, 18), in the script the news comes when Ganesh's political career has run aground and the colonial authorities decide to award him the title as a means of securing his support.

3. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960. London: Alison & Busby, 1984): 225.

It should be added, however, that Phillips's move away from satire to a "gentle, mocking"¹ tone which is not devoid of irony is not expressed only through this structural change, but through other elements as well. Let us look at the same scene once again. In Naipaul's version it concludes with Ganesh rejecting the enthusiastic welcome of his fellow Trinidadian and giving his new name "coldly"², this adverb being significantly the very last word of the novel. Phillips transforms this scene by introducing a previous personal link between the two men, so that their reunion on the platform station is imbued with genuine warmth on both sides, even though Ganesh is still described in the scene directions as holding himself in "an unapologetically pompous manner" (*S*, 1).

Clearly, then, it is in his reworking of human relationships that Phillips operates the most significant transformations, which would tend to demonstrate that Naipaul's early novel is full of a humanity that is often left latent, obliterated by layers of sarcasm and of reserve. This is particularly the case with man-woman relationships. While the ups and downs of Ganesh and Leela's married life are about the same in the two versions, their rapports are less caricatural in the screenplay. Leela is still greedy, manipulative, and naive, but she is also clear-sighted and plays a more positive role in Ganesh's career, while in Naipaul's novel she is first presented as a giggling girl, then as apparently "chastened and impassive, a good Hindu wife" (*MM*, 55) or as a tearful creature (*MM*, 104). Moreover, Phillips does not hesitate to suggest some

1. Jean Oppenheimer, "Pilgrim's Progress: Merchant Ivory Bring V.S. Naipaul to the Big Screen in *The Mystic Masseur*", *New Times L.A.*, 16 May 2002.

2. V. S. Naipaul, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977): 220. Further references to this edition are mentioned in the text.

form of tenderness between the two spouses, a dimension that is totally absent from the novel, for, as Phillips points out in an essay, "the region of the heart is a place that Naipaul, more than any writer of his generation, has seemed determined to avoid".¹

The character of the aunt provides another interesting point of comparison. Called "The Great Belcher" in the novel, Ganesh's aunt is a woman who devotes her life to Indian communal celebrations, such as weddings and funerals. As her name indicates, she remains something of a stereotype who always turns up when Ganesh is in need of financial or material advice. In the script, however, even though she is still prone to belching, she loses her nickname. There she is most often called "auntie", an affectionate term that corresponds better to her part as a substitute mother to Ganesh, as a guide in his marriage and career. Her death in the film shortly after Ganesh's departure for Port of Spain further symbolizes his temporary rejection of the old, rural order.

The positive role played by women in the script also seems to highlight the importance accorded by Phillips to substitute family relationships which, in his own fiction too, are a way of making good the disruptions and dislocations caused by colonial history. In the script, therefore, Ganesh is no longer viewed as an orphan, an isolated individual, in short as a castaway, but as a man who, thanks to the generosity of others, but also to his own resourcefulness, can make up for the void that fate has created around him. Significantly, Ganesh and Leela's childlessness is treated very differently in the two texts. In keeping with Naipaul's avoidance of emotional issues, the novel mentions Leela's barrenness in passing in two dialogues, then refers to it, in a detached, third-person

1. Phillips, "Naipaul", *A New World Order*, 187.

narrative as "another disappointment in [Ganesh's] life" (*MM*, 74). In the script, on the contrary, it becomes a touching issue discussed by Ganesh and his wife on an intimate mode or evoked through Leela's prayers. Ganesh does not resign himself to the idea of having no heir, but believes his creativity and imagination can provide a solution: "Leela, girl. Don't cry so. The books I [go] write they [go] be my children. You hear me? We going make sons and daughters out of literature" (*S*, 30). This, in a sense, could be Phillips's reply to Naipaul's famous statement in *The Middle Passage* that "nothing was created in the British West Indies".¹ Admittedly, Ganesh's books are not presented as sophisticated literature in the script – even less so in the novel where they are ridiculed, for example when the narrator says that Ganesh found inspiration for one of his books in a musical toilet-roll rack (*MM*, 164). But, as Phillips shows, Ganesh's resourcefulness commands some kind of respect in spite of his literary mediocrity. Moreover, for all its modesty, his achievement, like that of Mr Biswas, should be viewed in the context of a colonial society which did not encourage individuals to excel, but, in line with its educational system which was supposed to form, not inform, pupils (*MM*, 24) conditioned them to imitate the West, for example by drinking Coca-Cola, presented in both novel and screenplay as the ultimate token of modernity.

A final example of the substitute relationships, and thus of the added emotion, woven by Phillips into Naipaul's narrative is provided by the connections between Ganesh and the narrator. In the novel, the two hardly meet, and this impersonality guarantees the detachment of the narrative, with all the irony this entails. In

1. V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (1962. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978): 27.

the script, the narrator is no longer anonymous: he is Partap, the fatherless son of Ganesh's landlady when he was a teacher in Port of Spain, also the boy pursued by a black cloud on whom Ganesh performs his first successful act of mystic healing, and, later, a close collaborator in the Mystic Masseur's political career. Obviously, he is closer to Ganesh, but also more critical of his foibles (S, 78 & 93). Between the two Phillips establishes a clearly filial bond, making Leela and Ganesh take the boy in during Ganesh's political campaign, even though the film slightly attenuated this aspect of their acquaintance. What is important to note is that Partap, equally at ease in England and Trinidad, stands in the script as Ganesh's spiritual heir: at the end of the film he plans to go back to Trinidad to get involved in politics saying "I was the future and the Pundit was the past" (S, 110). The prospects of Trinidad seem less bleak in Phillips's version because there is a new generation ready to take up the challenges of a post-colonial society. Whereas the novel concludes with a recognition of complacent and unredeeming mimicry, announcing the even darker world of *The Mimic Men*, the film, closing as it does with a well-integrated Partap in Oxford, gives a glimpse of a future of accepted hybridity.

Phillips's insistence on seeing Ganesh and Partap as father and son could, of course, have several meanings which cannot be explored fully here. Let me just mention two possible interpretations. First of all, it could be an allusion to Naipaul's relationship with his own father and the recent publication of his correspondence with his family, entitled *Letters Between a Father and Son*,¹ which Phillips has reviewed and in which he sees a lot of

1. V. S. Naipaul, *Letters Between a Father and Son* (1999. London: Abacus, 2000).

repressed emotion, the very same emotion that he, Phillips, is trying to unearth in his adaptation of *The Mystic Masseur*. Next, the filial bond that links Partap to Ganesh could also be an indirect, if ironic comment on Naipaul's literary paternity. Early in the script, Ganesh says to his landlady "one day I'm going to stand at the centre of world literature" (S, 9), a line that does not appear in the novel. By adding it, Phillips, of course, highlights the dichotomy between Ganesh's ambition and his final achievement, but it might also be a way of suggesting a parallel between Pundit Ganesh and V. S. Naipaul himself, a parallel all the more piquant as Naipaul has since the writing of the script and the making of the film been awarded the Nobel Prize, thus effectively been placed at the centre of world literature. (And from that perspective, Ganesh's MBE might be a counterpart to Naipaul's knighthood). So, Partap might stand for any West Indian writer of the younger generation, Phillips perhaps, whose writing comes in the wake of the famous literary father figure.

If gender and family relationships constitute the major area of shifts in Phillips's script, it is also worth examining how the two versions of *The Mystic Masseur* handle the notion of race. In addition to repeated remarks about the inferiority of Trinidad or to the immaturity of its inhabitants, Naipaul's novel contains numerous references, veiled or not, but mostly prejudiced, to racial belonging. On the one hand, the dialogue is replete with bitter allusions to the greed and jealousy of Indians towards each other, as if their community could be made responsible for its own limited success. On the other hand, the novel suggests on several occasions the lack of sophistication or intelligence of people of African descent. For example, gossip spreads on the island through "the Niggergram" (MM, 137, 154 & 214), a distorting means of com-

munication which Naipaul nonetheless describes as "an efficient, almost clairvoyant, news service" (*MM*, 156-157) since it predicts Ganesh's success. Next, the young boy pursued by the cloud is called Hector in the novel, obviously not an Indian name, and his parents are represented as totally gullible. Finally, in the scene at Lorimer Park where Ganesh confronts a crowd of angry workers, one of the strikers is described as "[beating] his fists on his chest" (*MM*, 218). This clearly simian gesture is reminiscent of other statements by Naipaul that speak of Trinidadians as "monkeys", one of which is quoted by Phillips in *A New World Order*.¹ In his adaptation, Phillips leaves these racist references out, which does not mean to say that his version irons out the racial tensions between people of Indian and African descent in Trinidad, as testified by the confrontation between Ganesh and the headmaster at the beginning of the film. Rather, Phillips seems to have tried to show this tension rather than describe it, which is admittedly easier to do in a film than in a novel. At the same time, and in spite of a clear local anchorage, his version focuses more on the universal fable of an ordinary man who makes good but is corrupted by power, in which racial differences are but one of the possible sources of tension, but not an obsessive zone of conflict as it is for Naipaul.

Nevertheless, there is a major scene in the novel that is heavily loaded in racial terms and which Phillips has not been able to soften as much as he would. It comes at the end, when Ganesh is invited to a dinner party at Government House. One of the guests, "the blackest M.L.C.", is described, with Naipaul's usual excess, as wearing "a three-piece blue suit, yellow woollen gloves,

1. Phillips, *A New World Order*, 190.

and a monocle" (*MM*, 207), which eventually falls into his soup. If Phillips tries to tone down the ridicule and the racial prejudice of the scene by attributing these grotesque features to two separate characters, he cannot eliminate all the racist innuendos because, as he said to a journalist, "You have to see race and class in the context of that period, and the film remains true to the difficulties of that time".¹ Yet, even if Phillips is reported as having "encouraged the film editor to take out some of the more buffoonish stuff", he seems not too be fully pleased with the final result in the film, because, for him, "one or two of the black Trinidadians are portrayed as caricatures, while the behaviour of the Indian characters was more understated".²

One could explore many more aspects of Phillips's adaptation of *The Mystic Masseur*, such as the fact that it pays less attention than the novel to the theme of deceptive appearances or to philistinism in Caribbean society. Still, I hope that my analysis has made clear that for the St Kitts writer adapting Naipaul's book was more a matter of tuning, of turning down the satirical and the racial of the novel, than of rewriting it radically. Like the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Phillips could perhaps conclude "Who knows, but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"³

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3. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977): 469.

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