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Keeping an eye on Naipaul: Naipaul and the Play of the Visual

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The defining characteristic of works of art is not purity of vision, but how well they reflect the tension between themselves and the intellectual moments in their midst.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

The work of art in the 20th and 21st centuries has been deeply transformed by the emergence of cinema, the new art of modernity. Theorists, critics and artists have written much about the importance of cinema to human perception and to ways of seeing. There is little accord in the pronouncements about this art that is often called a “popular” art form. But writers have identified specific areas of overlap and influence. My concern here is to show that Naipaul’s thinking through of his relationship to the world portrayed in his novels is projected in part through the use of techniques and structures absorbed from cinema.

Writers such as Lynne Macedo and Keith Warner have identified constant references to the cinema and the shaping influence of cinema in Naipaul’s work. They have linked these instances to Naipaul’s conception of the lack of a secure sense among Caribbean peoples and his increasingly dim view of human existence. Caribbean peoples, for example, in such readings construct their ideal selves against the backdrop of movies and movie characters. Naipaul has himself suggested in *Reading and Writing* that he might well have considered an alternative career as a filmmaker were he a young man today (he has not indicated whether he would be a director, scriptwriter or cinematographer).

Macedo in *Fiction and Film: The Influence of Cinema on Writers from Jamaica and Trinidad*, details some of the thematic parallels between Naipaul and film auteurs such as Hitchcock: their concern with shifting identities; their shared exploration of destructive relationships, including the deep pessimism about such relationships; the threat posed by females within heterosexual relationships and the fragility of men. These cinematic images appear in the early works as ways of filling a lack in the Caribbean psyche. There are some overt examples that come immediately to mind. In *Miguel Street* (1959) the first chapter is named after Humphrey Bogart of *Casablanca* fame and in *A Flag on the Island* (1967) where Henry and Frank both evolve into characters—a longstanding word in Naipaul for those who adopt poses—the cinema is used as a mechanism for underlining the illusionary nature of the surface ambitions of those like Selma whose desires extend no further than cinematic images, hence Selma’s words, “A three-piece suite. One of those deep ones. You sink into them. I’d buy a nice counterpane, satiny and thick and crisscrossed with deep lines. I saw Norma Shearer using one in *Escape*” (Naipaul, *A Flag* 178), find an echo years later when Frank returns and sees, “On the bed lay a quilted satin eiderdown” (Naipaul, *A Flag* 22). The final deflation occurs when Frank comments, “Poor Selma. I pulled the lavatory chain twice” (Naipaul, *A Flag* 230).

The Jamaican film *The Harder They Come* (1972) by Perry Henzell encapsulates much of what Naipaul is referring to in Henzell's use of such filmic references and metaphors. In this 1972 Jamaican movie, the hero/anti hero Ivan sits in a cinema, absorbs the images of cinema and remakes himself as a cult hero according to those images he has viewed on screen. Naipaul's characters also appear to be constantly remaking themselves, and filling in the gaps of their existences with cinematic icons and ideas, often as in *Miguel Street*, with the complicity of their communities.

In a sense, our perception of all of the characters of *Miguel Street* is filtered through the idea of cinema. The characters need illusions to support their impoverished lives. They are, nonetheless, part of a community. Their existences are concrete. In the early novels the filmic illusion is not wholly or necessarily a negative. It can also be viewed as a way of extending the imagination and widening the horizons of those who live in small, narrowly defined and constricting island communities.

Cinematography, as the art of cinema, may from this perspective, be seen as a formative influence on Naipaul's characterization in particular in the ways in which fragmentation gives rise to distorted images that allow for psychological impact: for example the close-up shots of Seth's khaki clothes, big hands, boots, the cigarette holder in his mouth that become constant visual rhymes, and which act as indices to his function as a figure of power within the Tulsi empire. These veer towards the psychological impact of cinema's close shots that by virtue of their closeness give rise to an effect of distortion and psychological impact.

The sense of the absurd contained in the grotesqueness of closely scrutinized and mapped humanity finds its most potent evocation in a short story in *Flag on the Island*, "The Enemy." The enemy is the mother, and already indicates a kind of obsession with the figure of the mother. We see this even in the late novel *Half a Life* (2001) in the character of Saronjini where one of the often-repeated ideas is Willie's dependence on Ana and on his sister.

Hate is expressed as the hatred the mother feels for the father and is transferred as a reciprocal exchange between mother and son. The psychological problem that this short story describes with so few details is made clear via the route of visual description. The father is a driver; or rather like an overseer:

He wasn't a slave driver, but a driver of free people, but my father used to behave as though the people were slaves. He rode about the estates on a big clumsy brown horse, cracking his whip at the laborers and people said—I really don't believe this—that he used to kick the laborers. (Naipaul, *Half* 77)

The caricature of the broken brown horse and the ridiculous figure fantasizing about power in the 20th century is punctuated by the words, "I really don't believe this," in this way underlining the comic and the fictional. But what carries much of the force of the imaging is the gradual decline

into paranoia of the father, which is described with the melodramatic excess of the horror movie and also combines the psychological underpinnings of this genre.

I went to the window. It was a pitch-black night, and the world was a wild and lonely place, with only the wind and the rain on the leaves. I had to fight to pull the window in, and before I could close it, I saw the sky light up with a crack of lighting.

I shut the window and waited for the thunder.

It sounded like a steamroller on the roof.

My father said, "Boy, don't frighten. Say what I tell you to say."

I went and sat at the foot of the rocking chair and I began to say, "Rama! Rama! Sita Rama!"

My father joined in. He was shivering with cold and fright.

Suddenly he shouted, "Boy, they here. They here. I hear them talking under the house. They could do what they like in all this noise and nobody could hear them."

I said. "Don't fraid, I have this cutlass here, and you have your gun."
(Naipaul, *Half* 82)

This sequence may be explained as literary melodrama or the distortions of a child's memory. It, nonetheless, in its calling into play of the special effects of a horror movie and its use of intensified images, accesses our memory of cinema and the sound systems of cinema. The play of visual images finds its greatest impact alongside the rhythmic surety of Naipaul's ear. This play of sound and image provides a particular energizing principle in the early novels through the rhythms of the Caribbean voice.

Naipaul's delight in the art of seeing, alongside the rhythm of words in his early novels, creates the elation that makes us see the world of Trinidad or in its more specific incarnations, the world of Elvira, or the interior of Hanuman House, or the world of *The Mystic Masseur* as a form of elation. There is a love here that is more than the cynicism that one often associates with Naipaul. This exuberance of sound and image nonetheless also allows for the kind of paradoxical division that we see within a novel like *Mystic Masseur*, which is in effect a novel in two parts. The first is shaped by Naipaul's self induced laughter at his own desire to write and his delight in the world of characters and culture specific memories from Trinidad through the channel of sense. The delicious savoring of the paper in the stationer's or the peeping into the printing establishment or the caressing glance at Ramsuair at the wedding feast as his eyes feast on surfaces, on fruit hanging from trees or decorations of homemade lights all engage our senses in

a particular way so that we experience the uniqueness of a Trinidadian way of being. The second part traces the decline into absurdity; spectacle and emptiness of G Ram say Muir.

Naipaul's use of the playful arrangement of visual objects is not unique in that it is linked to the ways in which a modernist writer such as Beckett provides deep artistic truths about the nature of the modern condition.¹ What is interesting in Naipaul is the way that he sets up a relationship with his world that allows for this sensuous and loving apprehension, and almost simultaneously enables a savage deconstruction of the very perception and mindset that either emerges from or has emerged from that world of surface things. We see clothes literally "dancing out of the window" in *Flag on the Island*, and "taking on a life of their own" (180) as a prelude to one of Naipaul's muted references to Carnival (in itself an art of movement). The dance of the visual opens a window on the petty thievery, prostitution, black market economy and a world dominated by a black-white consciousness.

There are other cinematic techniques that approximate this use of visual play throughout the body of Naipaul's work. These include the use of the close-up as a vehicle of meaning (113). The close scrutiny of individual details can allow the reader through his appreciation of the visuality in the experience, to respond to complex emotions generated by the text. The figure of the Zulu's cap in the story "In a Free State," for example, plays with the ways in which what we see may not be what is true. This kind of play triggers a response that defines the nature of the two men, two worldviews and two social and political problems: "Bobby leaned to touch the plaid cap, and for a while they held the cap together, Bobby fingering the material, the Zulu allowing the cap to be fingered" (Naipaul, *Free* 114).

This is a gesture that suggests the fondling of flesh, but the visual message inherent in this moves towards more complex ideas: "On the plaid cap his fingers moved until they were over one of the Zulu's" (Naipaul, *Free* 115). The silence and the contempt in the eyes of the Zulu and the moist weakness in the face of Bobby set the scene for what occurs next. The interlude has the timing and impact of the filmic caesura: "Then, without moving his hand or changing his expression, the Zulu spat in his face" (Naipaul, *Free* 115).

Context is everything. Shots situated within a carefully constructed line that is based on the conflictual play of fragments whereby the addition of one plus one does not lead to two but to a qualitatively different concept allow visuals to transform themselves and their objective realities through conflict. In fact "In a Free State" makes constant use of montage. The narrator is often like a camera looking in from the outside and occasionally zooming in on incongruous details that take on the significance of defining images:

The new photograph of the president, the man of the forest with his hair now in the English style, stood between colored prints of English scenes. There were old magazines: photographs of parties, dances, country houses, furniture; an England,

as it were, for export, carefully photographed, with what was offending left out.
(Naipaul, *Free* 140)

These details add up to an idea that is more than each individual object and work in a way that is similar to a collection of shots that take on meaning by their juxtaposition.

There are many such examples where the narrative takes us on a journey, which directs the eye or iris in the same way that a moving camera carries us along a particular terrain. The build up of visual images in a moving line parallels editing principles taken from film. The narrative can speak by interpolating an idea of the human within a moving landscape in the same way that a camera intercuts a scenic fragment with a human figure to provide a psychological or emotional tone. One sees this again in a small example also from “In a Free State.” The character Bobby is looking at a landscape after his encounter with the fine boned man of the King’s tribe. His mind wanders to the man’s face and he forces himself to remember the failed homosexual pick up at the bar. The narrative uses an intercutting device:

Bobby said softly “God.” Then, leaning again on the steering wheel, he made himself think of the bar of the New Shropshire. “God. God.” He looked up. “God.” But now his voice had changed. “God, how beautiful.” He was speaking of the play of sunlight in the green field. (Naipaul, *Free* 159)

The words “God, how beautiful” provide a complex of ideas, here rendered possible through the intercutting of images that we see more frequently in films that use fast cutting techniques of montage. Images of the boy, the Zulu, the bar, are made doubly complex and evocative by the narrator’s words: “He was speaking of the play of sunlight in the green field” (Naipaul, *Free* 159). There is in all this something of the power of silent cinema with its play of overtone lines where conflict marks the leap to a new concept.

But cinema as an art of illusion is in itself as an idea brought into play in other works, not simply to demonstrate the mimicry of the insecure self but to denote a state of being. This difference, a difference located in new landscapes and a dissolving idea of home becomes evident after the writing of *The Middle Passage*. The novel *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* sets a new tone, one that suggests in some instances an illusion of a self that is dislocated from its bearings. “And again Mr. Stone had the delicious sensation of flying in his chair. Keenan's reaction was a caricature of astonishment and incredulity. For seconds he held himself in his conspiratorial stoop, held his smile” (Naipaul, *Mr. Stone* 62-3). Mr. Stone is defined in chiaroscuro by the concrete presence of the cat that stalks his movements, and is substantially different from any of the characters of the early novels. It is not simply that the location is different and that nationality is different—Mr. Stone is English and in England—the nature of his illusionary world is also different. Unlike the early novels, where surface description aligned to movement give a sense of the vitality that exists beneath the surface of such descriptions, Mr. Stone lives in a world where time passes and time decays and the figure of

the young black cat at the end of the novel brings into focus the nature of Stone's hubris, as a destructive element in the face of time and his own insubstantial presence.

What emerges in the later Naipaul is the idea, like a belief system, that illusion has finally replaced reality. It is no longer the matter of basing one's reality on an illusion to shore up one's sense of inadequacy or lack of real identity. Instead illusion becomes lens and fact. Mr. Stone's recognition of the finitude of the real world and his fear of death is pitted against a pervasive movement that demonstrates the growing unreality of his situation via an increasing lack of control over events. His wife takes over his home; his aspirations concerning the knight's companion are taken over by someone else. By the end of the novel his space has been so invaded that he has become a figure of real futility simply because he has succumbed to all his illusions.

"Tell Me Who to Kill" of *In a Free State* also merges fantasy with reality in such a way that we are left finally with a radical uncertainty about events; such is the nature of the nightmare that has replaced the possibility of the regenerative powers of the cinema, no matter how whimsical this may seem. The word "regenerative" is used here because Naipaul shares with Derek Walcott and Kamau Braithwaite a profound sense of the power of the moving image or the image aligned to movement, as a formative process that might allow for a truthful representation of the complex web of relations within human persons here and elsewhere, and for portraying the rich interconnections that exist within Caribbean societies. Their attention to the visual makes cinema the supreme art for seeing a key strategy in writing about the Caribbean. There are echoes of its influence in a writer like Kamau Braithwaite where the graphic shapes to be found in visual technologies give language the means to echo the very shape of hurt.² The multilayered tapestries of painterly lines and images in Wilson Harris in a work such as *The Tree of the Sun* (1978) suggest the superimpositions of cinematic projection and become a way of interrogating historic and psychological trauma. In Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), the visual patterning of words and images explodes on the page in the self-immolating fire of Caribbean belief, but beyond this, Rhys foregrounds the differences in ways of seeing between those who come from the Caribbean and those from beyond its borders. Walcott explores the interconnections and interpenetrations that exist in Antillean communities via a route that begins in the reversals of the photographic image and moves towards a benediction of the healing power of cinema's audio visuality and image making properties and rests finally on the interchangeability to be found in painting and poetry.

One of my students reminded me the other day that the word re-member is about remembering parts that have been dismembered. That is what film is about, the reconstruction of parts, which is why it is an art that makes use of the structures of memory. Oddly enough this idea of filmic structure as a way of renegotiating the past enables an even closer link with Walcott. Much of what Walcott has written about the negative effect of history has been in some sense shaped by Naipaul. I use the word shape because I am thinking specifically about the way he reinvents and constructs a visual idea and a visual image of Naipaul's "nothing was created."

This nothing becomes the cavernous O, the opening or the abyss out of which the great novel poem *Omeros* (1990) is shaped.³ In *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000) Walcott goes in search of a detail of light that defines an epoch. Naipaul's works retains a defining sense of what it was and still is to be a Caribbean person. His works, however, increasingly rest in the shadow of the light of this world. That regenerative light or way of seeing that had within it laughter, satire, grotesqueness and love, becomes converted to another world and increasingly lingers in the shadows of a half remembered idea that is more fiction than fact and that has become estranged from its origins.

Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001) is a narrative that brings together a number of fictions. Willie's father lives a fiction. As a writer, Willie looks dispassionately at other people's fictional worlds: the angry young man in his flat whose view of the world is only from his window, and the editor who only wants an audience. Willie himself is a creator of fictions based tenuously on a life he has left behind. In a real sense this novel is like a faint memory of *Mystic Masseur*. Willie writes scripts for the BBC. He shapes narratives based on dramatic situations taken from movies he has seen. (Naipaul, *Half* 85). He rewrites his life based on these fictions. And he exhausts them. Exhausted, he becomes a writer in the confessional mode.⁴ In this mode the distance between reality and illusion finally collapses.

The narrator of *Half a Life* is distant and objective. He looks at the antics of a world completely outside of himself. And this is the tone that Willie's final confession adopts as he tells to his sister, Saronjini, the story of his sojourn in Africa. The narrator gives us a dry account of Willie, as he is about to leave for Africa in a state of unreality: "He wondered whether he would be able to hold on to his own language" (Naipaul, *Half* 124). After his fall and during his stay in hospital he asks Ana: "Do you think that it would be possible for someone to look at all my bruises and cuts and work out what had happened to me? Work out what I have done to myself?" (Naipaul, *Half* 127). This is pretty much all that he takes with him when he goes to his sister. The rest of the story is a reconstruction of events told after the fact. The novel suggests that Willie's futile existence is nothing more than a series of stories that he has himself constructed out of events he does not really understand. For him there is no true reality. The end has occurred before there could be a beginning. And this fact marks a profound distance between the later fiction and the fiction of the period of *The Mystic Masseur*.

A Bend in the River provides a closing example of this new form of seeing distilled from the cinematic. Its fictional layers evolve over successive character delineations: Ferdinand who tries on different characters, Indar whose sophisticated exterior soon discloses in confession his sense of emptiness and disillusion and the importance of staying outside and assuming a mask of language. At the dinner party held by Yvette and Raymond, Naipaul explores the constructive powers of film. To the background music of Joan Baez he applies the cinematic technique of fragmentation in order to provide a truth about the fragmented lives of those who write history and who believe in that history as it is written. At the end of the party Salim, the narrator, says of Yvette:

I went over the pictures I had of her that evening, ran the film over again, so to speak, reconstructing and reinterpreting what I had seen, re-creating that woman, fixing her in the posture that had bewitched me, her white feet together, one leg drawn up, one leg flat and bent, re-making her face, her smile, touching the whole picture with the mood of the Joan Baez songs and all that they had released in me, and adding to it this extra mood of moonlight, the rapids, and the white hyacinths of this great river of Africa. (Naipaul, *A Bend* 151)

His words encapsulate the ways in which the novel edits events and builds a tonal line. A new mood is created out of fragments of the past. Such editing places in a new light the reconstruction of Africa by the President: his fictional self/selves become part of a constant play of illusion fashioned on the structures of cinema. Such shapes and structures allow a reworking of material and become increasingly more about the shape of things and the ways in which the patterning of images and sound can elicit ideas by their very juxtaposition.

Notes

¹I am using the word ‘play’ here in the sense used by Theodor Adorno (1984).

²See for example the fairly recent *Born to Slow Horses* (2005) where this is further developed.

³See Antoine-Dunne, Jean. “Time and Space in their Indissoluble Connection: Towards an Audio-Visual Caribbean Aesthetic.”

⁴See Gordon Rohlehr’s lecture “The Confessional Element in Naipaul’s Fiction,” given at the 2007 Naipaul Celebration, the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, which is included in this issue of *Anthurium*.

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