

***Merchant-Ivory: Interviews* edited by Laurence Raw (University of Mississippi Press, 2012)**

Perhaps the sign of a great filmmaker rests in his or her ability to foster a strong division between loyal viewers and perpetual detractors; at the very least, it would at least suggest consistency in the final product. Few contemporary filmmakers have successfully managed to cultivate a distinctive style as well as the creative team behind Merchant-Ivory Productions – so much so that James Ivory once lamented being credited with films he did not direct (and sometimes did not much care for). In his volume, *Merchant-Ivory: Interviews*, the latest in the Conversations with Filmmakers Series from the University of Mississippi Press, Laurence Raw ably distills this style as ‘period dramas with languid camerawork, long takes, and deep staging, long and medium shots rather than close-ups or rapid cross-cutting’ (ix). And the effect proves as intoxicating for some as it proves tiresome for others. Raw admits, ‘nothing much happens in many of their films, but we learn a lot about the characters and how they cope (or fail to cope) with cross-cultural encounters, including class-conflicts’ (xv). At a time when contemporary Hollywood cinema was growing increasingly insular and rudimentary in its narrative content, the Merchant-Ivory triumvirate – comprised of Indian producer Ismail Merchant, American director James Ivory, and their frequent collaborator, Polish-German novelist and screenwriter Ruth Praver Jhabvala (who lived in England and India before becoming a naturalised American citizen) – produced films that maintained a strict sense of meticulous detail, literariness, and cosmopolitanism.

Though many imagine Merchant-Ivory films as outsiders and independents (an image cultivated, in part, by Merchant himself), they were nevertheless connected with the Hollywood industry they seemed to dismiss. In fact their 1995 film, *Jefferson in Paris*, starred major Hollywood actor Nick Nolte and was co-produced by the Disney-owned Touchstone Pictures. Merchant-Ivory provides an illuminating look at the increasing dependence of independent filmmakers on the corporate Hollywood machine in the 1980s and 1990s, as major Hollywood studios initiated independent divisions and deals at festivals like Sundance launched the careers of independent filmmakers Paul Thomas Anderson, Steven Soderbergh, and Quentin Tarantino. Before all of this success, though, Merchant-Ivory cut its teeth on Satyajit Ray-inspired films that offered a Western perspective on the East, primarily India, where Merchant was born and Jhabvala had lived. These films – *The Householder* (1963), *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), *The Guru* (1968), and *Bombay Talkie* (1970) – benefited from the mentorship (and even the musical scores) of Ray, while offering a more critical perspective on the Western ‘mysticization’ of India in the 1960s by Allen Ginsberg and the Beatles, who reduced Eastern religion to a potential remedy for the post-industrial ‘malaise’ of middle class Europeans and Americans. As Ivory acutely describes his characters, ‘Things cannot work out for these people. They don’t belong in India. They shouldn’t be. India wants them out’ (23). This ongoing examination of cultures in contact (and quite often conflict) warrants a critical reappraisal of Merchant-Ivory, especially these early films, which remains long overdue.

Merchant-Ivory films, unfortunately, have received limited critical attention – mostly in adaptation and postcolonial studies – and those areas of study will benefit greatly from this volume. To date, no scholarly study exists, though out-of-print glossy chronicles by Robert Emmet Long and John Pym can be purchased, used, from online booksellers. No doubt this work makes gestures towards a reconsideration of the team’s work, especially with the

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blossoming interest in transnationalism and the advent of quality journals around the world, this one included, to house such vibrant discussions. But adaptation, postcolonial, and transnational studies will not be the only ones to reap the rewards of *Merchant-Ivory Interviews*. Scholars who employ an auteurist approach will take interest in ‘Hollywood versus Hollywood’, about the disastrous studio editing of James Ivory’s *The Wild Party* (1975), Merchant-Ivory’s period piece set in 1920s Hollywood and featuring James Coco and Raquel Welch. ‘The Trouble with Olive: Divine Madness in Massachusetts’, a fascinating profile of Vanessa Redgrave’s troublesome time making *The Bostonians* (1984), illuminates issues regarding movie stars’ public life and politics, film productions, and institutional and governmental resistance. The historical debates in film criticism over authorship have led to influential accounts favouring the director (Andrew Sarris), screenwriter (Richard Corliss), and the studio system itself (Thomas Schatz); now they will have to contend with the role of the producer as well in cinematic storytelling. Raw includes informative interviews with Ismail Merchant that reveal the uncompromising creative vision of Merchant and his collaborators, despite the concerns of mainstream Hollywood, their financial backers, and even the authors being adapted.

The strength of Raw’s collection lies in the balanced spread of interviews across their career, spanning their creative partnership from the first collaboration of all three with the 1963 adaptation of Jhabvala’s novel *The Householder* through Ivory and Jhabvala’s work together on *The City of Your Final Destination* in 2009, four years after the death of Merchant. Readers less familiar with their work may be surprised to learn that James Ivory had been directing for nearly thirty years when the critical and commercial success of *A Room with a View* in 1986. Indeed we are halfway through the book before the first mention of that milestone film for Merchant-Ivory Productions, thereby providing readers with a strong introduction to their early career leading up to that defining moment. Though I would have welcomed more interviews from the peak of Merchant-Ivory’s critical and commercial popularity, which seems to me to have taken place between *A Room with a View* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1993), Raw succeeds in providing a thorough survey of Merchant-Ivory’s collaborations as well as independent projects, such as Ismail Merchant’s fourth directorial effort, *The Mystic Masseur* (2001). At 174 pages, Raw offers scholars and critics with a timely (and needed) retrospective of Merchant-Ivory’s career and an implicit call for greater attention to their oeuvre, spanning more than fifty years. Hopefully, researchers heed his call.

**Peter C. Kunze**