A Close Up on Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children

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Opening remarks

"Nobody from Bombay should be without a basic film vocabulary" (Rushdie, 1982:33), the narrator declares in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and throughout this novel references to this vocabulary abound: trailer, close up, flash back, point of view, fade-out, etc. Obviously, Salman Rushdie's has made his novel into a kind of verbal Bombay film, and the aim of this article is to explore why this is so. In other words: what is the significance of cinema in this novel? Why does cinema has such a prominent position as theme? How is verbal representation of characters and actions made visual and even cinemativ? What is cinematic form? To open the discussion some general remarks on the relationship between the novel and the cinema must be presented.

Modernity and visuality in the novel

"Novelists have sought almost from the first to become a camera" (Edel, 1992:177), Leon Edel observes in his essay "Novel and Camera". Long before the invention of the film camera novelists have cultivated the camera-eye and the camera's movements: panning, jump cutting, moving into close ups. In fact, the camera and the novel "have come down to us like a pair of siblings, each intent on asserting itself and capturing the attention of the world" (Edel, 1992:178).
At the birth of cinema Henry James wrote extensively on point of view in the novel, and he and his contemporaries prepared the way for what Arnold Hauser in his *The Social History of Art* calls "the film age". According to Hauser this new medium became the key to experiments within the other arts; new ways of representing reality arose from the spirit of cinematic form: "the abandonment of the plot, the elimination of the hero, the relinquishing of psychology, the 'automatic method of writing', and above all, the montage technique and the intermingling of temporal and spatial forms of the film" (Hauser, 1968:226). The new concept of time was characterized by simultaneity, and the new concept of space was characterized by dynamism: "it comes into being as it were before our eyes. It is fluid, unlimited, unfinished, an element with its own history, its own scheme and process of development" (Hauser, 1968:227). He mentions techniques such as close-ups, flash-backs, cross-cuts, slow motion, fast motion, double exposure, and he shows how all these techniques spill over from film to literature. Among writers giving cinematic devices a prominent place in their work he mentions Marcel Proust, James Joyce, John Dos Passos, Virginia Woolf.

Of course it is not only technique, which explains the influence of film. Hauser also mentions "the awareness of the moment in which we find ourselves" (Hauser, 1968:231) and the "universalism" of this moment, "the discovery that, on the one hand, the same man experiences so many different, unconnected and irreconcilable things in one and the same moment, and that, on the other, different men in different places often experience the same things, that the same things are happening at the same time in places completely isolated from each other" (Hauser, 1968:231). Much easier and much more directly than literature film transcends national and linguistic borders, and if the early film was a contemporary of the age of imperialism, modern film is a facet of the age of globalism.

Underlying all aspects of the development towards a dynamic, ever-changing modern culture, one finds a new stress on the visual aspects of things, and here it is obvious, that already in the 19th. century a "visual turn" took place in literature – which explains why a film pioneer such as David Griffith has praised Charles Dickens as his great teacher. But what made visuality so important? Why did writers turn from "telling" to "showing"?

In *Fiction and the Camera Eye* Alan Spiegel suggests that the development from a traditional society to a modern society may explain the growing importance of

the visual world. Taking Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as his example he says that the writer of a traditional society displays a remarkable indifference to the sensuous surface details of the physical appearance and that the reason for this is that "a stable society cultivates the habitual, the quintessential, and the general" (Spiegel, 1976:13). Here reality is not found "through the five sense modalities" (Spiegel, 1976:14), but rather through the mind and what the mind knows and understands.

In a modern, dynamic society this conceptual reality must yield to a much more perceptual understanding of reality. Taking Gustave Flaubert as his counter-example Spiegel points to the new importance of visual representation and visual precision. "Flaubert strives to be "pitiless" and "exact" because he lives in an unstable society where there appears increasingly less to be "pitiless" and "exact" about. He must visualize every element of his narrative precisely because it is the visual that can no longer be taken for granted" (Spiegel, 1976:18).

In his *Notes on the Novel* José Ortega y Gasset points to the difference between the pre-modern belief that actions follow and derive from being and the modern belief that "the being of a thing is nothing else than the sum total of its actions and functions" (Spiegel, 1976:20). Writing from a pre-modern point of view Cervantes is able to offer general statements on his characters, whereas Flaubert "as the member of a skeptical, unstable, man-oriented society" has to build up his characters from moment to moment, focusing on particular and visual details, knowing that the qualities that reveal character are not the typical and habitual forms, but "forms that are unique, circumstantial, and transitory". This again is what makes Flaubert a cinematic writer avant la lettre – "showing", not "telling" his world to his readers.

Character or crack-pot

In *Midnight's Children* the narrative takes off in a presentation of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai. The take off is at the same time verbal and visual, literary and cinematic. It updates the "I was born" of Dickens' *David Copperfield* into "I was born in the city of Bombay" – then tries the tone of a fairy-tale – "once upon a time" – but finally gives up all efforts to generalize: "No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947." The birth of a person is equated with the birth of a nation, since this is "the precise instant of India's arrival at independence", and the situation is described in a way that reminds the reader of slap stick comedy, when this mythical moment is followed by a ridiculous accident when Saleem's father breaks a toe. The account of the birth is put into the mouth of Saleem, and this of course takes away the immediacy of action in a film, but may be compared to voice-over technique. Anyway, the introduction ends up in a direct and highly concrete reference to the importance of visuality: "... guided only by the memory of a large white bedsheet

with a roughly circular hole some seven inches in diameter cut into the centre, clutching at the dream of that holey, mutilated square of linen, which is my talisman, my open-sesame, I must commence the business of remaking my life..." (Rushdie, 1982:9f).

In spite of Hauser's claims, plot is not abandoned and character is not eliminated in this cinematic novel, but the plot dissolves into episodes, and as a character Saleem, who grows into a society experiencing a process of modernization, is built up from moment to moment through these episodes. His life is narrated by focusing on particular and visual details, and the "remake" of his life shows how circumstantial, transitory and fragile individuality is. Only step by step or look by look through the circular hole in the sheet does Saleem's grandfather Doctor Aziz succeed in making "a badly-fitting collage" (Rushdie, 1982:25) of Saleem's grandmother-to-be, and in the same way Saleem himself is a collage rather than a whole person. The fragmentation of his body is rendered very visually:

"I am not speaking metaphorically; nor is this the opening gambit of some melodramatic, riddling, grubby appeal for pity. I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug – that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams" (Rushdie, 1982:37).

Grotesque realism

The most important fragment of this fragmented body is Saleem's nose, and at the very beginning of the novel his grandfather, who is also equipped with an enourmous nose, learns that the nose is "the place where the outside world meets the world inside you" (Rushdie, 1982:17). Thus, Rushdie's use of grotesque images may be interpreted 1) as an indication of the vulnerability of characters who are not able to separate themselves from their surroundings; 2) as a cinematic way of representing inner and invisible phenomenons – such as remembrance which is likened to chutneyfication or panic which is likened to "a bubbling sea-beast com[ing] up for air" (Rushdie, 1982:37) or disbelief which is described as a muscle that "began to nictate" in the calves of Padma (Rushdie, 1982:443).
Saleem himself explains the grotesque in this way: "...perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one must make oneself grotesque" (Rushdie, 1982:109). Normally the surface of the body sets up a clear borderline between inside and outside, but the grotesque features of Saleem's body make his inner tension visible:

> "'O eternal opposition of inside and outside! Bacause a human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of everywhichthing are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another the next. The body, on the other hand, is homogeneous as anything. Indivisible, a one-piece suit, a sacred temple, if you will. It is important to preserve this wholeness. But the loss of my finger (...), not to mention the removal of certain hairs from my head, has undone all that" (Rushdie, 1982:236f).

Another example of this visualization of internal or abstract things is the Rani of Cooch Naheen "who was going white in blotches, a disease which leaked into history and erupted on enormous scale shortly after Independence". As the Rani herself puts it: "My skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit" (Rushdie, 1982:45).

Saleem is "public property" (Rushdie, 1982:77), and the consequence of the grotesque analogue between his small, private world and the x-large public world of India is a constant lack of control over his life. He tries to hide away in a washing-chest as Nadir Khan tries to evade public light under the carpet, but it turns out that it is impossible to secure a private space, especially in the modern India where "such places have been expropriated by the State" (Rushdie, 1982:433). Nevertheless approaching the end of his story and his life Saleem makes a solemn declaration – secretly whispering the following to the walls of his prison:

> "Politics, children: at the best of times a bad dirty business. We should have avoided it, I should never have dreamed of purpose, I am coming to the conclusion that privacy, the small individual lives of men, are preferable to all this inflated macrocosmic activity" (Rushdie, 1982:435).

Inflation is the trademark of grotesques, and simultaneously inflation is a matter of visuality. At the beginning of the chapter on Saleem's metamorphis into an All-India radio, he states, that "reality is a question of perspective", and that distance makes things look plausible which at a close up appear to be incredible – or, one might add: grotesque. Following on this statement he asks his listeners/readers to imagine themselves "in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions" (Rushdie, 1982:165f). This comparison is taken up again in connection with his statement on politics as a dirty business, but this time he votes in for the close up, subjective and grotesque as it is:

> "No, as to the question of guilt, I refuse absolutely to take the larger view; we are too close to what is happening, perspective is impossible, later perhaps analysts will say why and wherefore, will adduce underlying economic trends and political developments, but right now we're too

close to the cinema-screen, the picture is breaking up into dots, only subjective judgments are possible"(Rushdie, 1982:435).

Action and media

New media take older media as their contents, Marshall McLuhan once claimed, pointing to the novel's dependence on oral culture as its contents. In the final chapter Saleem compares his role "as that of any redundant oldster: the traditional function, perhaps, of reminiscer, of teller-of-tales..." (Rushdie, 1982:448), and the whole narrative of *Midnight's Children* is presented as good old-fashioned story-telling, as an oral exchange between Saleem, a modern and sophisticated narrator, and Padma, a working woman who cannot read nor write and whose name among village folk is "The One Who Possesses Dung'. Accordingly, Saleem's style is informal, colloquial, adequate for this face-to-face-contact – and if he leaves this direct style, Padma bullies him "back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what happened next"(Rushdie, 1982:38).

The concept of "linear narrative", however, belongs to the medium of writing, and to the reader Saleem's story is manifested as writing, and intertextual references to novels such as *Tristram Shandy*, *A Passage to India*, *The Tin Drummer* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* emphasize the importance of the literary medium. This is also a novel discussing the relationship between nartion and narration, and according to Benedict Anderson "the birth of the imagined community of the nation can best be seen if we consider the basic structure of two forms of imagining (...) the novel and the newspaper" (Anderson, 1983:30). What Rushdie calls "what-happened nextism" (Rushdie, 1991:39) is a manifestation of the novelistic concept of time as a "'homogeneous, empty time', in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (Anderson, 1983:30). In a paradoxical way Padma and Saleem have changed the roles of traditional story telling and modern, novelistic writing. Padma wants a linear narrative; Saleem embodies the traditional world of prefiguring and fulfilment – or unfulfilment.

However, as already mentioned Rushdie also transforms his novel into a film, and his narrator constructs his narrative with a lot of cinematic devices. At one point Padma exclaims: "...you've learned how to tell things really fast" (Rushdie, 1982:109), and there is no doubt that he has learned a lot about motion from the motion pictures. Thus, at the beginning of the third part of the novel, he once again makes an explicit comparison between his story telling and a fast moving Bombay melodrama:

"(While Padma, to calm herself, holds her breath, I permit myself to insert a Bombay-talkie-style close up – a calendar ruffled by a breeze, its pages

> flying off in rapid succession to denote the passing of the years; I superimpose turbulent long-shots of street riots, medium shots of burning buses and blazing English.language libraries)" (Rushdie, 1982:346).

Saleem also praises the Bombay films for their movie-trailers, telling how he "smack[ed] his lips of the title NEXT ATTRACTION, superimposed on undulating blue velvet!" and tries to raise the great narrative expectations of Padma saying "Padma, there is still plenty worth telling (...) there are still next-attractions and coming-soons galore" (Rushdie, 1982:346).

In her book on Salman Rushdie Nancy E. Barry suggests that in fact the dynamic construction of the novel may be compared to the construction of an episodic film or a serial with "synopses of previous events provid[ing] a rhythmic counter-point to the tantalizing teasers which anticipate events to come" (Harrison, 1992:63). These synopses are instruments which enable Saleem to speed up the tempo in anticipation of "next-attractions" and slow down the tempo in recapitulations of what-happened-before, and joining forces these devices bind the narrative together in spite of all breaks and discontinuities.

At one point Saleems defines himself as "the sort of person *to whom things have been done*" (Rushdie, 1982:237), and therefore he of course fits in perfectly with the reigning genre within the Bombay film industry: the melodrama. A melodrama combines the high level of action of the adventure film with the passivity of the hero/victim in a horror film, and Saleem would be the perfect melodramatic hero if comic distance did not accompany his sufferings. Again and again he is forced into episodes where the plot culminates in a highly symbolic picture – as in the episode where he loses control of his bicycle and runs into a political demonstration: "In this way I became directly responsible for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay, as a result of which the city became the capital of Maharashtra – so at least I was on the winning side" (Rushdie, 1982:192).

Saleem' uncle Hanif and his aunt Pia Aziz both work within the film industry, Hanif as a director and Pia as an actor, and to live with them is "to exist in the hot sticky heart of a Bombay talkie", especially since Pia, deprived of film roles, turns her own life "into a feature picture, in which I was cast in an increasing number of bit-parts" (Rushdie, 1982:241). Hanif, however, wants to reform the Hindi cinema by replacing melodrama with its villainous villains and heroic men and exotic locations with documentary realism writing "about ordinary people and social problems, for instance a film titled "the Ordinary Life of a Pickle Factory" (Rushdie, 1982:242).

The irony of it is that Saleem succeeds where his uncle Hanif fails. The narrative of Saleem is based on this ordinary life of people in a pickles factory, since Padma is working in one of these – and since Saleem's "chutnification of history" (Rushdie, 1982:459) obviously is based on this very ordinary work. The ironic point

is, that only by magic or melodramatic exaggeration is it possible to give an adequate picture of life in India. Already his father – or rather the man whom he believes to be his father – recognizes the melodramatic exaggeration as an aspect of reality "The swollen events of the night of the crescent knives reminded Nadir Khan of his room-mate, because life had once again, perversely, refused to remain lifesized. It had turned melodramatic: and that embarrassed him" (Rushdie, 1982:48f). And Saleem himself implores his listeners and readers to accept the fact that only by melodramatic exaggeration does this reality become visible: "Yes, you must have all of it: however overblown, however Bombay-talkie-melodramatic, you must let it sink in, you must *see*!" (Rushdie, 1982:440).

Approaching the end of the novel, Saleem declares that reality is nagging at him, and that love does not conquer all, "except in the Bombay talkies" (Rushdie, 1982:444), but in spite of this recognition the last pages of the novel do have all the effects and all the excess of a melodrama, love, marriage and child included, and when Saleem impatiently states, that "it's time to get things moving" (Rushdie, 1982:448), he makes them move by moving pictures: "a taunt, a last railway-train heading south south south, a final battle..." (Rushdie, 1982:448).

Encompasser of the earth

In an interview on *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* Rushdie makes a distinction between two kinds of novels. One is the inclusive novel, a loose baggy monster of fiction which tries to incorporate everything. An other is the exclusive novel which proceeds on the basis of excluding most of the world in order to concentrate on one strand plucked out of the universe. Rushdie's own work of course belongs in the first category, and all along through his narrative Saleem comments on "this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality" (Rushdie, 1982:75).

In the first chapter the boatman Tai is introduced. He is characterized by his "chatter", which must remind every reader about Saleem's own chattering style: It was "fantastic, grandiloquent and ceaseless" (Rushdie, 1982:14). Listening to Tai's chatter, Saleem's grandfather learns about an emperor who was called "Encompasser of the Earth". (Rushdie, 1982:17) This megalomaniac ambition is later transferred to the sphere of arts, and Saleem tells about Nadir Khan's friend the painter who suffered from this "Indian disease" (Rushdie, 1982:75) to want to encompass the earth:

> "As a young man he had shared a room with a painter whose paintings had grown larger and larger as he tried to get the whole of life into his art. 'Look at me,' he said before he killed himself, 'I wanted to be a miniaturist and I've got elephantiasis instead!" (Rushdie, 1982:48).

A little later Lifafa Das enters the novel with his peepshow, which he advertises by

the words: "'Dunya dekho', see the whole world. (...) See the whole world, come see everything!" (Rushdie, 1982:75).

Saleem himself is an artist who tries to put the history of modern India, from the Independence to the Emergency, into 30 chapters which are visualized as 30 jars of chutney. But the aim of containing a whole nation is impossible, at least without cracks in the personality, cracks in the jar and cracks in the work of art. "I have been a swallower of lives", Saleem tells on the first page, and he reveals that "[c]onsumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me" (Rushdie, 1982:9) and on the last page he admits to having become "a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many, too-many persons" (Rushdie, 1982:463).

He ends up "in the street", and this is where his life and death belongs. His real father was a street-musician, early in the novel he recognizes that "[e]ntertainers would orchestrate my life" (Rushdie, 1982:101), and therefore his real world is the ghetto of street magicians – which is bulldozed towards the end of the novel in a 'Civic Beautification programme' during the Emergency (Rushdie, 1982:429) - and his ceaseless, grandiloquent chatter is a clear example of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "the language in the marketplace". It's a loud and public voice, without intimacy, making a show of itself. It's a manifestation of the way people speak in the market-place and in the streets, where barkers and hawkers and peddlers want to catch the attention of customers by a highly performative language, nourishing on an atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity (Bakhtin, 1968:153). Here they toy with the objects they announce, they transform everything into playthings, they toy with their own oratory, and doing this they create an open and free game in contrast to the rigid borders of religious and political life.

The final chapter contains the final battle between Picture Singh and the Maharaja of Cooch Naheen to find out who is "the Most Charming Man In The World", and Saleem is the one who performs "the function of barker" (Rushdie, 1982:449) in loud words which inevitably remind the reader of Lifafa Das and his peep-show: "Roll up roll up – once in a lifetime an opportunity such as this – ladees, ladahs, come see come see come see! Who is here? (...) this, citizens, ladies, gents, is the Most Charming Man In The World!" (Rushdie, 1982:449).

Entertainment is a key to the understanding of *Midnight's Children*. Entertainment – the verbal entertainment of tall stories, the visual entertainment of larger-than-life.melodrama, the plastic entertainment of grotesques – lends the whole novel a remarkable unity of tone, in spite of all its centrifugal forves, and the same unity of tone, this all-pervasive gay and grandiloquent, festive and triumphant tone, makes the impossible possible: to include the history of Modern India with all its differences within one novel. Modern entertainment is mass-entertainment, and "spittoon-hittery" (Rushdie, 1982:448), "chutnification of history" (Rushdie, 1982:459), the Bombay film industry and Saleem's high-pitched story-tellingall have this in common, that they are not addressed to a solitary reader og viewer: Just as

"spittoon-hittery" permits intellectuals "to practise the art-forms of the masses" (Rushdie, 1982:448). Saleem's "chutnification" is an example of mass-production for the "All-India"-market:

> "...at Braganza Pickles, I supervise the production of Mary's legendary recipes; but there are also my special blends, in which, thanks to the powers of my drained nasal passages, I am able to include memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Paskistan, or how it felt to be in the Sundarbans...believe don't believe but it's true. Thirty jars stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation" (Rushdie, 1982:460).

Entertainment is play put at display and in the same way as Lifafa Das announces the universal capacities of his little peepshow, every sentence of Saleem is an invitation to take a look and find a perspective on what became of the 1001 possibilities of India after Independence. The message may be a message of resignation, but the medium tells quite an other story.