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Magical Realism and Film: A Look at Midnight's Children

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Abstract

Magical Realism, arguably one of the most important literary forms to develop in the 20th century, is rarely discussed as a film genre, though there are notable film adaptations of magical realist novels. This thesis explores the film adaptation of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* to demonstrate how a magical realist novel may be adapted to a visual form, and still maintain the aesthetic sensibilities—and political implications—of the literary original. Drawing on film adaptation studies, close reading, and film analysis, the thesis argues that film can be an effective magical realist genre, even if the conventions of visual mediums are dramatically different than the narrative conventions of the original. Ultimately, this thesis will prove that despite these differences magical realism still exist in film. However it does exist in a different form. This thesis will look at the novel *Midnight's Children* as well as the film version. While the thesis looks at certain passages from the novel, it will examine how these passages were transformed into film magical realism. The thesis will also be looking at how film techniques such as lighting, camera angles, and other techniques are used. In addition to all of this, the thesis shall examine how magical realism has evolved, from paintings to novels to film. It will look at three literary examples of magical realism and then three film examples. By doing this, the thesis shall give the reader a better handle on what magical realism is, how it exists as a literary phenomenon, and how it also exists in the film format.

State University of New York
College at Buffalo
Department of English

Magical Realism and Film: A Look at *Midnight's Children*

A Thesis in
English

by

Jeff Floss

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of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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Understanding Magical Realism

Magical Realism can be a hard concept to define. Since 1925 many different definitions have appeared. Some, like Terry Pratchett (during an interview with Linda Richards), only see magical realism as a slightly more sophisticated take on fantasy while others see it as something very specific with strict rules (it has to be from Latin America according to Irene Guenther in “Magic Realism in the Weimar Republic” who argues that outside of Latin America it is “transformed”). However, the most common definition and the one that covers the most ground is that of magical realism as a genre or aesthetic that takes place in realistic and mundane places yet features magical elements that are treated like they are ordinary and commonplace, the key being that magic is treated seriously and real. This definition, supported by critics like Clark Zlotchew, has under it a wide variety of texts, which includes *Midnight's Children* in both novel and film. Despite usually being thought of as a literary expression, magical realism has appeared in visual mediums as well, most notably film.

The term “magic realism” first appeared in an essay titled “Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism” from German art critic Franz Roh in 1925. Roh used the term not to describe any form of literature, but instead to talk about New Objectivity (a move away from Romantic ideals) in artwork. When talking about Georg Schrimpf, for example, Roh noted that “he wants it to be ‘real,’ to impress us as something ordinary and familiar and, nevertheless, to be magic by virtue of that isolation in the room: even the last little blade of grass can refer to the spirit” (Roh 25). The term did not originate with the page, but instead with *visual images*. In his essay, Roh went on to point out that he noticed in paintings the mixture between the real and the unreal, in a way similar to how we notice

realism mixing with the unreal in modern magical realism literature saying “a painter may enjoy positioning a powerfully foregrounded near shape in front of diminutive details in the distance” (Roh 29). It was this focus on the real despite the strangeness of the images that for Roh divorced magic realism from similar forms like Expressionism and Surrealism, noting “so that even when the theme is abstract (as in Leger, Feininger, Schlemmer), we see a sharper, more minute, cleaner structure than in the first five years of Expressionism” (Roh 29). It was clear to Roh that realism still existed in the paintings, they were simply joined by the strange. As Maggie Ann Bowers argues in the book *Magic(al) Realism*, Roh noted this was different from surrealism since it had much less of a cerebral reality, with Bowers noting that surrealism “is most distanced from magical realism [in that] the aspects that it explores are associated not with material reality but with the imagination and the mind, and in particular it attempts to express the ‘inner life’ and psychology of humans through art” (Bowers 22).

The term magical realism first appeared in reference to literature in an essay from Spanish writer Angel Flores. Flores, unlike Roh, was talking about literature in his essay “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction” He argued that Jose Luis Borges was the first magical realist writer, saying “I shall use the year 1935 as the point of departure of this new phase of Latin American literature, of magical realism. It was in 1935 that Jorge Luis Borges’ collection *Historia universal de la infamia* [A Universal History of Infamy] made its appearance in Buenos Aires” (Flores 113) He also focused purely on magical realism in Latin America. When looking at the new wave of Latin American writers, Flores stated “meticulous craftsmen all, one finds in them the same preoccupation with style and also the same transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome

and the unreal” (Flores 114). Like Roh before him, Flores notes that there was a mixture between the elements we associate with realism and the elements we associate with magic. He also noted how writers played with time, saying “time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality” (Flores 115). Flores also noted that magical realism is very much defined by the equal relationship between realism and fantasy, saying “the practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent ‘literature’ from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms” (Flores 116).

Another aspect of magical realism that is important to understand is that as an aesthetic it often deals with history in profound ways. In magical realism, authors have a chance to reimagine or reposition history to a certain extent, much like political satire and dystopian novels. This is very evident in *Midnight's Children*, where Rushdie is allowed to reexamine Indira Gandhi's term as prime minister by making her the villainous Widow. This is important to understand about magical realism as well as other genres: when an author can blend the magical with the real, it means he or she can bring in magical elements to history, or give us a new understanding of “magical” elements like the creation of a nation. The most famous of all magical realism novels, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, also notably incorporated something like Colombia's real life civil wars into its narrative. It is important to notice that Marquez did not use the novel as a way to use magic to change the outcome of the wars. Marquez plays with the irony that even in a world filled with magic, human cruelty still exists exactly as we know it. This is a major theme in magical realism, magic may exist but it has to still deal with the real world of war and slavery.

While magical realism admittedly does not have a precise definition but is more akin to a loose set of criteria, it is worthwhile to consider some undisputed examples of magical realism to better elucidate some of its qualities. The first is Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In the novel, José Arcadio Buendía, the first in a long line of Buendías, dreams of, and later establishes the city of Macondo. In this city, strange and unreal things happen. Ghosts appear and a child is born with a pig tail, a child who is later devoured by ants. However, all of this strangeness is a way of explaining reality, particularly the history of Latin America. Indeed history is important to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; it incorporates something like Colombia's real life civil wars into its narrative. Gonzalez Echevarria noted in his article "Cien años de soledad: the Novel as Myth and Archive" that "In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* myth and history overlap. The myth acts as a vehicle to transmit history to the reader. García Márquez's novel can furthermore be referred to as anthropology, where truth is found in language and myth. What is real and what is fiction are indistinguishable" (Echevarria 358). Ricardo Gullon in his review of the novel noted that Márquez also manages to blend the real and the unreal with his use of narration, mainly the way he describes everything in a simple, down to earth manner. By doing this he makes everything, including the extraordinary, seem ordinary. Márquez takes real events, like the banana massacre of 1928, and gives us his interpretations of them as well. With his novel Márquez is allowing magic and reality to blend seamlessly, not given one higher focus to one over the other. This is an important aspect to note because we can argue that this is true of several magical realism novels and films.

Similarly Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* focuses on magical realism concepts. The novel, like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, focuses on generations of families inside a Latin American country. This is another important thing to note about magical realism, it is often about a nation. However, Allende like Marquez never specifies what country she is writing about. Magical realism often focuses on the vague and not specific, even if it is obvious which country the author is basing his or her nation around. In Allende's novel, a girl with magic abilities and a house frequently visited by spirits is mixed in with modern Chilean history. In the article "Magical Realism in the Americas: Politicised Ghosts in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The House of the Spirits*, and *Beloved*" Stephen M. Hart notes "like her Colombian forebear, Allende portrays a world in which the everyday and the supernatural coexist. Rosa the Beautiful, for example, is described in such terms as to make us wonder if she is really of this world. She has green hair, seems to float when she walks, and, because of her beauty, is able to mesmerise men" (Hart 118). Hart makes another important distinction, "but it is important to remember that Allende consciously gives the world of magic realism a feminine touch, since it is the women who have a sixth sense and not the men" (Hart 119). Hart notes that Allende hopes that the world will become more feminine over time. Therefore her magical realism, which shows female characters gaining magical powers and passing them onto other female characters, can be seen as a particularly feminine or feminist magical realism. Allende work is very important to the magical realism canon as it is a clear example of an author using magic in an otherwise realistic setting, and using magic to make a particular point, mainly a feminist point.

While not as political as Marquez or Allende's work, Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* does have a national crisis and magical occurrences to serve as its backdrop. Once again, we have a Latin American country, in this case Mexico, during a critical time in its history, the Mexican revolution, as the backdrop of the story. The main protagonist, Tita, is a cook for her family who are born into the kitchen. When she cooks, she is able to pour her emotions into her food, literally. By doing this, she is able to do things such as make everyone violently sick by crying into the cake batter, and her lust for her lover Pedro ends up making a man who eats her food lustful. But *Like Water for Chocolate* is no fantasy. As mentioned earlier, it uses a very realistic Mexico as its backdrop, and Tita deals with the very realistic abuse of her mother, even when that abuse becomes fantastic in the form of her mother's ghost haunting her. Still, the magical elements of the story are important. Similar to *The House of Spirits*, *Like Water for Chocolate* has a feminist message, and it goes about this feminist message by making the magic particularly feminine in nature. She gives a certain honor to the food the women prepare, as noted by Oana Ursache in the article "Food and Cultural Concerns: An Alephic Reading of Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*" where it is said "it was precisely Laura Esquivel's novel, *Como agua para chocolate*, the one that used food as main character, the force that changes the story and moves characters and narration onward" (Ursache 1005). Esquivel combines food and magic to create a certain feminine magical realism that propels her narrative forward. The story can be seen as a protest of the ways women are treated by culture and tradition, and the magical realism is in many ways rebelling against that as it gives Tita a power she would not normally have. Overall the novel is an excellent example of a magical realism work that uses magic to reflect a

certain reality, with that reality in particular being the strength of the feminine within society. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, as is the case with several magical realism novels, magic is shown to be present in reality.

While all of the above novels are connected through their relation to Latin America, they are also all notable for the beautiful and extravagant ways that their authors use language. This is one of the main areas of difference when we consider the transition of magical realism from literature to film. While literature allows us to enjoy the baroque use of language, film demands that this element of the aesthetic be conveyed differently. Film is a visual medium and it ultimately depends more on visuals than words. However, visuals can show the real and the unreal just as well, though very differently but nevertheless staying true to the conventions of magical realism. If a filmmaker, for example, displays the baroque through framing, like Federico Fellini, or through the use of color, texture, and detail, like David Lynch, they can create a cinematic magical realism. Of course there are many more ways a filmmaker can turn his or her film into a visual experience of magical realism.

It's also important to note that film creates *magical* realism and not *magic* realism. In their article "Animated Worlds of Magical Realism: An Exploration of Satoshi Kon's *Millennium Actress* and *Paprika*" Manisha and Maitreyee Mishra argue that "animation can be read as magical realist (which is applied to literature) as opposed to magic realist (which is applied to art), as animation is flowing art and hence has a narrative structure as in literature" (Mishra 300). The key to note here is that film (animated or otherwise) is a *flowing* art form. While both are visual arts, film, unlike painting, usually aims to tell a story, and the focus on narrative is what tends to stop film

from producing magic realism. Magic realism relates to the still visual image as opposed to the moving one, which makes it inapplicable to film. This comes from their article on Japanese animation auteur Satoshi Kohn, whose animated films blend reality and dream-like visuals in a way that can only be described as magical realism. They noted that his films follow certain components of magical realism; saying “While drawing from the five characteristics of magical realism described by Wendy Farris (2004), we introduce concepts to examine *Millennium Actress* and *Paprika* in the light of broader magical realist theory” (Mishra 300). They noted that the phenomenal world, the irreducible element of magic, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space and identity are all themes that run through Kohn’s work. What I find fascinating about the trends in magical realism noted above is that all of them have to do with narrative. That is because genre, whether it be magical realism or something else, is usually concentrated on narrative, as plot points and aesthetic help define genres. Farris’s principles (such as the phenomenal world, the irreducible element of magic, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space and identity) can be applied to a film by Kohn just as much as a novel by Marquez. The Mishras managed to note Farris’s principles with ease in Kohn’s films, showing that it is possible to approach animated films that way. There are certain live action films that can be viewed this way as well, like the film adaptation of *Midnight’s Children*; they simply approach the principles differently since live action is a different form than animation with different rules to say the least (differences such as the visual aesthetic of animation are very important to realize). That is why it is time to start looking at magical realism as a film genre or aesthetic. There exist several films that incorporate Farris’s principles besides Kohn’s

works, and more are popping out all of the time. We can no longer let our studies of magical realism be restricted to only one form, instead we need to examine how magical realism has in fact crept into other forms and how that has affected the genre/aesthetic.

Like with literature, magical realism exist in the form of several films that are undeniably magical realist in nature. There are three films critics like Catharina Cowden and Daniel P. Haeusser considered to be magical realist, *Birdman*, *Pan's Labyrinth*, and *The Green Mile*. The first is *Birdman*, a film Cowden describes as “a film that is constantly playing with magical realism” (Cowden 1). It is playing with the genre to the point that magical realism takes over the film. In it, we have a washed-up superhero actor who wants to become a serious actor on Broadway. The film ties itself to the realist genre strongly, as it contains real locations (NYC), a hand held camera, and the attempt to make the entire film look like it was done in one take. However, while all these realist techniques are going on, the film also adds in scenes of the actor levitating, flying, and talking to a superhero he sometimes only talks to in his head, but even at times physically appears. Not much is made of the magic in the film; it's implied that only the actor and eventually his daughter notice it. The actor treats all the magic he can do as mundane, and it reflects his state of mind. It doesn't help him with his struggling personal life nor does it take him on any fantastic adventures. *Birdman* is an example of a film that focuses strongly on filmmaking elements that are associated with realism and adds magical elements almost like an afterthought. It does this to the point that the entire film becomes magical realism.

Magical realism has shown it can pop up in Latin America's filmmaking as well as its literature. The most significant example of this is Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's*

Labyrinth, a film Daniel P. Haeusser praised by saying “the themes and tone of Guillermo del Toro’s cinema have culminated in an intricate masterpiece of magic realism” (Haeusser 1). This film is a particularly interesting example of cinematic magical realism in the way it incorporates massive special effects. Creatures like the faun look like they have stepped out of a major comic book movie production, the kind del Toro is often associated with. Instead of being a fantasy, however, the film only uses elements of magic instead of creating a fantastical world. It aesthetically blends the real and the unreal. Most importantly, the film uses magic to show the world-view of a child, even though the film itself is not for children. In between all the massive special effects are strong elements of film realism. The film does not frequently use sets, shooting instead on real locations. Actors act natural and violence is handled in a way that can only be described as realistic. During one scene, a fascist guard brutally kills a farmer. The direction on this scene is nondramatic: it merely focuses in on the general pounding on the farmer and the farmer’s bloody body. It is also important to note that the film spends as much, if not more time, in the realistic world than it does the fantastic. Realism in many ways grounds the film, stopping it from becoming too fantastic. At the same time magic is at the heart of the film. It is the magic that provides an escape from reality, allowing the protagonist to find temporary relief from the Spanish Civil War. Magic and history are what move the plot along, similar to Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. The use of history is another thing that ties *Pans Labyrinth* to magical realism. Like *Midnight’s Children* the film is offering an alternative look at history through magic. History does not change, the Spanish civil war continues the same way, but magic is used to show a new perspective on the war. Overall, *Pan’s Labyrinth* is a film that aesthetically

combines a realistic world of war and suffering with a world of magic and wonderment. It shows us two completely different worlds and blends them in a way that makes it look like the two always belong together.

Another film that can be seen as magical realism is *The Green Mile* from director Frank Darabont. In the film a death row inmate named John Coffey demonstrates magical powers. During his time on death row, he manages to cure a brain tumor, a bladder infection, and he resurrects a mouse. He also lets a mouse and a man, his prison officer, live for an extended period of time. Yet this magical man is contrasted with his realistic setting of death row. Coffey's magical abilities do not allow him to leave death row and in the end of the film he is executed like any other prisoner. The magic in the film is given to the most innocent character, the one who is almost Christ-like. The other characters are either there to be healed or blessed by Coffey's magic or to be condemned by it, like a sadistic prison guard who ends up in a mental institution and the real man behind the crime Coffey was sent to death row for who ends up shot. *The Green Mile* is a perfect example of using magic to tell a realistic storyline. Like many works of magical realism, it is dealing with history, the Deep South in the 1930's, and the social injustice of that history, mainly innocent black men being killed for crimes they never committed but are doomed to die anyway due to the stereotypes and injustices of the time. Unlike other works of magical realism, *The Green Mile* does not span decades or generations yet history is still important to the film. The film is clearly trying to say something about its time period in the same way *Midnight's Children* is trying to say something about its own. Linda Williams notes in her article "Melodrama in Black and White: Uncle Tom and *The Green Mile*" that when Coffey cures the warden's wife by kissing her, which is

in turn followed by her embracing him, “the kind of contact that would drive a conventional white racist to murder is provocatively offered up under the guise of a sublime form of transcendent love” (Williams 18). The film uses magic not to merely entertain but to make a comment on interracial love between a black prisoner and his white guard, as well as the people around the said guard. The film is also simplistic in how it displays its magic. It is shown through simply grabbing, touching, and kissing. It is not a grand thing, making the magic seem smaller. This grounds the magic in reality and makes it seem less spectacular. This is something very common in magical realism films; *Birdman*, for example, is a lot like this. Both films make their magic seem less extraordinary in order to ground the magic.

One theory as to why magical realism is not often seen as a major genre in cinema despite many different successful films is the lack of auteurism. Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini both are known for strange films that combine the realistic with the strange. Bergman’s *Fanny and Alexander* is a good example of a film that has elements of the realistic, like the setting, as well as stranger elements such as ghost. Fellini’s classic *8 ½* also has realism combined with strange choices in costume design, cinematography, lighting, and even plot elements. David Lynch makes films that combine the strange and dreamlike with otherwise realistic settings in films such as *Mulholland Drive*. His films notably have realistic backgrounds but insert the strange into them, like finding an ear in the beautiful suburbs in *Blue Velvet*. His television series *Twin Peaks* saw characters leaving the realistic world to enter a strange and surreal one. Lynch is a director who takes what is real and unreal and smashes them together, creating magical realism in the process. Likewise, Woody Allen (who has noted in an interview

with Justin Harp that magic creeps into his films) has often made films that are magical realist. Going more in the direction of *Birdman* as opposed to Lynch, Allen's films are directed in a style that is hyper realistic. He shoots on location, his situations are mundane, and his actors are directed to act in a natural, laid back way. However, several of Allen's films, such as the *Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Midnight in Paris*, feature elements of the fantastic. Yet Allen never treats the fantastic very fanatically, as characters do not react particularly shocked to the magic that is happening. As we can see from Allen and *Birdman*, directors can develop magical realism if they first understand the principles of film realism as established by Italian neorealist films such as *The Bicycle Thieves*. Allen's nods to magical realism make his work notable, even if they don't make him a full on magical realist. It is important to use techniques such as location shooting, handheld cameras, non-famous actors, natural dialogue, and more. Not every one of these elements needs to be checked off in order to create magical realism, but it is important that the majority of these principles are remembered. Once they are, directors then need use magic in a way that is also real, and come off as mundane. They must also use magic to show or highlight a certain view on life. Cinematic magical realism is the combination of two different film techniques, the world of realism and the world of magic, and it can be difficult to blend these two elements in a way that is seamless, which may be the reason why few directors have made the attempt.

We should also note a few things magical realism isn't. Magical realism requires magic existing in a realistic world. Obviously that does not include *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, with their faraway imaginary lands. We should remember the principles of film realism that were defined by the Italian neorealism movement of the

40's and 50's and described by filmmaker C. Zavattini in his article "Nekotorye mysli o kino" (and others like Esma Kartal in his article "Defining Italian Neorealism: A Compulsory Movement") such as on-location shooting, nonprofessional actors, and a focus on poverty. If a film can use magic in a narrative that includes these principles, and treat the magic mundanely and to reflect a certain reality, then the director can create film magical realism.

As we can see, magical realism is something with a more broad definition than many critics often argue. It is also something that can fit into different forms, including film. When we begin to look at magical realism more broadly and start to see it outside of literature, we begin to see its influence everywhere. While magical realism can exist in film, it does change in the translation, and with the film adaptation of *Midnight's Children* the hope is to capture and examine how that change works.

Chapter 2: Understanding Film Studies

In order to understand how a magical realism novel becomes a magical realism film, we must have an understanding of film adaptation studies, a field that has garnered both attention and controversy. When discussing how literature has influenced film, Sergei Eisenstein in his essay “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today” noted a conversation D.W. Griffith had with his bosses. When they said that his attempts to be like Charles Dickens was foolish since he was a filmmaker and Dickens was an author, Griffith responded by saying “these are picture stories, not that different” (Eisenstein 201). This story from the dawn of film shows that the two forms were connected by their desire to tell narratives, but, being different mediums are still different from one another. Still, both literature and film are narrative mediums, which is why we see so many films adapted from books in the first place. Understanding film studies involves going back to the genre’s father, George Bluestone, and his book *Novels into Film*. One of his major arguments is the raw material argument, where he says: “the film-maker merely treats the novel as raw material and ultimately creates his own unique structure” (Bluestone 15). Filmmakers, according to Bluestone, are not bound to the novel, but instead are actually only using the novel to create their own visions based off of it. Bluestone would later even go as far as to say “the great innovators of the twentieth century, in film and novel both, have had so little to do with each other, have gone their ways alone, always keeping a firm but respectful distance” (Bluestone 63). While Griffith would claim to be like Dickens, he as Bluestone notes still had a firm distance from him.

Seymour Chatman followed Bluestone, and made an important observation of his own in his article “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (And Vice Versa)” saying “the

camera depicts but does not describe” (Chatman 128). This is ultimately a description of how the forms are different, and that difference is important. Description leaves a different impact on a reader than viewing does on an observer. Knowing this difference and knowing the effect of this difference is the key to understanding adaptation. This will be important as we examine the film adaptation of *Midnight’s Children*. The film will be bringing magical realism to the screen with film techniques, and watching a film is a very different experience from reading a book.

It’s also important to note however that the discussion about adaptation studies has changed. No longer do people debate what medium is better than the other, as Kamilla Elliot says in her article “Rethinking Formal-Cultural and Textual-Contextual Divides in Adaptation Studies”: “in the twentieth century literature and film scholars used adaptations to vie for disciplinary territory and power, in the twenty-first, they have more often used adaptations to compete for theoretical dominion and authority” (Elliot 1). The discussion has shifted to how we understand adaptation as well as the many different forms an adaptation has the tendency to take. The days of talking about literature being superior to film or vice versa are now a distant memory. In fact, Julie Grossman in her article “Literature, Film, and Their Hideous Progeny” noted that “instead of seeing adaptations as looking back to previous works they are re-visioning, we might more usefully conceive of adaptations as looking forward, as they stretch familiar texts into new forms with new cultural resonances” (Grossman 1). Instead of a debate between which form tells the story better, adaptation is about how a work of art can find new life in a different form.

Of course, the issue of auteurism also comes up when one is discussing adaptation. When the film is based on a book, then it begs the question, who is responsible for our enjoyment of the film and its story, the author who wrote that story originally or the director that brought that story to the screen? The answer to that question may become a little clearer when the director in question is considered an auteur and has his or her own style. A great example is Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Stephen King's novel *The Shining*. King is an author who has his own writing style, one that usually dominates the directors adapting his work in the sense that King's preferred tropes appear more than the directors'. However, when given to Kubrick, King's style was overshadowed in the film by Kubrick's famous directing choices, including a strong use of awkward close ups, the use of classical music, tracking shots, and other choices we could not imagine King making when adapting his own work, but we do associate with Kubrick. This would interest Antonija Primorac as he stated "Cartmell stressed that the characteristics that used to be frowned upon—such as the loosening of links between the adapted text and its author and the adapter's freedom to make it appealing to a mass audience rather than the elite—now make it the democratic art form" (Primorac 1). Filmmakers like Kubrick ultimately have a right to interpret a work in the way they want to, even if that means interpreting it in a way the author may not like (and indeed King was unsatisfied with Kubrick's adaptation of his novel according to *Writer Digest*). The question of authorship versus auteur theory is going to become important when looking at the adaptation of *Midnight's Children* since Rushdie was heavily involved.

The question of auteurism becomes an issue in another way, when the original author of a work becomes involved with adapting his or her work to the screen. Anita

Loos was involved with promoting and making some creative choices with the adaptation of her novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. This was something played up by the studio, as noted by Bethany Wood: “Paramount secured Loos’s writing and production talents and publicized her involvement through numerous press releases and photos highlighting her role in creating its adaptation, particularly in selecting an actress to play Lorelei” (Wood 573). Wood noted the studio even made Loos part of the visual advertisement, saying “one publicity photo featured Loos atop a ladder, surveying a group of actresses in search of a Lorelei” (Wood 573). When the author’s involvement is being publicized to this extent, it becomes clear that the studio wants the general public to view the original author as the auteur of the film, whether he or she is or not. Some authors come on as executive producers of their works. Perhaps the most dramatic example is when an author like Frank Miller comes on as the co-director of an adaptation, as Miller did with the adaptation of his graphic novel *Sin City*. If one person is not only the one who wrote the original story but also made creative choices on the film, does that make that original author also the author of the film adaptation? This makes the question of auteurism blurrier than our Stanley Kubrick example. Now the author helps decide what audiences will see on the screen when they see a film adaptation of their work. However, it is important to note that just because the original author is basing the screenplay of his or her own original book that does not mean the author is in complete control. Again, going back to Wood’s article on Loos, she noted that “even as a prominent screenwriter, author, playwright, and adaptor of her own work, Loos was unable to maintain ‘the point of the story’ due, in large part, to the concerns of industry and its profits” (Wood 579). As we can see, studio interference makes the question of auteurism even trickier, as they can

pervert the author's work even if he or she wrote the screenplay. All of this becomes an issue considering that Salman Rushdie wrote the script for the film adaptation of *Midnight's Children*. Is he the auteur, or is the director the auteur? Or could even the studio be argued as the auteur? Ultimately, according to classical auteur readings from the likes of François Truffaut and Andrew Sarris it would still be the director Mehta who is the auteur, and it is her magical realism we are witnessing.

Adaptation studies is a huge and varied topic, but one that is essential to understand to see how magical realism novels are brought to film. It's important not merely to understand the differences between the two mediums, but also to understand what goes into the two mediums and how that is different. Novels and films are two very different mediums yet they have a very important relationship. And another aspect to note is that while many different topics have been adapted, the question is if anything can be adapted successfully.

Introduction to *Midnight's Children*

Midnight's Children author Salman Rushdie is not only more comfortable with the term magical realism than other authors are, but he is also notably more influenced by cinema than most other authors have expressed being. One work that Rushdie claims influenced his writing is the film *The Wizard of Oz*. Within *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie has notably incorporated film language, talking about pans, zooms, and medium shots. In an interview with the *Times of India*, Rushdie has gone as far as to say "I have been a film buff all my life and believe that the finest cinema is fully the equal of the best novels" (*Times of India*). According to Randy Malamud, he has also acted as a guest

director at the Telluride Film Festival, written about *The Wizard of Oz*, and has even cameoed in films such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

The novel *Midnight's Children* was a critical and commercial success. Perhaps its most famous success was winning the 1981 Booker prize, and later winning the Booker of the Bookers award. The novel was particularly praised for its magical realism and its depiction of South Asian history. In his review in 2009 for *Tor.com*, Jo Walton states “Midnight's Children invites you to immerse yourself in India the way you would with a fantasy world and I think that was partly Rushdie's intention” (Walton). Through the years it has gained the reputation of being a classic novel, and is widely considered Rushdie's masterwork.

According to Malamud, Rushdie spent the better part of fifteen years trying to bring *Midnight's Children* to other mediums. He had written a teleplay for the BBC, but conflicts in Sri Lanka where filming was to take place led to that project's cancellation. Rushdie did succeed however in co-writing a stage play version in 2003 of *Midnight's Children* and adapted it through the Royal Shakespeare Company. However, the stage play, which unlike the film featured an actor with a fake nose to make it cartoonishly deformed, was not well received, with the *Guardian's* reviewer claiming that the play had “huge narrative gallons (that) are squeezed into a pint pot” (*The Guardian*). However, despite of the poor reception of the play, Rushdie still believed his story could cross into other mediums, particularly eyeing a film version.

Within *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie uses literary techniques that are foreign to film language. As Laura Buchholz points out, the novel is full of stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse that make it difficult to translate to film. The use of language

like this is essential to magical realism. Yet Rushdie, still seeing his novel as cinematic, pressed on, finally finding a director who shared his vision with Deepa Mehta, a director who herself made the film *Heaven on Earth* that mixed a real Canadian setting with magic potions and other magical elements.

According to Malamud, Rushdie stated of the film version “it’s not just an adaptation of the novel, we should think of it as a relative of the book. There’s a strong family resemblance. And I, for one, welcome this new member of the family” (Malamud). He had previously talked about adaptation in a similar way according to Malamud, “Rushdie suggests that one can, indeed, despite ‘inevitable distortion,’ make ‘a second version of a first thing, of a book or film or poem or vegetable” (Malamud). Does this mean the film is a relative of magical realism as opposed to magical realism itself? No, since it still follows the principles of magical realism, only in film form. While Rushdie was enthusiastic, critics had a response that was mixed at best. *USA Today* said “it sometimes feels as though Mehta can’t decide if the film’s over-arching purpose is to illuminate the complexity of India’s triumphs and failures, or to spin a multifaceted yarn of intertwined destinies, tinged with magical realism” (“Wake Up to *Midnight’s Children*”). However, no one denied that the film was very much a work of magical realism. Even critics who disliked how the magical realism was executed nevertheless used the term to describe the film. So while there are very clearly problems with the film version, it still arguably achieves the goal of being magical realism by creating an aesthetic that has both realistic and fantastic elements, establishing that magical realism can exist in film. While the film may drag at times, its magical realism segments are visually stunning and manage to pull the viewer into the magical realism world.

***Midnight's Children* as Literary Magical Realism**

Midnight's Children uses realism techniques that it then blends with the magic.

Midnight's Children uses location shooting to make shots grounded in a reality. Location shooting, depending on how it's used, adds an element of realism to a film, because true reality or real locations are present. During many scenes there is only a subtle use of lighting going on letting scenes feel like they are non-manipulated and thus real. A more gritty realism is added by shots of impoverished streets mainly when Saleem is in Parvathi's run-down town, something Italian neorealist filmmakers famously strived for according to Kevin Bongiorno in his article "Michael Haneke's *Amour* in the Light of Italian Neorealism."

How violence in the film also grounds it in realism. The magic is tied into the violence, with Saleem's rival Shiva's power being his knees, his physical abilities. Magic in *Midnight's Children*, both novel and film, is used to say something about the lives of the characters (like their violent personalities for example), or to simplify them through the use of magic. It is also used as a form of resistance, as noted by Sara Upstone in her article "Domesticity in Magical-Realist Postcolonial Fiction" where she noted "I want to suggest, the magical-realist novel refuses both colonial and national metaphors as (R.M.) George indicates, yet also draws upon transformative strategies that facilitate a new form of resistance" (Upstone).

The film also brings in the element of realism by including historical clips. Using historic footage also creates realism by having a presence of realism in the film because the film is showing events that happened. The film footage is putting reality into the film. This kind of effect is ultimately a useful tool for bringing in reality into a fictional film

and blending the line between a nonfiction documentary and a fictional narrative film. However, *Midnight's Children* is of course magical realism so it never forgets to make the real history blend with magic. For example, the real history and wars have characters using their magical powers to influence events, like Shiva winning the war for Bangladeshi independence with his powerful knees. History's outcome has stayed the same, but magic has been brought into it to give us a new perspective on these events.

Midnight's Children takes words straight from the novel to add magical realism dialogue, or language that blends the real and unreal to the film version. A lot of this comes from Rushdie's narration. He in particular quotes the scene (through voice over narration) where the grandmother visits the children's dreams, or, as the novel calls it, "the invasion of dreams" (Rushdie 58), and it is described in the film with the same simplicity as it is in the novel. This is the scene where the grandmother visits her daughters in their bedrooms. A film technique is also brought into this particular scene. For example when she sees someone in a dream, there is a cut to the person she is seeing so we too can magically see what the grandmother sees. This brings us into the magical world by letting us be a part of it. Mehta is letting us be active participants in the magic by letting us peep with the grandmother. The scene also has the children behind white sheets, giving them an almost phantom-like appearance, adding to the magical feeling while still being grounded in realism through the grimy house it is shot in. Overall this particular scene does a lot to add to the magical feeling of the film through Mehta's directorial choices.

Mehta later grounds the film's magic in realism when Saleem first discovers his powers. This is where he is still at school and first has a magical experience. When

Saleem first sneezes, the audience hears a bunch of unclear noises. It is a magical scene, as we are clearly hearing the voice of children, and it is happening at a specific time, when Saleem sneezes. This shows that the voices are magical in nature, since it is tied to his sneezes. Whenever Saleem begins to sniff, however, the voices start to go away, working almost like turning down the volume of the radio. The magic is notably noncomplex in its execution (as often the case with magical realism), we simply hear a sneeze and then hear voices. This can be seen as a grounded use of magic, based more in clever editing than any kind of expensive special effect. This example will go on to define how magic is used in *Midnight's Children*; simple editing tricks in place of more conventional special effects so that the film's magic feels unspectacular and grounded in a certain type of realism.

Like the book, the film is grounded in magical realism in the way that the characters treat the magic. Saleem, after his first magical experience, immediately accepts the magic. There is no scene where he questions how something like magic can exist in his reality. However, one way *Midnight's Children*, both book and film, differ somewhat from other magical realism works is that not everyone accepts the appearance of magic. In the film, as in the novel, Saleem's father acts violently to his claims of being magical. Still, magic is for the most part not questioned in the film, in fact that scene with Saleem's father is the only scene where magic is questioned. From that point on in the film, magic becomes an accepted part of the film's reality and blends in with it seamlessly. This is one of the things that separates magical realism from something like *Superman*, where the magical or super powered being is at first strongly questioned by the regular world, and the magical being often gets more focus. As noted by Christopher

Warnes in his article “The Hermeneutics of Vagueness: Magical Realism in Current Literary Critical Discourse,” “the key defining quality of magical realism is that it represents both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth” (Warnes 3). Mehta lets the magic blend with reality, as Warnes says: she does not let one gain a stronger presence over the other.

The magic continues in more subtle appearances when Parvathi and the midnight’s children first appear. Parvathi first appears by simply fading into the frame, a simple special effect from the silent days of cinema. She continues to look slightly faded however as she stays on screen. The other midnight’s children eventually fade in but end up looking the same way. When it is time for the children to leave, they simply fade away from the screen in a slow fashion. With this Mehta is creating a simple but significant magical effect. Magic is clearly not reality as shown by the blurriness of the children but it can fit into reality. The children don’t look deformed and they still act like children. In other words, while they appear magical, they are still very real.

The magical moments do have their place in the film, and they all happen in the same understated way. At one point Parvathi says “abracadabra” and we then cut to Saleem having a bird in his hand. We also see the midnight’s children one more time when Saleem is getting surgery on his nose; again, they only appear simply before us without any visible magical attributes. Also, when the children are having their debates, it does not look magical at all. Instead, the midnight’s children conference visually looks like any other meeting of individuals, one that you need to know the background on in order to understand is magical.

There are also elements of magic that are not shown but described. For example, Saleem's super smell he gains after his surgery is not shown to us visually but simply told to us by the narrator. This happens again when Saleem is hit by the spittoon. There is no attempt to show magic, it is only described for us. This form of magic is even less spectacular than the ones shown through simple tricks. The audience literally sees nothing magical even though magic is going on in the story. Again, the magic in the novel is supposed to be a simple and accepted thing, so this simplicity in depiction fits.

We later get the film's more traditional magic when Saleem is in Parvathi's basket. We see a point of view shot from Saleem and can clearly tell where he is. We then cut to Parvathi, who says "abracadabra" and then when we see her open the basket; nothing is there, another use of simple editing tricks as opposed to any large scale special effects. She later says "abracadabra" to a closed basket, and when she opens it Saleem pops out. Most of these special effects are simple camera tricks, the most advanced special effect in the whole film occurs when we see Parvathi say "abracadabra" again and candles suddenly light up all around her.

Color tinting is also used to create a magical effect. Whenever Saleem is having a vision, it is always of a greyish color. This makes things feel a bit different and magical. It is a way of letting the audience know reality is being distorted to an extent by magic. In this case what is distorted is that Saleem is seeing things that have not yet happened. The filmmakers want the audience to feel the magic by distorting their visual senses. And if we remember that magical realism is supposed to offer a different view on reality, then the tinting makes sense because it is showing us a child's perspective on the future, which is scary and grey.

Sometimes magic is implied to be going on through editing. At one point in the film Parvathi says “come to me,” and we then cut to Shiva riding his motorcycle to the slums. What is implied here, of course, is that by saying “come to me” Parvathi has magically made Shiva want to appear. It is both the film’s and novel’s way of having magic stand in for attraction and lust. However, instead of accomplishing this through a narrative, as in the novel, Mehta accomplishes this through the cinematic language of editing. As we have been seeing with our examples, Mehta can make magical realism come to life with cinematic language: it is how she uses that cinematic language.

Let’s take a look at some magical realism passages from the book and see how they were translated into the film version. The first is the following:

Newspapers shall praise him, two mothers shall raise him! Bicyclists love him, but crowds will shove him! Washing will hide him--voices will guide him! Friends mutilate him--blood will betray him! Spitoons will brain him--doctors will drain him--jungle will claim him--wizards reclaim him! Soldiers will try him--tyrants will fry him. He will have sons without having sons. He will be old before he is old... And he will die... before he is dead. (Rushdie 96)

This is when Saleem’s mother hears a prophecy about her son and his life, all of which become true. In the novel this is magically real because of the mix of setting and words. The setting takes place in a realistic slum, but what is actually happening is quite magical. While many in real life claim to experience prophecy, this particular prophesy is describing the future magical events of the book. What is unique about this section is how everything becomes true throughout the novel. It is a true prophecy: every magical thing

that is said to happen ends up happening. The realistic setting stops this sequence from going too far off into magic but there is magic present nonetheless.

The film versions opts not to show the actual prophecy yet everything happens, in scenes that are prolonged across the film. As in the novel, magical things happen to Saleem. He is born of two mothers, and he loses his memory because of a spittoon in a scene that uses dark lighting to emphasis that this is a magic that damns Saleem. The claim that wizards will reclaim him happens when he is taken into the slum of the wizards, a scene that uses much brighter lighting to emphasis that this could Saleem's salvation. As we can see, the film decides to mostly stick to the magical parts of the prophecy. It focuses on what was magical about the prophesy instead of the ordinary. This in a way makes the magic a bigger part of Saleem's character in the film than it is in the novel. Here it is particularly the magical parts of the prophecy that come true, making the magic all that more highlighted within the film adaptation of the story.

There is another passage that is somewhat less magical in the film than in the novel:

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (Rushdie 533)

In the novel, this is Saleem talking about how he is going to break down into millions of pieces, literally, as he says in the beginning of the novel, he is falling apart. The fact he this is literal also makes it magical as it is out of the ordinary. This is magic that ties into one of the main themes of the text. The number of pieces Saleem is falling into represents the number of people who were living in India at the time. This connects to the idea that Saleem is a representation of the country. He also talks about his magical “son” who will also experience the same fate he has. This shows that the magic in *Midnight’s Children* is generational. Like Saleem before him, his son will also be broken down into pieces, and experience magic and history unlike anyone else before them. Many works of magical realism, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are generational, and *Midnight’s Children* is no different.

The film decides not to go through with the “broken into pieces” ending. Instead, the magical event that the film decides to focus on is Saleem’s son saying “abracadabra.” This shows that he has inherited his mother’s magic, as that was her magical word that allowed her to use magic. He also recognizes Saleem as his father. This ends the film on a more optimistic note of magic than the novel. Instead of focusing on the magical suffering the son of Saleem will face, it focuses on the magical joys. This ends up making less magic than the novel but there is clearly still magic going on, one that is celebrating magic as something that can travel from generation to generation.

Another important quote from the novel is about the midnight’s children themselves, “Midnight has many children; the offspring of Independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed, and pepperpots.... I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I—even I—had

dreamed” (Rushdie 333). This describes the variety in the midnight’s children. This is important since it represents the variety of India itself, one of the world’s most diverse countries. Within the novel we see children with all sorts of strange powers, and the novel goes into great detail into what their powers are. We get to see children who are so beautiful they blind people, and children that can time travel and thus know the future. All these powers manage to engage the reader: these are among the most fun parts of the novel to read. But as the quote takes note of, the children are diverse. They do not all have glorious and wonderful powers. Some like Shiva represent a dark side: he is a child of poverty and a child of violence, and this can be seen in the power he revived. He also later becomes a child of corruption, as he becomes one of the Widow’s top lieutenants. Overall diversity is an important theme to the magic in the text, as again it represents the magic of India.

The film notably does not go into as much detail on the children’s powers as the novel does. Mainly, it decides to focus mainly on three magical characters, Saleem, Parvathi, and Shiva. Admittedly this somewhat undercuts the diversity theme that the novel had, but the same idea can be discovered in the film. Saleem is a telepath: his power is about bringing people together, and he is the glue that keeps a nation together. Parvathi is a magician who can perform real magic: she is someone who is unique and in many ways represents the uniqueness of India itself. Finally, Shiva is, as his name suggests, a destroyer. His powers help him in war and combat. He is also corrupt and evil. He is a representation of the ugly side of India, the violence, the poverty, and the corruption. Therefore, even though the film only really focuses on three magical characters, it manages to say a lot about India with these characters. All of this is shown

through simple special effect tricks, such as having the sound of many voices be heard when Saleem is standing. The simple nature in the special effects gives the film a less grand feeling, again, giving the film a more down to earth feeling.

This passage from the novel is important since it is one that gets to the heart of Saleem by describing his history.

I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I'm gone which would not have happened if I had not come.

(Rushdie 226)

Here, Saleem is describing himself. He makes the important note that he is everything that has happened before him. This justifies the novel's decision to focus so much on Saleem's grandfather and Saleem's mother, since their experiences are related to his own. Unlike most people's experiences however, his and his families is magical. It also justifies Rushdie's decision to give Saleem a stepson, since it shows that Saleem is also everything that comes after him. This quote is important because it is not just summing up Saleem's character but the entire novel as well.

Like the novel, the film spends its beginning focusing on Saleem's grandfather and mother, and like the novel it ends on Saleem's stepson, thus showing that his magical journey is one of generations. The film like the novel focuses on how Saleem affects the world around him. It is he who brings the midnight's children together and it is he who brings them all to their doom. The film shows Saleem as the center of the magic, the one

who represents all of India and thus all of the midnight's children. The film never forgets that this is ultimately Saleem's story and a story about India at the same time, and that the magic is a representation of India.

This is a part of the novel that brings forth many questions about the nature of narrative,

I have been only the humblest jugglers-with-facts; and that, in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case; and maybe this was the difference between my Indian childhood and Pakistani adolescence--that in the first I was beset by an infinity of alternative realities, while in the second I was adrift, disoriented, amid an equally infinite number of falsenesses, unrealities and lies. (Rushdie 396)

We have something interesting: the narrator questioning truth and reality. It is rarely the magic that is questioned but Saleem's honesty on history. This brings up an important point with magical realism that we discussed earlier, when the novel involves magic in a realistic setting, then history can be played with. And indeed, *Midnight's Children*, like many magical realism novels, is playing around with history, especially when it makes India's state of emergency all about magic and the magical children that inhabit India. This is clearly not the historical history of India, but Rushdie's magical one.

The film also deals with the magical realist themes of magic infecting history. Like the novel, the state of emergency is all about Saleem and the other Midnight's Children. Thus, history is becoming altered by the film's magic, as in so many other

works of magical realism. Therefore, like the novel, true history becomes hard to distinguish from fantasy. There is actually very little that the film does differently from the book in this regard. Saleem continues to be in all the important places in the South Asian subcontinent's history. He is born at the hour of India's independent, he fights in the battle for Bangladesh's independence, and he is the source of India's state of emergency.

An important quote that exemplifies magical realism in a really strong way through the writing is the following,

One Kashmiri morning in the early spring of 1915, my grandfather Aadam Aziz hit his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray. Three drops of blood plopped out of his left nostril, hardened instantly in the brittle air and lay before his eyes on the prayer-mat, transformed into rubies. Lurching back until he knelt with his head once more upright, he found that the tears which had sprung to his eyes had solidified, too; and at that moment, as he brushed diamonds contemptuously from his lashes, he resolved never again to kiss earth for any god or man. (Rushdie 15)

Here we have a very realistic setting, a man going to pray and hitting his nose, being mixed with magical elements, the blood being transformed into rubies. This is, in a nutshell, classic magical realism. Note that Aadam's reaction to the magic is not what you would expect, he reacts more with annoyance than shock and awe. This is nevertheless a turning point for his character, and it haunts him throughout the rest of the novel. Another thing to note about this passage is the simplicity with which it is written.

Nowhere do you see any excitement from the narrator about what is going on. This is very different from traditional fantasy where magic is often described with great excitement.

The film takes a similar approach to making everything feel as if it is on the same wavelength, only through cinematic means as opposed to literary ones. When magic is going on, it is filmed in a way that does not draw any special attention to it. Instead it is treated like anything else within the film. This is done through simple cinematography (medium takes as opposed to zooming in on the magic for example). Medium shots are used for the Aadam scene for example. Magic does not get treated like in fantasy films or superhero films, where the filmmakers linger their cameras on the special effects that drive those films, creating a different aesthetic. Also unlike superhero films in particular, the magic in a magical realism work like *Midnight's Children* is a part of a magical world, where superhero films have a few magical beings in a non-magical world.

One final quote that shows off magical realism, “family history, of course, has its proper dietary laws. One is supposed to swallow and digest only the permitted parts of it, the halal portions of the past, drained of their redness, their blood. Unfortunately, this makes the stories less juicy” (Rushdie 112). This quote actually revolves around the family grandmother, Naseem Ghani, spying on her children’s dreams. This is another example of classic magical realism in action. The description is simple and does not even focus much on the magic going on. Instead, the focus is on metaphor and other literary techniques. Magic is simply something attached to all of these things, just a part in a story. In *Midnight's Children*, history and family drama drive the plot forward, with magic simply acting as part of the plot.

As mentioned earlier, the film version uses narration (or having someone simply talk over the film saying magic is going on) instead of special effects to show the magic in this scene. This makes the magic seem unspectacular and not special. Like the novel, it is not magic that drives the story. It is again history and family drama that make the story go forward. Just as we saw with *Pan's Labyrinth*, magic is simply a part of the plot, while history is the main thrust of the plot. When magic does happen in the film, it is unspectacular, nothing like the big budgeted blockbusters we are used to seeing magic in. Overall the film distinguishes itself through its more simple use of magic in a way that is very similar but more cinematic than the novel before it.

Looking at all these quotes and comparing them to the novel, we can see that the film version of *Midnight's Children* is overall a very faithful adaptation of the novel. Admittedly not every scene from the novel makes it into the film, but that is to be expected when the novel in question is over 500 pages long. Instead *Midnight's Children* stays truthful to what makes the novel a unique work of magical realism, using film techniques to make the magic subtle in appearance, much like how the novel used literary techniques to do the same thing.

While exploring the ways that the film adapts the literary magical realism is important, it is equally important to note that the film also engages in magical realism that is specific to the film genre. The big change is that it is a visual experience, as opposed to a literary one. As George Bluestone notes, novels are “a conceptual and discursive form” and film is “a perceptual and presentational form” (yii). While language is still very much a part of the adaptation of *Midnight's Children*, it relies mostly on visuals to display the real and the unreal. While novels describe visual images to put in

our heads through the use of language, film directly shows us these visuals, a big difference between the two forms. In magical realism film, visuals show realistic images and unreal magic colliding, not in a fantastic way, but in a subtle way, as if the magic is a natural part of the world. Unlike fantasies where everything is spectacular, cinematic magical realism has visuals of magic be a natural part of the entire visual image.

In film, language appears to take a back seat to visuals. This is perhaps the main difference between the two forms. It is not that language becomes unimportant to the magical realism experience. The film still contains Rushdie's language and it is still important to the magically real aesthetic. But not as important as the visuals. It is ultimately the visuals that tell the audience the story and push the narrative forward. Language has the goal of not only partially creating an aesthetic but more importantly in most cases for moving the plot along from one point to another so that the visuals can tell the story more clearly.

In both the novel and film version of *Midnight's Children*, part of what makes them magically real is that their narratives involve the history of 20th century South Asia being mixed with magic. As Asli Degirmenci notes in her article "The Nation and the Supernatural in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*" "magical realism is often suited to the representation of communities in transition" (Degirmenci 58). Narratives are told differently in film than in novels, however. Again, in film it is the visuals that push the narrative along, visual images of realism and magic combined that make the narrative comprehensible as opposed to a narrator taking us along on the journey.

The adaptation of *Midnight's Children* displays its realism through certain cinematic techniques such as realistic set design, not through any literary description.

How shots are used also plays a part in the difference between screen and page magical realism. For example, by using a wide shot when magic is happening, the filmmaker is not giving the magic special attention, but letting it blend into the realist aesthetic. The film version of *Midnight's Children* notably does this when the grandmother is using her magic. This is a technique that cannot be used in a novel, for shots and the effects certain shoots have on the viewer are unique to the study of film language.

Overall, while the film on the whole feels like it lost a lot of Rushdie's original richness due to its abridgement from the book, the film still works strongly as a piece of magical realism. Mehta notably uses low-key film tricks to make the magic seem smaller and a part of reality. Not many films with magic do this, so she deserves credit for trying and accomplishing this task. Not even other films that are magical realism (like *Pan's Labyrinth* for example) do the low-key tricks that Mehta does to make the film feel like magical realism. Despite the film's problems it does manage to bring magical realism to the screen in a unique way, showing the genre can live and flourish in cinema if in the right hands.

Conclusion

As we can see from our example of *Midnight's Children*, magical realism can exist in film. Magical realism in film is a different kind of experience however, one that is very visual and relies upon these visuals to tell its story. It is still magical realism and it continues to follow the principles of magical realism nevertheless. The magical realism experience is in the film version of *Midnight's Children*, as much as it is in the novel, even if it is a different experience. Overall magical realism can certainly exist in the film medium, even if it changes as a result.

Looking at the history of magical realism, we can see it has existed in several forms. Before there was literary magical realism, there was simply magic realism that existed in paintings. Later it made the jump to literature, with authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Laura Esquivel, Leslie Marmon Silko, and of course Salman Rushdie all doing classic takes on magical realism. Now more recently magical realism has made the jump to film. We have seen films like *Birdman*, *Pan's Labyrinth*, and *The Green Mile* use magical realism to tell their stories and make their points. The film version of *Midnight's Children* joins these other films as classic examples of the aesthetic or genre existing in the film medium.

The film version of *Midnight's Children* is doing something very similar to the novel. In both novel and film, we see magic used not to create fantasy but to comment on reality. That need to comment on the reality of war and suffering through magic unite the novel and film as works of magical realism. The whole aesthetic or genre of magical realism is about combining reality and magic, and both the novel and film manage to do

this in a sophisticated way. This sophistication is what levitates both as great works of magical realism.

The novel and film are also united by their intent to use magic in a simple, non-grand way. Never do you see magic used in a way that would make it seem larger than life. In the novel, the narrator describes the magic the same way as everything else. In the film, Mehta uses only low budget film tricks in order to capture the magic. Both of these techniques ground the magic and make the extraordinary seem like a simple thing that could easily exist in real life. This is part of the key to magic realism; the magic should not seem larger than life but down to earth.

Looking at the film version of *Midnight's Children*, the elements that make a magical realism film experience are there. It again shows that magical realism can exist in the film medium by translating the literary experience of magical realism into the film experience. Just like how magic realism in painting became the magical realism of literature, we are now seeing literary magical realism being translated to film magical realism, which of course has its own rules. Magical realism is something that has grown and changed throughout the ages, and we are now seeing changes into a film form.

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