

## SALMAN RUSHDIE'S "THE LOCATION OF BRAZIL". THE IMAGINARY HOMELANDS OF FANTASTIC LITERATURE

*Silvia Albertazzi*

### Abstract

In 1985, under the title "The Location of Brazil" Salman Rushdie published a long review of Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*, which today is to be found in his collection *Imaginary Homelands*. My essay shows how Rushdie's article can be considered a sort of manifesto of his poetics, pivoting on his idea of a political use of the fantastic and his concept of the migrant as a central figure of modernity. Rushdie's theories seem to anticipate on the one hand Deleuze and Guattari's ideas on minor literatures and, on the other, Arjun Appadurai's views on "modernity at large".

**Key words:** modernity, Salman Rushdie, migrants

In 1985, shortly after the worldwide success of 1981's Booker-Prize-winning *Midnight's Children*, and three years before the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, which would leave him on the run from a death sentence and under the protection of the British police, Salman Rushdie wrote a long review article on Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*; this article, under the title "The Location of *Brazil*", would be included in the essay collection *Imaginary Homelands* at the beginning of the following decade. This apparently throwaway work in fact offers not only Rushdie criticism but also (above all) the student of the fantastic an irreplaceable expression of the author's poetics on the one hand and a vital critical tool on the other. The purpose of this essay is to offer a rereading of Rushdie's article aimed at highlighting the elements of theories of the fantastic that may be found in it.

Rushdie's goal in the 1985 article would appear from the title onwards to be to individuate where the fantastic is located. Asking himself where the "Brazil" the film refers to is to be found, Rushdie is really asking himself where products of the imagination are situated; if, in other words, it is possible to localize them in space and/or time: "where have we come to? What kind of place is Oz, or Wonderland? By what route, with or without a Ford Galaxy, may one arrive at Alyphaville? Specifically – for the purposes of this essay – where is *Brazil*?" (1991, 118-119). Rushdie notes that Gilliam's film takes its title not from the South American country but from a popular song that supplies the soundtrack to the protagonist's dreams, and suggests that the fantastic is to

be sought in time as well as (or rather than) space. The chorus to the song does indeed run “Brazil, where hearts were entertained in June/ We stood beneath an amber moon/ And softly murmured: Someday soon”. It is precisely in this “*someday soon*”, in this near future, that Rushdie finds a possible temporal rather than spatial location for the whole fantastic affair.

However, representing tomorrow today, that is, in a moment when “tomorrow is not only a place that hasn’t arrived yet, but one that may never arrive at all” (Rushdie 1991, 120), turns out to be somewhat problematic. In the fantastic, the possibility of changing through mechanical means not only the future but also the past is often contemplated; in narratives – both literary and cinematographic – from the end of the millennium the future takes on connotations of a recent past, as per the postmodern nostalgia theorized by Jameson (1989) or, if preferred, our experiencing reality as a future past (Augé, 2000). Thus, in cinema, from Kasdan’s *Body Heat* (1981), quoted by Jameson, to Mendes’s *Road to Perdition* and Haynes’s *Far from Heaven* (2002), by way of the Cohen brothers’ *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) and *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001), there is a constant desire to conceal the present through a nostalgic return to simulacra of a stereotypical past, something that Jameson also finds in the novels of E.L. Doctorow. At first sight, *Brazil* too would appear as much another monument to the disappearance of the historic referent, with the future it shows wearing the garb of a not-too-distant past, as it does a dystopia seen from the prospective of a future past – situated, in other words, “in the future of the past”, to paraphrase Pessoa, and having a sense only from the perspective of its relationship with yesterday. If this were the case, then Gilliam’s cinematographic narrative, in terms of political purpose (or absence thereof) would not differ from the “realist” films of Kasdan, Mendes, Haynes and the Cohens. The importance of Rushdie’s essay, however, lies in the fact that it demonstrates how Gilliam’s film, following on from the model of the best of the fantastic, carries a certain subversive political charge completely lacking from the nostalgic productions of the postmodern. These claim to be artistic expressions of the much vaunted “end of history”; *Brazil*, although set in a “cancelled future” (Rushdie 1991, 120), reaffirms the triumph of the imagination, of dreams, over the anguish of the real.

“... it turns out that we are being told something very strange about the world of the imagination”, Rushdie writes regarding this, “that it is, in fact, *at war* with the ‘real’ world, the world in which things inevitably get worse and in which centres cannot hold” (1991, 122 – emphasis in the original). In Gilliam’s film, therefore, dreams, with their creative power, are set against a dark reality recreated through simulacra of a recent, dark, past. The film’s “moral” – which is also the base of any political interpretation of the fantastic – is that “the world of the imagination is a place into which the long arm of the law is unable to reach” (Rushdie 1991, 122). Rushdie goes on: “This idea – the opposition of imagination to reality, which is also of course the opposition of art to politics – is of great importance, because it reminds us that we are not helpless; that to dream is to have power” (loc. cit.), and ends affirming that “the true location of Brazil is the other great tradition in art, the one in which the techniques of comedy, metaphor, heightened imagery, fantasy and so on are used to break down our conventional, habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be” (loc. cit.). It is obvious that here we have a concept diametrically opposed to that of an unchanging

situation in which historical events are situated. Instead, Rushdie's conclusion heralds the possibility of a new beginning for history, a new beginning in which history is born anew out of a destruction and reconstruction only available to the fantastic: "Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may be subsequently be reconstructed." The author who deals with the fantastic, therefore, has to destroy the world to re-invent it, recreating its rules according to the logic of dreams, a logic which is greatly different from that of our waking hours, which controls realist discourse.

"Our sense of the modern world is as much the creation of Kafka, with his unexplained trials and unapproachable castles and giant bugs, as it is of Freud, Marx or Einstein", writes Rushdie in his essay on *Brazil* (1991, 123). In order to classify the fantastic politically, on the one hand we have the "Kafka method": black humour and a technique that uses the superficially absurd, in the awareness that Kafka, as Deleuze and Guattari have noted, "c'est un auteur qui rit, profondément joyeux, d'une joie de vivre [...] qu'il tend comme un piège ou comme un cirque" (1975, 75), as well as being more importantly "un auteur politique, devin du monde futur, parce qu'il a comme deux pôles qu'il va savoir unifier dans un agencement tout à fait nouveau: loin d'être écrivain retiré dans sa chambre, sa chambre lui sert à un double flux, celui d'un bureaucrate de grand avenir, branché sur les agencements réels en train de se faire; et celui d'un nomade en train de fuir à la façon la plus actuelle, qui se branche sur le socialisme, l'anarchisme, les mouvements sociaux" (loc. cit.). On the other hand, it is precisely in the flight from a world that tends to substitute fantasies held *en masse* for personal dreams that the other component Rushdie considers inherent in the fantastic as we know it today is manifested. This is what is produced by a migratory consciousness and by crossing borders, which is a *sine qua non*, in the Indo-English author's view, for seeing to the heart of things: "The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature" (Rushdie 1991, 125). We have here one of the key themes of Rushdie's poetics: the importance of the migrant in twentieth-century culture, which was proclaimed in his essays from the early 'eighties and repeated in the last piece of non-fiction in his second essay collection, *Step Across This Line* (2002), where we may once again read that "the migrant, the man without frontiers, is the archetypal figure of our age" (2002, 356). Recapitulating what he has written in other essays and in the authorial asides in his novel *Shame*, as well as bearing in mind the personal history of Gilliam, an immigrant from the United States to England, Rushdie affirms:

The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human beings: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves – because they are so defined by others – by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves.' (1991, 124-125)

Rushdie here repeats the importance of the migrant, not just for contemporary culture, but also, most importantly, for the fantastic: because they have experienced more than one world and learnt not to trust reality: "Migrants must, of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats" (1991, 125).

The fantastic thus becomes placed in a supremely postcolonial dynamic: Edward Said affirms that “liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled [...] dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies [...] whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages” (1993, 332), and his words are echoed by Homi Bhabha who writes about “Marx’s reserve army of migrant labour who by speaking the foreignness of language split the patriotic voice of unisonance and become Nietzsche’s mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and antropomorphisms” (1990, 315). It is this attention paid by postcolonial theorists to migrant language that takes us back to Franz Kafka and his concept of “littératures mineures”, based first of all on the “déterritorialisation de la langue, le branchement de l’individuel sur l’immédiat-politique, l’agencement collectif d’énonciation” (Deleuze, Guattari 1975, 33): the fantastic-creating migrant is superimposed on the nomadic (and revolutionary) “minor” writer, who is “dans sa propre langue comme un étranger” and creates “une petite musique, une autre, mais toujours des sons déterritorialisés, un langage qui file toujours la tête la première en basculant” (op. cit., 48-49 – italics in the original).

But there is more to it than this. When Rushdie quotes Gilliam and reminds the reader that *Brazil* is a film built up around the simple fact that “America bombards you with dreams and deprives you of your own” (1991, 124) he is implicitly situating his critical speculations in the universe of cultural globalization hypothesized by Arjun Appadurai, but in doing so he is anticipating the Indian anthropologist by at least ten years. Although it may be true, as Rushdie himself has always underlined, that migrants have to carry with them their own capacity to imagine new ways of life, it should nonetheless be pointed out that for these individuals “both the politics of adaptation to new environments and the stimulus to move or return are deeply affected by a mass-mediated imaginary that frequently transcends national space” (Appadurai 1996, 6); this often results in mythographies quite alien to their original cultures. The mass media’s imaginary worlds thus become induced dreams, “large-scale, imagined life possibilities” (op. cit., 55) wielding enormous power over individual existential processes: “forms of mass advertising teach consumers to miss things they have never lost [...] creating experiences of losses that never took place [...] what might be called “imagined nostalgia”, nostalgia for things that never were” (op. cit., 77). It is the ridiculing of this “nostalgia without memory” that provides the motive force to Gilliam’s fantastic work, where the future is represented in the garb of the past, a past that “is now not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting” (op. cit., 30). The final goal of fantastic representation – whether literary or cinematographic – would appear to be to highlight “the inherent ephemerality of the present” (op. cit., 78), on the one hand, and on the other the fact that the future, thanks to the temporal acceleration characterizing what Marc Augé has theorized as our “supermodernity”, approaches the past to a point where it becomes part of history before it has been experienced.

For those who create the fantastic, therefore, it is no longer simply a question of opposing the powers that deprive an individual of his or her dreams. The watch-

words of French student protests in 1968 – “Forget everything you’ve learnt and start again from your dreams”, “Power to the imagination!” – become dangerous in a society where mass-produced fantasies are substituted for personal dreams and “the imagination [...] has now become a part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people in many societies” (Appadurai 1996, 5), which is often expressed in the creation of “imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world” (op. cit., 35). It is precisely this fight against a society that robs the individuals of their own dreams and obliges them to dream the dreams of others that underlies Tom Stoppard and Terry Gilliam’s screenplay, which not only succeeds in showing this world of fantasy on the screen but also manages to take it seriously, even though it is clearly separate from reality, something possible only for the greatest creators of the fantastic and children at play (cf. Augé 1997). In light of these observations, the opening question “Where is Gilliam’s Brazil?” may be answered, quite literally, “in a song”; just as it is in a song that there is to be found that world where “all fall down” in children’s games.

The two finales to Gilliam’s film – the darkly dystopic one envisioned for European audiences and the more fantastic one cooked up for the Americans – may thus be read as the natural consequence of these two attitudes (which are nevertheless expressions of a similar way of confronting reality). In the “Kafkaesque” European finale, in the final scene the protagonist’s torturers accept that he has died with the words “Look, he’s gone away”; in the American finale, however, the protagonist really does “go away”, breaking free from the torture chamber on a dream’s wings, flying above the clouds with the woman he loves like a disillusioned version of a Frank Capra angel. In both cases, however, imagination and fantasy allow him to escape the oppression by totalitarian powers of which he is a victim: metaphorically, in death, or literally, in a dream. As if this were not enough, a few scenes before the epilogue, the film’s most revolutionary character, the terrorist Harry Tuttle, vanishes in a whirlpool of paper, like the old nurse in Stevenson’s fable “The Song of the Morrow”, leaving the spectator only with the idea that, just like the “old crone” who vanishes in a whirl of dead leaves, he will sooner or later rematerialize: “Sam may be destroyed”, comments Rushdie, “but Tuttle swings on, like an urban Tarzan, from skyscraper to skyscraper [...] as a street-wise version of Sam’s dream of himself as an angel” (1991, 122).

Sam and Tuttle flee from the horror of Orwellian totalitarianism towards a Brazil that exists in a song, in a dream, in cinema itself, “because in the cinema the dream is the norm” (op. cit., 125); Brazil, or, Rushdie concludes, “a land of make-believe of which all of us who have, for whatever reason, lost a country and ended up elsewhere, are true citizens” (loc. cit.), all citizens of Brazil, always ready, like Alice, to change the rules of our New Found Land, to identify the corruption behind the charade of power, to denounce the fact that Wonderland (or Brazil) is only a bluff and, tearing away its mask, to find ourselves again in waking.

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*Universtiy of Bologna*