

The term “magical realism” was coined by art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe German post-expressionist painting. It was independently applied to literature for the first time, with a diverging meaning, by Italian novelist Massimo Bontempelli in 1927 to characterize modernist fiction. While, soon, the concept was virtually forgotten in Europe, it was resurrected in Latin American literature, again with varying meanings, starting in 1940. By the mid 1970s, it had become very popular in the context of the so-called “Boom” of the Latin American novel (1967–1984). Thereafter, as magical realism declined in Latin American fiction, it was picked up by many different national traditions of world literature and continues to enjoy a successful afterlife. This has further expanded the already varied conceptions of the term, making its definition one of the most challenging and interesting theoretical problems in contemporary literature.

Franz Roh published his 1925 book *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (*Post-Expressionism, Magical Realism: Problems of the latest European Painting*) at the height of the modernist avant-garde movement in Europe and the beginning of a new tendency in German art, marked by a post-World War I return to a rather blunt realism (Arnason 317–23). Roh coined the oxymoron “magical realism” to describe this new style. Two years earlier, another German art critic, Gustav Hartlaub, had proposed a competing term: “new objectivity” (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). Roh sought to define post-expressionism as a synthesis of two opposing tendencies: impressionism and expressionism. On the one hand, the impressionism of Van Gogh and his contemporaries emphasized external objects and the effect (or *impression*) they have on our senses. For instance, an impressionist painting up close may look like a conglomerate of dotted brush strokes, but as we retreat, realistic figures begin to

take shape. On the other hand, the expressionism of Emil Nolde, Ernst Kirchner, and the followers of Edvard Munch established the predominance of the subject, or inner self, over the object. The expressionists sought to project their emotions and existential angst onto the objects they depicted, thereby deforming them. They considered such distorted figures to be more “real” and humanly relevant than our proportionate everyday perceptions because they embodied the emotions that the subject *expressed* upon the world. Franz Roh believed that this tension between subject and object was a universal dichotomy in art. Today, postmodern critics shun such broad “universalist” or “essentialist” generalizations. Yet for Roh, this subject-object dialectic was finally resolved in the synthesis of the new post-expressionist “verism” of his contemporaries, such as painters Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, and George Grosz.

Roh’s rationale for calling this new type of realism “magical,” as opposed to “mystical,” was scarcely convincing, given the spiritual connotation of a “primitive” belief in the supernatural, which the word “magic” had acquired with the rise of ethnology and anthropology. In contrast, Roh meant the “wonder” that the constant movement of atoms and molecules should generate the sensation of concrete objects. He was drawing from Husserl’s phenomenology, introduced in 1913. Edmund Husserl suspended in brackets the old impasse of whether the world is fundamentally matter or spirit, noting that our perception of phenomena is the only given fact from which to approach reality. This became the philosophical foundation for Roh’s theory of post-expressionism. But the critic did not persist in the use of the term magical realism; he occasionally employed “ideal realism” instead, and later opted for Hartlaub’s competing term, “new objectivity.” Meanwhile, in European painting, as post-expressionism intersected French surrealism as well as Russian and Italian futurism, leftist artists became associated with “new objectivity,” while right-wing fascist sympathizers were more closely identified with Bontempelli’s “magical realism.” The increasingly negative overtone that fascism and fascist art accrued during the 1930s contributed to the term’s waning popularity in Europe (Guenther 33–73).

In 1927, Roh's work on magical realism was translated into Spanish and published by the influential *Revista de Occidente*, directed by José Ortega y Gasset. Given the diffusion of Spain's premiere cultural journal among the literary circles of Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Havana, and other centers of culture in Latin America, it is presumed that his concept of magical realism may have enjoyed a certain currency across the Atlantic. Nevertheless, the first Latin American literati to use the term in writing (Usigli 1940; Lins 1944; Uslar 1948; Portuondo 1955) make no mention of Roh and use the term with totally different meanings, to include poetic-lyrical-symbolic realism and psycho-existential realism. With this first acceptance of the term in Latin America, writers sought to transcend traditional realism, naturalism, and regionalism by *internalizing* the narrative point of view through techniques such as the interior monologue and the then popular "stream of consciousness." They narrated from inside the protagonist's mind in order to express, either a poetic view of the world and the self, or else a psychological and existential search for authenticity in a lurid world, viewed through the distorting prism of an alienated individual, who nevertheless succeeded in exposing disquieting existential truths.

Notwithstanding this literature's vague affinity with post-expressionism, Enrique Anderson-Imbert (1956) and Luis Leal (1967) would be the first to point out Roh's forgotten paternity, at a time when the term "realismo mágico" had already become, in its own right, a commonplace of Latin American letters. With few exceptions (e.g., Seymour Menton), the prevailing view among critics is that Roh's concept, and German post-expressionism for that matter, have very little to do with Latin American literature (González Echevarría 25–27).

A more direct connection, however, may be found with Bontempelli's original literary version of *realismo magico*. In 1926, Massimo Bontempelli founded the literary journal *900 (novecento)*, which circulated in Italy and France, bringing together modernist figures, like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Rainer Maria Rilke, Max Jacob, and Blaise Cendrars. Purportedly without any knowledge of Roh, Bontempelli proposed his own avant-garde literary formula:

“*precisione realistica e atmosfera magica.*” This formula—normalizing a supernatural atmosphere by describing it or narrating it in precise realistic detail—remains, to this day, a core technique of magical realism. In addition, Bontempelli urged his fellow writers to become primitives with a past. “Adam and Eve had no past”—he contended, alluding to the surrealist ideal of a return to the primal. “We cannot be Adams again: *Siamo dei primitivi con un passato*” (Bontempelli 188). Being “primitives with a past” meant returning to one’s national traditions, archetypes, and foundational myths—a very meaningful proposal for the young Latin American writers who were flocking to Europe at the time, and who would launch, a few years later, their own magic-realist proposals. Venezuelan essayist Arturo Uslar-Pietri, who had met Bontempelli in Paris and joined the debates of *900* in Italy, was a key contact. He would soon befriend Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias and Cuban Alejo Carpentier in Paris, where all three contributed to Asturias’ journal *Ensayo* and Carpentier’s journal *Imán*.

Significantly, Bontempelli’s proposals had very different cultural and political implications in Europe as opposed to Latin America. In a European hegemonic context, the idea of evoking a pure national archetype, so dear to fascism, was eventually hijacked by the Third Reich. By the end of the 1920s, Bontempelli, like other Italian futurists, had become an active fascist, leading to a rupture with many of his former literary friends. Yet in 1938, as political conditions deteriorated and it became evident that fascism was going too far, Bontempelli was expelled from the fascist party for refusing to take over a university post that had belonged to a Jewish professor. In a Latin American post-colonial context, on the contrary, that same search for national archetypes led to reclaiming indigenous traditions (in the case of Asturias’ Latin American highlands) and neo-African culture (in the case of Carpentier’s Caribbean basin). After their European experience, both Asturias and Carpentier became active Marxists. By 1949, Asturias had become the first Latin American novelist to describe his own work as magic-realist, based on his surrealist interpretation of the “primitive” Mayan psyche; whereas Carpentier had launched his own concept of *lo real*

maravilloso americano (“the American marvelous real”), inspired by Cuban *santería* and Haitian *vodou*. Henceforth, magical realism has remained primarily a countercultural and counter-hegemonic literary style.

According to Carpentier (1949), the marvelous resides in the cultural reality of Latin America itself, by virtue of the continuous clashes of disparate belief systems (European, indigenous, African) over five centuries of tumultuous history, and the hidden syncretism generated by such clashes. The task of the artist is not to create the marvelous through any technical means, but rather to perceive and bring forth the hidden cultural and historical marvels that have long been waiting to be discovered. Due to this radical negation of artificiality, Carpentier refuses to recognize any “-ism” or literary style other than the (neo-) Baroque, precisely because of the Baroque’s capacity for accepting and incorporating onto itself the most varied cultural elements. Following Carpentier, and yet admitting the role of technique, Haitian novelist Jacques Stephen Alexis (1956) opted instead for the term “*réalisme merveilleux*.”

A second moment in the development of the term in Latin American literature came with the early attempts at a more precise critical definition. Initially, this took the form of a debate between critics Ángel Flores and Luis Leal. Flores (1955) took a formalist approach, describing the term as an “amalgamation of realism and fantasy” distinguished by its preoccupation with style, precision and succinctness, a tight and logical plot, the transformation of everyday life into the awesome and unreal, the intemporal fluidity of the narrative, the rejection of sentimentality and lyrical effusions, and the predilection for the new and the surprising (112). These traits, however, characterized modernist fiction as a whole and, therefore, were lacking in specificity. Flores cited as early precursors a wide array of authors of non-realist fiction, such as Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Hoffman, the Grimm brothers, the dramatist Strindberg, Poe, Melville, and even Proust. But he held Kafka to be the purest literary exemplar and Giorgio de Chirico to be his counterpart in painting, arguing that their “cold and cerebral” style is what distinguished magical realism from the earlier, more romantic flights of fantasy

that were based on atmosphere rather than technique (Flores 113). Indeed, with his reference to de Chirico and to “atmosphere” Flores appears to be alluding to, and revising, Bontempelli’s “*precisione realistica e atmosfera magica*.” In regard to Latin American literature, Flores points to Borges as the initiator of magical realism, followed by the Argentines Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo, Mallea, Sábato, and Cortázar; the Uruguayan Onetti; the Chilean María Luisa Bombal; the Mexicans Arreola and Rulfo; and the Cubans Novás Calvo and Labrador Ruiz. Meanwhile, Borges, Bioy Casares, and Ocampo had famously edited their influential collection *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (1940), including a sampling of world literature since ancient times. Significantly, they defined their own work, not as magical realism, but as “fantastic literature.”

Luis Leal (1967) credits Flores with producing the first critical study of magical realism in literature, but disagrees with his definition and with his catalogue of magic-realist authors. He also recognizes Roh’s first use of the term, but notes that, in Latin America, it is Carpentier who presents a more systematic and coherent view based on his concept of *lo real maravilloso*. Leal concludes that:

magical realism cannot be identified either with fantastic literature or with psychological literature . . . neither does it distort reality or create imagined worlds. . . . The existence of the marvelous real is what started magical realist literature, which some critics claim is *the* truly American literature. (121–22)

Thus, he sides with Carpentier’s thematic approach and not with Borges’ formalism. He agrees with some of the authors cited by Flores and adds a few of his own, notably the Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos and the Cuban Félix Pita Rodríguez. The core difference between Flores and Leal, as well as between Borges and Carpentier, ultimately hinges on their emphasis on form (technique) versus content (the theme of the marvelous real).

A third moment in the development of the term, relevant not only to Latin America, but now also to world literature, arises in 1970, with the publication of Todorov’s systematic study, *The Fantastic*. Todorov defined the fantastic as the *tension* between the

possibility of a rational explanation and the disquieting acceptance of the supernatural—the unsettling prospect that the “laws of nature” have been violated, thereby compromising the reader’s sense of certainty and understanding of the world. To promote this tension, it is best if the narrator has a skeptical, scientific mind, such as that of a detective, who is constantly engaging in deductive reasoning and looking for clues that may lead to a rational explanation. Therefore, the fantastic is structurally related to detective fiction, as can be seen in the works of authors like Borges and Cortázar, whom critic Jaime Alazraki fittingly classified as “neo-fantastic”—as opposed to magic-realist (“¿Qué es . . .” 21–33). As long as this tension or doubt persists, the effect of the fantastic is maintained. On the other hand, if the characters and narrator do not care to look for a rational explanation, but instead accept the events as normal, then the story belongs to the genre of the *merveilleux* (the marvelous), such as in the case of the fairy tale, which requires from the reader a suspension of disbelief. Todorov emphasizes that any poetical or allegorical meaning would serve to naturalize or normalize the story, eliminate the doubt, and, therefore, destroy the tension of the fantastic, which requires a strictly literal reading. Finally, if a rational explanation prevails in the end, then the story is neither fantastic nor marvelous, but simply strange or *uncanny* (*unheimlich*, to use the psychological term developed by Sigmund Freud for that which is taboo or uncomfortably strange).

Todorov’s systematic definition of the fantastic was supposed to lead, by elimination, to a more specific definition of magical realism, but that would not turn out to be such a straightforward result. By the mid 1970s, the popularity of the term had grown so much as to lead to numerous studies and almost as many competing definitions. At the landmark 1973 magical realism conference in Michigan, Yale critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal called the debate “a dialog among the deaf” and suggested that the term be discarded altogether (Yates). To begin with, one of the problems with Todorov’s theory is that it reduces fiction to only three types of narrated events: the natural, the supernatural, and the strange or preternatural. Following this simplification, Anderson-Imbert suggested that Franz Roh’s original

dialectics (impressionism + expressionism = magical realism) could be transposed to literature as “a thesis: the category of the veridical, which produces ‘realism’; an antithesis: the category of the supernatural, which produces the literature of ‘the fantastic’; and a synthesis: the category of the strange, which produces ‘magical realism’” (*El realismo mágico* 9). This failed to resolve the problem because the delineation of the fantastic, while helping to narrow down the possibilities, ultimately could not establish what magical realism is, but only what it is *not*.

In *O Realismo Maravilhoso* (*Marvelous Realism*, 1980), Brazilian critic Irlemar Chiampi revisits Todorov’s opposition between the “fantastic” (based on doubt and skepticism) and the “marvelous” (where the supernatural is unquestioningly accepted as normal). Following both Leal and Monegal, she discards the term “magical realism” as being too imprecise and problematic and replaces it with “marvelous realism,” which she argues is more amenable to definition because of its relation, not only to Todorov’s theory, but also to Carpentier’s doctrine that the marvelous real is a normal everyday occurrence in Latin America’s marginalized cultures. Although Chiampi’s study, published in the heyday of structuralism, appears excessively technical and abstract today, it does contribute the view that, in “marvelous realism,” the natural and the supernatural appear as non-contradictory and that its core narrative technique is “the de-naturalization of the real and the naturalization of the marvelous” (157–58). That is, the commonplace becomes defamiliarized when seen from a naïve perspective, whereas the miraculous is rendered commonplace from the standpoint of the believer. As Carpentier famously held in his prologue to *The Kingdom of This World*, “the phenomenon of the marvelous presupposes faith” (86).

In a different take on Todorov, Amaryll Chanady proposes, in *Magical Realism and The Fantastic*, three criteria for defining magical realism in contrast to the fantastic. She notes that the fantastic establishes an antinomy between the natural and the supernatural; it affirms the natural as valid, such that the irruption of the supernatural creates an illogical situation; and it presents

a narrator who is reluctant to explain matters and resolve the antinomy. In contrast, magical realism presents as an antinomy two coherent perspectives in conflict, one based on a rational view of reality, and the other one on an acceptance of the supernatural as a normal everyday occurrence. However, according to Chanady, this second, coherent (but non-rational) perspective should not be unnecessarily restricted to that of a marginalized ethnic culture, but could also be that of an individual psyche (dreams, hallucinations, psychopathology, a child's perspective, etc.). The main difference vis-à-vis the fantastic would reside in the *natural attitude* with which the narrator accepts the irrational, thereby "resolving" the antinomy. Nevertheless, it may be objected that the narrator's natural attitude may be recognized as a necessary, but not as a sufficient condition for an accurate definition of magical realism. Accepting both a *collective* (culturally bound) and an *individual* (*sui generis*) point of view as equally conforming to magical realism, results in grouping together works of very different styles, traditions, and periods under a single, all-inclusive rubric. For instance, García Márquez admired Kafka's penchant for narrating *the absurd* (as opposed to the supernatural) "with a straight face" and even recognized this as a major influence; yet both authors ultimately have very different styles (30, 52). In consequence, despite some important advances, Chanady's definition remains vague in as much as it reduces magical realism to a "mode" or technique that may be employed in very different types of fiction.

Notwithstanding the limited results of such contrastive method, Todorov's delineation of the fantastic did lead most critics to associate modernist authors, like Borges and Cortázar, with the (neo-) fantastic, while more regionalist authors, like Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo, and García Márquez, became the most often cited as representatives of Latin American magical realism. This ushered a fourth moment in the development of the term, marked by an ethnological approach. From such anthropological perspective, the reader's modern-Western-industrial culture is confronted with the collective worldview of a pre-industrial-ethnic-rural society of believers, for whom the natural and the supernatural coexist

within a single, culturally-bound belief system. In his 1960 essay “Alejo Carpentier: realismo mágico,” Fernando Alegría was the first critic to point out this contextual dependence of magical realism on the Latin American hinterland, particularly what he called the “Afro-Indian” zone. Along these lines, I contended that, contrary to Carpentier’s myth of the marvelous real, subsequent magic-realist authors produced instead a sort of “narrative primitivism,” in which Latin American autochthonous culture was technically and, therefore, artificially constructed as a conventionalized pastiche or simulacrum based on classical anthropology’s creation of a generic “primitive society”—a composite of early ethnographic depictions of traditional non-Western cultures across the globe, as popularized in twentieth-century ethnology, literature, and film (Camayd-Freixas, “Narrative Primitivism” 112–31). These “primitive” conventions for what constitutes habitual everyday reality (perceived as “magical thinking” by the modern reader) came to replace the rational causality of traditional realism and became a given, an unquestionable *norm* in the magic-realist text. According to this theory, Latin American magical realism is not a “mode,” but a historically specific style shared by particular works of contemporary authors who exhibit a definite relation of literary influence, including: Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*, 1949); Asturias’ *Hombres de maíz* (*Men of Maize*, 1949); Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (*Pedro Paramo*, 1955); García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967); Isabel Allende’s *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*, 1982); Laura Esquivel’s *Como agua para chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*, 1990); and Vargas Llosa’s *El hablador* (*The Storyteller*, 1992). Their style is defined by three common denominators: the adoption of a “primitive” or provincial narrative viewpoint (production); the transculturation of reality norms from modern to archaic (text); and the virtual reader’s dual role as believer and skeptic (reception), resulting in an alternate, allegorical interpretation of Latin American history, as opposed to the “official” version of history perpetuated by the structures of power.

In the 1990s, as magical realism declined in Latin American literature after having attained international acclaim, it began to be applied globally to numerous authors in the rest of the world (Moreiras 84). Formerly competing terms, such as “marvelous realism,” “the marvelous real,” “fantastic realism,” and others became eclipsed by magical realism’s sheer popularity. But also, as a term of international literature, its earlier Latin American definition became too narrow and had to be complemented by a broader, more inclusive scope. Meanwhile, the fantastic was also experiencing an expansion of scope. Todorov’s delineation of the traditional fantastic, applicable mostly to nineteenth-century literature, and even the notion of a neo-fantastic modernist literature in the twentieth century, developed into what Brian McHale defined as a postmodern fantastic. Thus, in the actual practice of contemporary literature, even in Latin America, as Morales and Sardiñas have shown, previously separate elements of the fantastic and of magical realism have begun to coalesce within the same literary works, requiring new and more flexible theoretical formulations of both terms. This has led to a fifth moment in the development of the term: magical realism as a global poetics.

A leading theorist of international magical realism, Wendy Faris, has returned to Chanady’s broader concept of magical realism as a literary “mode,” and has identified five primary characteristics: an irreducible element of magic; a strong presence of the phenomenal world; some unsettling doubts on the part of the reader in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; the narrative’s merging of different realms; and the predilection for disturbing received ideas about time, space, and identity (7). Faris observes that “magical realism often originates in the peripheral and colonized regions of the West: Latin America and the Caribbean, India, Eastern Europe, Africa. But the mode is becoming less and less marginal” (29). She then adds, “Magical realism is currently moving out of that primitivist phase” (36). Among the many contemporary authors associated with this tendency are Günter Grass, Wilson Harris, Milan Kundera, Kenzaburō Ōe, Salman Rushdie, D. M. Thomas, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, José Saramago, Ben Okri, and Tahar Ben Jelloun. “The danger of studying magical

realism globally, from a broad, comparative perspective,' warns Faris, "is to colonize diverse cultural traditions by considering them under a general rubric" (40).

In conclusion, there is a tradeoff in theorizing magical realism: the more precise and rigorous the definition, the fewer the works that meet such strict criteria; conversely, the more inclusive the term, the more vague the definition. In order to arrive at a suitable compromise, it is important to note that the single characteristic on which critics agree is that magical realism makes the extraordinary seem commonplace and vice versa. This is dependent on the non-conventional point of view of the ("naïve" or "unreliable") narrator, and on naturalizing devices, such as the extremely detailed and matter-of-fact description and narration of a rationally implausible event. In any case, the narrative point of view is key. In this regard, a further distinction may be drawn as to whether the point of view should be collective and culturally bound (that is, tied to a set of traditional beliefs shared by a particular cultural group) or individual and psychologically bound (that is, relative to an individual as a universal representative of the species, or of the human condition).

Aside from these primary traits, a host of secondary characteristics may be found in some works, but not in others. Epistemologically, therefore, primary characteristics should be considered common denominators, while secondary characteristics would be best conceptualized in terms of Wittgenstein's *family resemblance*—where a wide number of works are linked together as sharing some, though not all, of a set of overlapping traits, much like members of an extended family. By the same token, a group of works within the same national or linguistic tradition may be linked together by strict common denominators, forming a core or nucleus of magical realism, while other works that share a family resemblance may be placed in closer or farther proximity to this relational nucleus. Such is, for example, the general relationship between the Latin American and the international brands of magical realism.

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