

The term ‘magic realism’ was first applied to painting, in Franz Roh’s 1925 essay ‘Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism’, although this essay has been widely quoted as describing magical realism in the form in which we understand it today:

It seems to us that this fantastic dreamscape has completely vanished and that our real world re-emerges before our eyes, bathed in the clarity of a new day. We recognize this world, although now – not only because we have emerged from a dream – we look on it with new eyes.⁶

When Roh wrote this about painting, he could hardly have expected it to be applied to literature on another continent. Although the Latin American critic and historian Angel Flores is credited with first applying the term to Latin American literature, Miguel Angel Asturias is said to have popularized the term when he applied it to his own fiction, particularly *Men of Maize*, after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1967.⁷ Though it is one of the lesser-known novels, probably because of its excruciating complexity, this work presents one of the most interesting and powerful examples of magical realism in terms of perspective, point of view, and elements of postmodern and fragmented narrative techniques to tell what is basically an epic story. Part myth and part historical fact, the main character is a Mayan Indian chief, Gaspar Ilóm, who resists the forces of the Spanish colonial empire, here represented by Guatemalan government soldiers, and defeats death when officers with whom he has shared hospitality trick him into ingesting poison. A complex layering of realism, magic and the fantastic, the novel presents a narrative that is faithful to the spirit of the original event, portrayed as though told from an indigenous perspective and means of representation.

It seems apt that a term originally applied to painting would come to be known as a continent-wide movement in Latin America. The magical realism seen in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* resembles the hybridity of painting, since the representation of painting and literature make use of entirely different conventions and value structures. If one thinks of this novel in terms of the kinds of brush strokes used by the author, it is clear that so much is suggested or implied, in the same way that movement or light is implied in a canvas. The novel is such a visual experience that the author has refused to sell the movie rights to the book in spite of many requests. A moving visual picture would set the images and characters in stone; the moving picture of the imagination is far more flexible and pliable in the creation of the corresponding images.

Curiously enough, something that almost all the Latin American works of fiction have in common is the suggestion of another medium of the arts

imposing on the novel, which has an impact on the representation of motion and emotion. Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (to whom García Márquez pays appropriate homage) portrays ghost-like images fading in and out of view, while the one living character, the sometime narrator, wanders through a maze of past personal and archetypal memories, some his own and others not, and finally ends in a crypt in a mass burial area of a cemetery, his thoughts and the thoughts of other decomposing corpses mixing together so that they are almost indistinguishable as in a painting.⁸

Certainly the concept term 'still-life' defies the reality, as paintings may portray fluidity as well as tense and frozen action at the same time. Just as the corpses in *Pedro Páramo* are far more alive than the single living character who appears in the story, we see the magical real at its best – the fantastic is portrayed as ordinary so that the reader suspends disbelief beyond the necessary parameter to enjoy the 'fiction'. In Elena Garro's *Recollections of Things to Come*, Martín Moncada remembers far better things that never happened – or that happened outside of time – than the things he did the day before, all the while making a political commentary on the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero War (as does *Pedro Páramo*).⁹ Of course, the indigenous influence everywhere apparent in mainstream Mexican and Latin American writing is a part of the native mysticism that is especially apparent in the treatment of time and space. North American native mysticism does not meet mainstream tradition until the 1960s, but when it does, the magical realism in the writings of Louise Erdrich, M. Scott Momaday and Leslie Silko is as prevalent as in their Latin American counterparts.

Magical realism: that two words can contain, capture and project so much in imagination, theory and definition is nothing short of amazing. Critics have researched, written and devoted careers and tens of thousands of pages to getting this definition right, in fact, 'just right', the reason being that we, as a modern reading public, are immediately intrigued by the mystical paradox of the term. While we may argue the genesis and proprietary rights to magical realism, we immediately recognize that magic cuts across national and linguistic boundaries, gender, age and social class and mores, un/natural boundaries of life and death, communicating the territories of this world and the next (or another world), and belongs as a birthright to all peoples. Children especially have not lost their magical connection to the universe. For all of us, it is a part of our identity in the same way that magical realism belongs to the identity of Latin Americans, but is shared with those who come to it later. Magic belongs to everyone, including those who are dismissive of it.

So it is with magical realism; the many definitions springing up around the term and its variations are intriguing. Wendy B. Faris in *Ordinary*

Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative discusses one of the most important, not to mention useful, aspects of magical realism as the ‘irreducible element’ in a narrative which has to be accepted at face value and cannot be broken down further:

The ‘irreducible element’ is something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse, that is, according to ‘logic, familiar knowledge, or received belief’, as David Young and Keith Hollaman describe it. Therefore, the reader has difficulty marshaling evidence to settle questions about the status of events and characters in such fictions. We must take Gabriel García Márquez’s very old man with enormous wings, for example, ‘as a given, accepted but not explained’. The narrative voice reports extraordinary – magical – events, which would not normally be verifiable by sensory perception, in the same way in which other, ordinary events are recounted.¹⁰

The conflict that ensues comes from the fact that Western society defines itself, through its over-reliance on science as a means of explaining the universe (and human existence), as reductive. When we attempt to use science as a means to explain the ‘irreducible’ part of this element, we must take into account the modern tendency of science to reduce everything to the knowable through a deductive or inductive explanation.

Why is this term, magical realism, so seemingly simple and relevant at once so evocative and resonant? I trace the history of this phenomenon back to Octavio Paz’s discussion of analogy in *Children of the Mire*; his analysis of the Baudelairian correspondences which govern the nature of the interaction of things, which he uses as an analogy for magic in that instant feeling of connectedness and the inner working of events. Paz refers to this magic as a tradition which ‘crosses the eighteenth century, penetrates the nineteenth, and reaches our own. I am referring to analogy, the vision of the universe as a system of correspondences, and of language as the universe’s double.’¹¹ These correspondences link every human being with every other human being on this planet (and the next if we include magical realist authors of science fiction such as Daína Chaviano, Rosa Montero and Yoss). Jorge Luis Borges firmly believed in the so-called ‘interconnectedness’ of events, so much that every quotidian, personal and individual act of the day had an impact on every other event, both great and small, in the life of the planet. We see this manifest and acted out in intricate design in his short stories and essays.

It is my own belief that magical thinking is the underpinnings for magical realism, and that magical realism is tied to the dream world in that it represents the site where the conscious and unconscious worlds meet. This is