



# Naturalizing the Supernatural: Faith, Irreverence and Magical Realism

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## Abstract

Starting from a basic understanding of magical realism as a mode of narration that seeks to naturalize the supernatural, this essay draws a distinction between faith and irreverence in magical realist discourse. It offers a brief account of magical realism's conceptual and literary history, analyses the state of current critical discourse and suggests ways in which nuanced modes of reading magical realist literature can be developed. Drawing from the early theorizing of Alejo Carpentier, the article proposes that one strand of magical realism is characterized by the desire to affirm non-western world views and cultural modalities. On the other hand, Carpentier's contemporary, Jorge Luis Borges, provides the paradigm for an alternative view of magical realism that sees it as similar in key respects to postmodern literary projects. These contrasting approaches are then tested with reference to the magical realism of Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie.

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## *Introduction*

The term *magical realism* has appeared in print with increasing frequency over the past few decades. It can now be found in a vast number of university course descriptions, dissertations and academic articles, and it has received notable coverage in the popular press.<sup>1</sup> Even the advertising industry has recently begun to take an interest in the term, though it long ago learned how to capitalize on magical realist visual techniques in its quest for ever more novel ways of marketing products.<sup>2</sup> The main force of the attraction seems to be that the term's distinctive oxymoronic nature suggests a numinous quality to the everyday, and it thus promises somehow to reconcile the modern, rational, 'disenchanted' subject of the West with forgotten but recoverable spiritual realities.

In the domain of literary studies this popularity has not been matched by any certainty over what magical realism actually is, and scholars new to the field are likely to be confronted by a number of contradictory attitudes towards the term. One eminent critic has referred to magical realism as 'the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world',<sup>3</sup> while another has called it 'little more than a brand name for exoticism'.<sup>4</sup>

It can be ‘a major, perhaps *the* major, component of postmodernist fiction’,<sup>5</sup> or it can be ‘a possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary postmodernism’.<sup>6</sup> Magical realism has by turns been praised for founding ‘a new multicultural artistic reality’<sup>7</sup> and denigrated as ‘dangerous and shallow’.<sup>8</sup> It has even been accused of being underpinned by ‘pernicious – even racist – ideologies’.<sup>9</sup> While such discrepancies are partly to be accounted for by ideological differences, as a critical term magical realism has, until recently, lacked widespread definitional and theoretical legitimacy.

Some critics have responded to this state of affairs by suggesting that we ought to do away with the term magical realism altogether.<sup>10</sup> The problem with such a suggestion, even if it were possible to implement, is that it ignores the fact that the tenacity of the term is due in large measure to its explanatory value. There is a growing corpus of literary works that draws upon the conventions of both realism and fantasy or folktale, yet does so in such a way that neither of these two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the other. This capacity to resolve the tension between two discursive systems usually thought of as mutually exclusive must constitute the starting point for any inquiry into magical realism. A brief survey of canonical magical realist texts – Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Isabel Allende’s *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*), Laura Esquivel’s *Como agua para chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*), Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, and Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, for example – will reveal that what these otherwise different texts all have in common is that each treats the supernatural as if it were a perfectly acceptable and understandable aspect of everyday life. As Rushdie says, talking of García Márquez, ‘impossible things happen constantly and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun’.<sup>11</sup> A basic definition of magical realism, then, sees it as a mode of narration that *naturalizes the supernatural*;<sup>12</sup> that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of rigorous equivalence – neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality. Pressing this formal definition further, this essay proposes to distinguish between an attitude of *faith* and one of *irreverence* in magical realist writing.

### *A Brief History of Magical Realism*

The term, or at least a form of it, was first used to signal something very similar to the promise that it now seems to hold in the popular imagination. In 1798 the German Romantic poet and philosopher, Novalis, speculatively described in one of the fragments in his notebooks a ‘true prophet’ or an ‘isolated being’ who would not be bound by the limits that govern the lives of ordinary humans. Such a prophet, Novalis wrote,

should be referred to as a 'magical idealist' or a 'magical realist'.<sup>13</sup> Novalis's idealism was an essential part of his Romantic philosophy, and functioned, throughout his work, as a means of resolving oppositions between self and other, subject and object, in order to attain a higher, miraculous truth. Importantly, though, this idealism still maintained a place for the physical world.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Novalis's project was a response to the 'disenchanting' logic of the Enlightenment, and provides a relevant, though almost entirely unexplored, point of connection with the ways modern magical realism, similarly responding to a disillusionment with the relentlessly rational nature of modernity, also seeks ways of resolving the tension between miracle and truth, the magical and the real.

Novalis never developed the concept of 'magical realism', and it resurfaced in an aesthetic context only in 1925 when, again in Germany, it appeared in the title of a book of art-historical analysis by Franz Roh.<sup>15</sup> Roh felt that the new forms of art emerging in Germany in the Weimar years (today better known as *Neue Sachlichkeit*) managed to synthesise the (relative) naturalism of Impressionism with the transcendentalist overtones of Expressionism. Thus, once again the term magical realism proved a useful means of naming a process whereby a set of antinomies crucial to rational discourse is undone. Roh, a former student of Heinrich Wölfflin, was an erudite and respected figure in art circles in Germany for more than forty years, and it is quite plausible that he inherited the term from Novalis.<sup>16</sup> Even if he didn't, the overlap between what he and Novalis intended to signal with their uses of the term is nevertheless important for reconstructing an intellectual history of the term, for it shows just how recurrent is the urge to bring together realms suggested by the signifiers *real* and *magical*.

Roh was not the only Weimar intellectual interested in the term magical realism or the concepts it underpinned. Jeffrey Herf has shown how Ernst Jünger, a reactionary whose ideas went some way towards authorizing those of Nazism, also used the term to demonstrate the possibility of reconciling German Romanticism with an embrace of technology. Though Jünger's fiction shows no sign of what we would today call magical realism, in his social commentary he extended Roh's use of the term in ideologically charged and highly conservative directions.<sup>17</sup> His appropriation of the term, while not essential to the rise of magical realism as a critical concept, serves as a reminder that magical realism, at least in its conceptual state, is not wedded to any particular political orientation – and is far from always being the subversive, revisionary force many critics seem to assume it is.<sup>18</sup> A third Weimar intellectual worth mentioning here is Oswald Spengler. Spengler, like Jünger (and unlike Roh) was a reactionary thinker preoccupied with a sense that German national identity was under threat from the twin forces of liberal capitalism and Marxism.<sup>19</sup> Like Jünger, Spengler sought answers to the crisis in the reconciliation of the real and the non-rational: in his case myth and

history. Clearly influenced by the ideas of German Romantic Idealism, his relevance lies not in his use of the term, or in any fictional production, but in the extent to which he was able to articulate a space for the non-rational within a certain paradigm of identity politics. This synthesis was later to prove important for Latin American purveyors of magical realism like Alejo Carpentier.<sup>20</sup>

Along with Roh, the other major figure in the conceptual genealogy of the term is the Italian writer and critic, Massimo Bontempelli. In 1926 Bontempelli started the journal *900* in which he expressed his desire to further a new mythography that, unlike the fabrications of the avant-garde, would respect the continuities between past and present. The kind of art he proposed was one that would find miracles in the midst of ordinary and everyday life, and he specifically named this art magical realism.<sup>21</sup> Bontempelli exerted an influence over both Carpentier and Miguel Ángel Asturias, the two authors credited with the earliest works of Latin American magical realism, through the agency of Arturo Usler-Pietri. A friend of Bontempelli, Usler-Pietri collaborated with both Carpentier and Asturias during the time they spent in Paris in the 1920s, and renewed his acquaintance with Carpentier when the latter moved to Venezuela in the 1940s.<sup>22</sup> As Camayd-Freixas makes clear, in terms of both concept (the reconciliation of the everyday and the miraculous; but also ‘conscious primitivism’) and terminology (the specific use of the phrase itself), Bontempelli is a more relevant figure than Roh to magical realism’s genealogy. It should also be observed that Bontempelli, at this stage of his career at least, was a fascist. As in the case of Jünger, the historical link between the term magical realism and fascism is worth keeping in mind, even though it may not be directly relevant to the writers who use the mode.

Usler-Pietri is credited as being the first critic to apply the term to Latin American narrative in 1948.<sup>23</sup> The first sustained piece of literary criticism devoted to magical realism appeared six years later, when Angel Flores used the term to describe a wide range of Latin American authors who shared certain aesthetic similarities.<sup>24</sup> Flores’s magical realism is something more akin to what we would today describe as the fantastic, or simply as modernism, and he made no reference to either Carpentier or Asturias. By contrast, in 1967, Luis Leal attempted to correct Flores’s overly formal definition, insisting instead that magical realism does not call for the creation of imaginary worlds, but rather displays an attitude in which ‘the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts’.<sup>25</sup> The differences between Flores and Leal are summarized by Camayd-Freixas as expressing a ‘secular schism’ in magical realist scholarship – that between the formal and the thematic.<sup>26</sup> In the years that were to follow, the term became popular in Latin American critical discourse, yet conflicting attitudes abounded. The application of the term to Canadian and then to other

non-Latin American contexts from the 1980s onwards may have exacerbated the confusion, especially in the case of criticism that takes no cognizance of magical realism's Latin American history.

As far as the literary development of magical realism is concerned, the year 1949 is a watershed, for it was in this year that Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*) and Asturias's *Hombres de maíz* (*Men of Maize*) appeared in print.<sup>27</sup> Both of these writers had spent a considerable amount of time in Paris in the 1920s, and, in addition to the ideas of Bontempelli and Spengler outlined above, surrealism must be mentioned as a crucial influence on both writers (Carpentier's rejection of its artifice notwithstanding). The celebration of the primitive, the emphasis on aesthetic experimentation, and the deliberate and self-conscious assault on rationalism promoted by surrealism all proved important to the development of magical realism as it emerged in these two early examples of the mode. The former is now well known for its introduction, which contained an aggressive assertion of Latin America's ontological difference from Europe. In this introduction, Carpentier argued that Latin America was inherently marvellous, and that it was only through the exercise of faith that outsiders would be able to access *lo real maravilloso americano* (the marvellous American real). Focalizing his novel largely through the perspective of a Haitian slave, Carpentier tried to express the world view and belief system of the Afro-Caribbean population through magical realism. Asturias attempted something similar for the descendants of the Maya of Guatemala in *Men of Maize*. In these two novels, then, and in the early Carpentier's claims about *lo real maravilloso americano* we have the paradigm for what I would like to call a faith-based approach to magical realism.

Alongside Asturias and Carpentier, the third member of the 'genealogical ABC' of modern Latin American writing is, of course, Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>28</sup> Borges was wholly uninterested in the cultural nationalism explored by Carpentier and Asturias. Thoroughly familiar with the literatures and cultures of Europe he asserted that, far from feeling inferior in any way, the Latin American in fact had a greater right to European culture than did Europeans, and therefore that he or she should treat European ideas with 'an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences'.<sup>29</sup> Those 'fortunate consequences' can, in Borges's case, best be seen in the ways his short narratives toy with certain key assumptions that underpin the rational, causal world view which is dominant in the West. Borges's starting points often turn out, on close inspection, to have much in common with the Idealist tradition of Berkeley and Hume, and it is therefore no surprise that he also openly venerates Novalis.<sup>30</sup> Borges is not a magical realist in the sense the term is being used here, but it is safe to say that his writings created the conditions of possibility for future purveyors of a certain kind of irreverent, philosophically minded magical realism.

Carpentier and Borges, then, are connected to their Romantic predecessors via two different routes. Carpentier's early insistence on faith and his fascination with Afro-Cuban culture is best understood within a framework given by surrealism, Bontempelli and Spengler. Borges's fascination with the Idealism of Novalis and others, fuelled by his encyclopaedic reading and a productive sense of marginality, allowed him to cast a sceptical eye over virtually every aspect of knowledge with which he came in contact. The key word governing this process is irreverence. The third section of this essay will test the proposition that these two strands of influence can be detected in later works of magical realism from around the world.

### *The Current State of Criticism*

The first critic to develop a coherent narratological theory of magical realism was the Brazilian, Irlemar Chiampi, in 1980 (a Spanish translation of her book appeared in 1983). Through her shrewd analysis of the arguments of Roh, Uslar-Pietri, Flores, Leal and others, Chiampi made some noteworthy contributions to our understanding of the mode. Most prominent among these are the ideas that magical realism may involve either a 'denaturalisation of the real' or a 'naturalisation of the marvellous', and the distinction, seldom remembered, that magical realist critical discourse frequently confuses the phenomenological and the ontological.<sup>31</sup> While it was actually Chiampi's intention to supplant *magical realism* with the Carpentier-derived term *marvellous realism*, her observations are nevertheless still useful in helping us understand the processes by which the mode functions, and also those by which criticism attempts to interpret its objects of study.

In 1985 Amaryll Chanady continued in the structuralist vein, identifying a three-part taxonomy of magical realism: the magical realist text must display coherently developed codes of the natural and supernatural, the antinomy between these codes must be resolved, and a measure of authorial reticence must be in place in order to ensure that the co-existence and legitimacy of both codes is not threatened.<sup>32</sup> As the title of her book suggests, Chanady is concerned with distinguishing magical realism from fantastic literature, and in this regard her theory is useful both in understanding the formal dimensions of the mode, and in distinguishing magical realism from its neighbouring genres. One can show, for example, how fantasy, fairy tales and science fiction underprivilege codes of the real by taking as settings realms removed from our recognizable, empirical world. Or one might show how the Gothic novel, the uncanny and some examples of horror make coherent use of codes of the natural and of the supernatural, yet present them in such a way that their co-existence is rendered as a source of unease or anxiety – thus leaving the antinomy unresolved. Finally, with regards to Chanady's third criterion, it needs to

be emphasized that if the supernatural is in any way explicable – such as when Lewis Carroll's Alice awakes to find that her adventures were all a dream, or when the fantastic bats swooping down on one of Hunter S. Thompson's characters are revealed to be the result of drug-induced hallucination – then the code of the real is effectively privileged over that of the fantastic, and magical realism is therefore not the best category within which to consider the text.

The landmark publication in English-language critical discourse on magical realism is Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris's 1995 anthology, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. The volume treats magical realism for the first time as an international phenomenon, and literary contexts as diverse as Europe, Asia, North and South America, the Caribbean, Africa and Australia are brought together under the rubric of the term. One of the main strengths of the anthology is that it presents alongside one another founding texts of magical realist discourse by Roh, Carpentier, Flores and Leal. A useful history of the term – straddling literary and art-historical contexts – is provided by Irene Guenther, and Chanady contextualises the Latin American debate helpfully by interpreting it as a 'territorialisation of the imaginary'.<sup>33</sup> Also noteworthy is Faris's attempt at constructing a coherent set of generic defining features for the mode, an effort she has renewed and extended in a monograph published in 2004.

The problem with the Zamora and Faris's anthology is that, in moving away from the kind of narratological approach advanced by earlier critics, it leaves too open the important question of definition. The tone is set by Stephen Slemon who asserts: 'In none of its applications to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighbouring genres'.<sup>34</sup> Slemon signally fails to note that Chanady had already explicitly set out the terms on which such differentiation needs to take place. Though his essay goes on to exhibit a clear and useful sense of exactly what magical realism is and does, his comments have served, in certain cases, to authorize a vague and arbitrary approach to the question of how we should know when a text is or is not magical realist.<sup>35</sup> Theo d'Haen's essay, similarly oblivious to previous scholarship, assumes that an art-historical definition of magical realism, in this case gleaned from the *Oxford Dictionary of Art*, can unproblematically be applied to literature.<sup>36</sup> The dubious result is that J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are called magical realism. Postmodernism and magical realism may have much in common, but collapsing the terms into one another serves little purpose.

Recent works of criticism by Erik Camayd-Freixas and Wendy B. Faris make visible the outlines of two possible routes out of this confusion.<sup>37</sup> In Camayd-Freixas's account, magical realism is understood to be a sophisticated aesthetic expression of primitivism that served the yearnings of Latin American writers for identity and cultural emancipation. The

magical realism of Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo and García Márquez is shown to develop from an urge to reclaim a space of otherness by appealing to myths of difference.<sup>38</sup> Faris takes a more global perspective, mapping out the transnational literary links between a great range of texts, showing the 'cultural work' that magical realism does, and claiming it as 'perhaps the most important contemporary trend in international fiction'.<sup>39</sup> These approaches can be seen to represent two different views of magical realism. The former is anthropological (in the broadest sense of the term), and seeks to interpret the 'magic' in magical realism culturally, as an expression of particular belief systems or ways of seeing the world. The latter perspective sees magical realism as akin to a form of epistemological scepticism, a productive fictional mode of critique that points towards a possible re-enchantment of Western modernity.

These two approaches are by no means incompatible, and correspond roughly to the emphasis on *faith* and *irreverence* being identified in this essay. Useful though they may be, it should be noted, though, that each of these two critical works shows up the methodological limitations of the other. Where Camayd-Freixas's exclusive emphasis on Latin America facilitates a thorough and meticulous penetration of literary-historical and theoretical issues, it leaves questions about non Latin American contexts at the level of suggestion only. While Faris is at pains to account for exactly the question of magical realism's internationalism and its capacity to critique, her attempt to articulate the continuities between such a vast range of different magical realist texts leaves her unable to account fully for the historical and theoretical differences between these texts, and also between the contexts from which they emerge. That strand of magical realism that is regional, and which strives to affirm specific cultural modes of perception is too quickly harnessed to postmodern projects, without being allowed the space to emerge on its own terms. It remains to be seen whether a study of magical realism can be written that successfully blends Camayd-Freixas's depth of regional analysis with Faris's international range.

### *Faith and Irreverence in Magical Realist Fiction*

If all realism is illusionism, as J. M. Coetzee's fiction and criticism consistently seek to show,<sup>40</sup> then magical realism involves a special kind of narrative trickery. Most notably, it uses the devices of realism to achieve ends that realism would, of necessity, eschew. Techniques for integrating natural and supernatural vary from writer to writer: in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* disbelief in the supernatural is punished with beheading, teleportation into exile or madness.<sup>41</sup> García Márquez presents a supernatural occurrence and then immediately draws the reader's attention to a relatively banal detail. When José Arcadio Buendía sees a 'taciturn Armenian' vanish before his eyes, he responds by being upset about the



news of the death of his friend Melquíades; when Fernanda sees Remedios the Beauty ascend to heaven her first concern is whether she will get her sheets back. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* it is the domestic space and the mother-daughter bond that naturalizes the unsettling fact that *Beloved* is simultaneously ghost and real person. As techniques vary, so will each text have its own reasons for wanting to naturalize the supernatural. These reasons will only become clear when background factors such as literary influence, cultural context and political agenda are taken into account.

Close scrutiny of magical realist novels thus reveals that, though they share a common set of formal narrative procedures, in other respects they are quite different. I would like to propose a set of simple questions that will orientate the reader towards a nuanced interpretation of specific magical realist texts: what is the source of the supernatural in this text? What kind of dialogue does it enter into with the text's more realistic elements? And why has this writer engaged this particular mode at this particular time? Two different tendencies may become evident in the answers to these questions: those given by the paradigms I have identified in terms of Borges's *irreverence* and the early Carpentier's *faith*.

The magic in the magical realist text may have, in postmodern fashion, the effect of unmasking the real, showing up its claims to truth to be provisional and contingent on consensus. Alternatively, the magical may seek to force its way into the company of the real, and thereby to share in the privileged claim the language of realism has to representing the world. Most modern critics would argue that only the former is possible. The latter bespeaks a nostalgic but impossible view of what language can do. The tendency unselectively to celebrate postmodern scepticism in the interpretation of magical realism should be resisted, however, for it has the effect of effacing, on a formal and a thematic level, the distinction between faith and irreverence introduced above. Consequently this bias towards postmodernism may underemphasize the 'work' that some magical realist texts do in expanding (rather than subverting) the conventions of realism in order to create space for cultural perspectives other than the hegemonic western world view. The examples of Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri should help in making these issues clearer.

No novel celebrates irreverence more boldly than *The Satanic Verses*. The infamous *fatwa* sentencing Rushdie to death for apostasy serves as confirmation of his success in this regard, though it should be noted that *The Satanic Verses* is more about 1980s Britain than it is about Islam. If the object of Borges's approach is eclectically to relativize, ironise, and to question boundaries of all kinds, then Rushdie clearly follows in step. In his pamphlet defending the novel, ironically entitled *In Good Faith*, he provides what is probably the most optimistic interpretation of the potential of irreverent magical realism: '*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of

human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotch-potch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world.<sup>42</sup>

The supernatural of this novel seems to arise from Rushdie's own eclectic imagination, nurtured as it has been by wide reading and a productive mixing of cultures. It does not arise ethnographically, from the world view of any specific culture, but linguistically, from the detail of language. For Rushdie language does not carry culture: it actively constructs it. His sustained and sometimes hilarious literalization of metaphor is, therefore, the primary source of his magical realism. Rushdie's earlier novel, *Midnight's Children*, similarly takes issue with monopolizing meta-narratives, the most prominent of which is the colonial version of the history of India. In Saleem Sinai's counter view there are 'as many versions of India as there as Indians themselves',<sup>43</sup> and his magical realist 'handcuffing to history' serves to prove the point. Rushdie's targets, in both novels, are those narratives, be they fictional, cultural, religious or historiographic, that arrogate to themselves the final say on what is true and what is not. Magical realism supports this project because, as its oxymoronic nature suggests, it allows Rushdie to utilize realism when it suits him, but then simultaneously to relativize and undermine it by allowing the supernatural, the mythical, the bizarre and the grotesque to intrude without explanation or rationalization. The result is an idiosyncratic, culturally and politically aware form of meta-fiction.

Okri's magical realism needs to be understood on a quite different set of co-ordinates. In interviews conducted around the time of the publication of his Booker-winning novel, *The Famished Road*, he rejected the label magical realism, and consistently asserted that he was not trying to generate 'strange effects' in his work. Rather, he was attempting to give voice to a putative African identity: 'This is just the way the world is seen: the dead are not really dead, the ancestors are still part of the living community and there are innumerable gradations of reality, and so on. It's quite simple and straightforward. I'm treating it naturally. It's a kind of realism, but a realism with many more dimensions.'<sup>44</sup>

Notwithstanding his objections to the label, these comments, which find a clear precedent in Wole Soyinka's theory of 'the African world view',<sup>45</sup> can quite clearly be located within the faith-based paradigm of magical realism elaborated by the early Alejo Carpentier. After all, for Carpentier the marvellous was inherently and inevitably part of Latin America. Okri emphasizes mode of perception rather than telluric reality, but the effect is substantially the same. Here 'faith' signifies not only the living spirituality that is alleged by Okri to belong to Africans, but also, perhaps more importantly, faith in the capacity of literature to represent such multi-dimensional realities. Okri appears well aware of this latter point – his narrative is self-conscious and gently ironic throughout, as Azaro's encounter with spirits in the marketplace makes clear:

I watched crowds of people pour into the marketplace . . . After a while I felt a sort of vertigo just looking at anything that moved . . . I shut my eyes and when I opened them again I saw people who walked backwards, a dwarf who got about on two fingers, men upside-down with baskets of fish on their feet, women who had breasts on their backs, babies strapped to their chests, and beautiful children with three arms. I saw a girl amongst them who had eyes at the side of her face, bangles of blue copper round her neck, and who was more lovely than forest flowers. I was so afraid that I got down from the barrel and started to move away when the girl pointed and cried:

‘That boy can see us!’

They turned in my direction. I looked away immediately and hurried away from the swelling marketplace, towards the street. They followed me . . . They stayed close to me to find out if I really could see them. And when I refused to see them, when I concentrated on the piles of red peppers wrinkled by the sun, they crowded me and blocked my way. I went right through them as if they weren’t there.<sup>46</sup>

The passage highlights the importance of vision in the novel, subtly encouraging the reader to accept the norms that govern Azaro’s seeing. By framing the question of whether Azaro can see the spirits from the point of view of the spirit-girl herself, the passage neatly forecloses on the possibility of rationalization. The point of making Azaro’s escape dependent on his walking through the spirits *as if* they are *not* there is that, of course, they *are* there, and the point of Okri’s novel is to grant western readers access to a Soyinkan version of the world view of Africans. There is irony here, but it is not the irony of a Rushdie or a García Márquez.<sup>47</sup> Far from discrediting all established notions of reality, Okri’s desire, at least in *The Famished Road*, is to expand it to make place for the cultural modalities of those who have been, and continue to be, excluded from the products and benefits of modernity.

It is unlikely that the distinction between faith and irreverence will always be as clear-cut as it appears from this brief comparison between Rushdie and Okri. Indeed, most writers – including these two – consciously or unconsciously factor both dimensions into the pages of a single text. It is worth keeping in mind that the non-rational in the magical realist text is only seldom the product of a world view in which there exists no clear line between what westerners insist on referring to as natural and supernatural. Such novels do exist – Asturias’s neglected classic *Hombres de maíz* (*Men of Maize*), and *The Famished Road* are good examples. The problem is that, even in the case of Asturias or Okri, perspectives that we might call ‘anthropological’ are very difficult to separate out from more literary and philosophical agendas. Who can say for certain where surrealist automatic writing ends and the Mayan world view begins in *Men of Maize*, for example? Is Okri’s perspective in *The Famished Road* Yoruba, or Igbo or New Age? Magical realist novels are complex works

of literature in which real and non-real exist in a state of carefully contrived equivalence. In García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the narrator clearly exhibits such a great deal of sympathy for his characters that the reader is lead towards assuming that the novel's magic arises from an 'anthropological' representation of their world view.<sup>48</sup> However, when García Márquez's comments about the influences that led to the discovery of his method are considered, it is clear that they are so eclectic and diverse that his magical realism cannot simply be a case of 'this is just the way the world is seen'. Rather, García Márquez extracts from his literary and cultural contexts the justification for using magic as a means of defamiliarizing discourse – about the nature of Columbian and Latin American culture, and especially about the relationships between past and present that underpin it.

### Conclusion

Sweeping generalizations about magical realism are bound to fail; the term is best used not as a globalised postcolonial aesthetic category, but rather as a tool for understanding specific texts and contexts. Failing to recognize the differences between impulses behind magical realism has caused a great deal of confusion for literary criticism. Similarly, acknowledging such differences, but then falling back on the postmodern variety as a template against which other forms must be judged also leads to distorted interpretations. The way forward is to bear in mind that all criticism of any kind should always emerge out of a dialectic between the general and the specific. In this context that means above all resisting the urge to develop totalizing theories that cannot account for local difference, respecting the particular traditions and cultural currents that flow through magical realist texts, and ensuring, ultimately, that the text itself is allowed to enter into dialogue with the critical assumptions that seek to classify it.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See M. Margolis, 'Is Magical Realism Dead?', *Newsweek* 139(18) (6 May 2002), pp. 52–5; R. McCrum, 'Now You See It, Now You Don't. Has Magic Realism Run Its Course?', *The Observer Review* 12 May 2002, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.mtnhigh.com/mag\\_econ.html](http://www.mtnhigh.com/mag_econ.html) for an advertisement for a 'magical realist water softening device' offered by a company called Mag-Well. Accessed on 8 July 2004.

<sup>3</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> J. Franco, 'What's Left of the Intelligentsia', in *Critical Passions: Selected Essays*, ed. M. L. Pratt and K. Newman. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> M. Calinescu, *Dustcover of Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. L. Parkinson Zamora and W. B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> F. Jameson, 'On Magic Realism in Film', *Critical Inquiry* 12(2) (1986), p. 302.

<sup>7</sup> J.-P. Durix, *Mimesis, Genres, and Post-Colonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998), p. 162.

- <sup>8</sup> F. Barker, P. Hulme and M. Iversen, eds., *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 14.
- <sup>9</sup> G. Martin, 'On "Magical" and Social Realism in García Márquez', in García Márquez, ed. R. Fiddian (London: Longman, 1995), p. 104.
- <sup>10</sup> See R. González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 108; L. Connell, 'Discarding Magic Realism: Modernism, Anthropology, and Critical Practice', *A Review of International English Literature* 29(2) (1998), pp. 95–110.
- <sup>11</sup> S. Rushdie, 'Gabriel García Márquez', in *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1992), pp. 301–2.
- <sup>12</sup> This phrase is derived from I. Chiampi, *El realismo maravilloso: forma e ideología en la novela hispanoamericana*, trans. A. Martiniez and M. Russotto (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1983), p. 27. See below for a discussion of Chiampi's influential book.
- <sup>13</sup> Novalis (Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg), *Schriften*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960), vol. 3, pp. 384–5.
- <sup>14</sup> See F. C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism 1781–1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 426.
- <sup>15</sup> F. Roh, *Nach Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der Neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1925). Extracts appear in English as 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', Zamora and Faris, eds., *Magical Realism*, pp. 15–31.
- <sup>16</sup> For more on Roh's life and work, especially his photography, see H. Fernández, 'The Double String: Franz Roh as Theorist and Photographer', in *Franz Roh: teórico y fotógrafo*, ed. M. Casanova (Valencia: IVAM Centro Julio González, 1997), pp. 112–18.
- <sup>17</sup> J. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). See also I. Guenther, 'Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic', in Zamora and Faris, eds., *Magical Realism*, pp. 33–73.
- <sup>18</sup> For an elaboration on the ways Jünger's conservative cultural version of magical realism resonates with a strand of magical realism in South African literature in Afrikaans see C. Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Cultural Politics of the Postcolonial Novel* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Cambridge University, 2003), ch. 5.
- <sup>19</sup> O. Spengler, *Decline of the West*, trans. C. F. Atkinson (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1926).
- <sup>20</sup> See González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier*.
- <sup>21</sup> M. Bontempelli. *L'avventura novecentista* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1974), p. 351.
- <sup>22</sup> E. Camayd-Freixas, *Realismo mágico y primitivismo: Relecturas de Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo y García Márquez* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), pp. 34, 45–9; see also Guenther, 'Magic Realism', pp. 60–1.
- <sup>23</sup> A. UsLAR-Pietri, *Letras y hombres de Venezuela* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1948), p. 162. See E. Camayd-Freixas, 'Reflections on Magical Realism: A Return to Legitimacy, the Legitimacy of Return', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 23(2) (1996), p. 585.
- <sup>24</sup> A. Flores, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction' in Zamora and Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, pp. 109–117.
- <sup>25</sup> Luis Leal, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature', in Zamora and Faris, eds., *Magical Realism*, pp. 119–24, 121.
- <sup>26</sup> Camayd-Freixas, 'Reflections on Magical Realism', p. 584.
- <sup>27</sup> A. Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo* (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 1969). M. A. Asturias, *Hombres de más* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1981). Carpentier's preface is translated in an expanded form as 'On the Marvellous Real in America', in Zamora and Faris, eds., *Magical Realism*, pp. 75–88.
- <sup>28</sup> R. Pope, 'The Spanish American Novel from 1950 to 1975', in *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature*, ed. R. González Echevarría and E. Pupo-Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), vol. 2, p. 232.
- <sup>29</sup> J. L. Borges, 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition', in *Labyrinths*, ed. D. A. Yates and J. E. Irby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 218.
- <sup>30</sup> See, for example, the essays, 'Avatars of the Tortoise', 'The Mirror of Enigmas' and 'A New Refutation of Time', in Yates and Irby, eds., *Labyrinths*.
- <sup>31</sup> Chiampi, *El realismo maravilloso*, pp. 27–32; p. 205.

- <sup>32</sup> A. Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (New York: Garland, 1985), pp. 3–6.
- <sup>33</sup> Guenther, 'Magic Realism'; A. Chanady, 'The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms', in Zamora and Faris, eds., *Magical Realism*, pp. 125–44.
- <sup>34</sup> S. Slemmon, 'Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse', in Zamora and Faris, eds., *Magical Realism*, p. 407. Essay originally published in 1988.
- <sup>35</sup> For a detailed discussion of the question of definition in magical realist critical discourse see C. Warnes, 'The Hermeneutics of Vagueness: Magical Realism in Current Literary Critical Discourse', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* forthcoming, 2005.
- <sup>36</sup> T. D'haen, 'Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentring Privileged Centres', in Zamora and Faris, eds., *Magical Realism*, pp. 191–208. For a similar approach, which generates similar problems, see S. Menton, *Historia verdadera del realismo mágico* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998).
- <sup>37</sup> Camayd-Freixas, *Realismo mágico y primitivismo*; W. B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004).
- <sup>38</sup> Camayd-Freixas, *Realismo mágico y primitivismo*, p. 49.
- <sup>39</sup> Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments*, p. 1.
- <sup>40</sup> See J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003), pp. 1–35.
- <sup>41</sup> M. Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, trans. M. Glenny (London: The Harvill Press, 1996).
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- <sup>43</sup> S. Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 269.
- <sup>44</sup> J. Ross, 'Contemporary Authors Interview with Ben Okri', in *Contemporary Authors Vol 138*, ed. D. Olendorf (Detroit: Gale Research, 1993), p. 338.
- <sup>45</sup> See W. Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 33, 58, 122–33.
- <sup>46</sup> B. Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Vintage, 1992), pp. 15–16.
- <sup>47</sup> See B. Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 34.
- <sup>48</sup> See Martin, 'On "Magical" and Social Realism', pp. 100–20.

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