SEEKING A VALID THEORY OF MAGIC REALISM:
A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

BUSCANDO UNA TEORÍA VALIDA DE REALISMO MÁGICO:
UNA REVISIÓN BIBLIOGRÁFICA CRÍTICA

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Resumen
A pesar de que mucho se ha investigado y escrito sobre el género literario realismo mágico, las conclusiones a las que llegan la mayor parte de los estudios varían y, en algunos casos, hasta se contradicen. Los malentendidos asociados al término, por un lado, y el apego al modelo estructuralista, incluso por parte de estudios postcoloniales y postmodernos del género, por el otro, han impedido el desarrollo de un marco conceptual que pueda ser usado para analizar obras mágico realistas. Este artículo aborda estas cuestiones revisando críticamente la bibliografía sobre realismo mágico desde que el término fue acuñado. Se cuestiona el criterio más usado para definir y caracterizar el género a la luz de teorías postcoloniales y postmodernas. Esta evaluación de las numerosas contribuciones realizadas por investigadores de diferentes enfoques literarios apunta a delinear un marco teórico bien fundado con criterios sólidos de definición del género que puedan ser validados y mejorados en investigaciones futuras.

Palabras clave: realismo mágico - postcolonialismo - postmodernismo - realismo - fantasía.

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Abstract

Despite much has been researched and written about the literary genre magic realism, the conclusions to which most studies arrive vary and, in some cases, even contradict each other. The misconceptions associated to the term, on the one hand, and the attachment to a structuralist model, even from postcolonial and postmodern studies of the genre, on the other, have hindered the development of a conceptual framework that can be used for analysing magical realist works. This article addresses these issues by reviewing the critical literature on magic realism since the term was first coined. The most widely used criteria to define and characterise the genre is questioned in the light of both postcolonial and postmodern theories. This examination of the many contributions made by researchers from different literary approaches aims at outlining a well-grounded theoretical framework with sound criteria to define the genre that can be validated and improved in further research.

Key words: magic realism - postcolonialism - postmodernism - realism - fantasy.

Introduction

Originally considered as the expression of an authentically magical world, the literary genre magic realism was born in a context of seductive exoticism. Although many theorists have made important contributions now considered as valid by most critics in the field, the real meaning of magic realism remains elusive. The existence of elements from the two codes of the supernatural and the real is one of the few certainties criticism of the genre has; however, for some critics, there is a prominence of realism interrupted by magical events, whereas others find that these two codes are fused into one incoherent fictional world. Ideas about the role of the narrator, the narrative strategies and the author’s purpose, among others, are also at issue. On the other hand, to further obscure any attempt at theoretical certainty, the number and variety – in terms of characteristics, literary devices, origins and purposes – of fictional works classified as...
magical realist not only from the critical perspective but also from the marketing one, is bewildering. The result is a controversially and contradictorily defined genre.

There is, thus, a need for a conceptualisation of magic realism based not only on formalist views, which aim at determining the structure behind magic realist texts, but also grounded on approaches that give importance to other features of the text like the purpose and the context. In other words, if we are to define magic realism, critical ideas on the genre’s structure as well as on its political and ontological claims should be considered as essential. To that end, it seems timely to summarise and evaluate the literature on magic realism, from the moment the term was first used until the present times, critically assessing the contributions made from structuralist, postcolonialist and, more recently, postmodern views of the genre to identify valid theoretical tenets. After a brief account on the existing literature, this review makes particular emphasis on Bortolussi’s (2003) set of four criteria for characterising the genre and on her ideas as to the possible aims of magical realist authors.

How did magic realism come into existence?

The term “magic realism”, since it was first coined until it definitely acquired its meaning of a literary genre, has been used to express different ideas in different fields. Literary critics generally present Roh as the person who first coined the words in 1925 (Guenther, 1995; Leal, 1995; Simpkins, 1995; Slemon, 1995, among others). However, Warnes’ article “Naturalising the Supernatural: Faith, Irreverence and Magic Realism” (2005) distinguishes itself from most other studies on this genre by crediting the introduction of such a term to the German writer and philosopher Novalis in his notebook in 1798. According to Warnes, the term “magical realist” is used by Novalis to signal someone “who would not be bound by the limits that govern the lives of ordinary humans” (p. 2). Yet the term was not further developed by Novalis.

Roh, the commonly-proclaimed creator of the term, later applied the term in an aesthetic context using it to describe a new style in German painting which “present[s] familiar things in unusual ways” (Simpkins, 1995, p. 150). The fact that many magic realists frequently apply this strategy has led to the belief that magic literature derives
from magic realist painting, “one of the principal misconceptions that has contributed to cloud the theoretical legitimacy (...) of the genre” (Takolander, 2007, p. 243). As Takolander notices, though some magic realist authors do portray the ordinary as magical, one of the fundamental characteristics of magic realism is exactly the opposite, i.e., the portrayal of the supernatural as if it were natural.

The first use of the term in relation to literature occurred in Italy in 1927, when Bontempelli referred to a new European tendency in the first editions of his journal “900”, and it was first applied to describe Latin American literature by the Venezuelan Uslar-Pietri in 1948 (Guenther, 1995; Warnes, 2005). In words of Guenther (1995), “it is in Latin America that the concept was primarily seized by literary criticism and was, through translation and literary appropriation, transformed” (p. 61). The Latin American writers Carpentier, Flores and Leal produced “the first sustained pieces of literary criticism” (Warnes, 2005, p.4) in 1949, 1954 and 1967, respectively. For them, what magic realism does, portraying a reality in which magical events are considered as normal occurrences, is nothing but the true depiction of the Latin American reality, another misconception in relation to the genre (Bortolussi, 2003; Takolander, 2007; Warnes, 2005; Gesicka, 2003).

Carpentier and Asturias are attributed to have written the first magical realist novels: El Reino de Este Mundo (The Kingdom of This World) (1949) and Hombres de Maiz (Men of Maize) (1949), respectively (Guenther, 1995; Warnes, 2005). The very much acclaimed works of Latin American writers like Borges and García Márquez gave place to the so-called Latin American Boom of the late 1950s and 1960s, mainly characterized for its use of magic realism (D’haen, 1995; Simpkins, 1995; Slemon, 1995; Warnes, 2005).

Many other magical realist works and literary studies followed, structuralist and poststructuralist ones, not only from Latin America, but also with other origins. This has led critics such as Faris (2002) and Hegerfeldt (2001) to propose analyses of magic realism as an international genre. One of the most important theories of magic realism is that of Amaryll Chanady who in 1985 introduced her three-part taxonomy (Bortolussi,
2003; Noriega Sánchez, 2000) according to which magic realist works are characterised by:

1. the co-existence of two “autonomous coherent levels of reality” (Noriega Sánchez, 2000, p. 13): the natural and the supernatural,
2. a resolved antinomy allowing co-existence of these two autonomous worlds, and
3. authorial reticence to judge the veracity of the facts.

 Chanady’s taxonomy has been widely accepted and unquestionably used by a vast majority of studies of the genre. However, as Bortolussi (2003) puts it, Chanady’s theory has not received the critical treatment it deserves and, after a careful reading of this taxonomy, she concludes in its inaccuracy. The co-existence of two autonomous codes is refuted by Bortolussi (2003), arguing that if the rational world admits magical occurrences, it could not be called autonomous, and viceversa. The cancellation of the first criteria, invalidates the second one since, from an ontological perspective, the fusion of two worlds does not correspond with the tension that should arise from an antinomy. Finally, the last criteria, that of authorial reticence to explain the facts, is also argued against by Bortolussi, for whom it is not clear what constitutes an explanation and who claims that if magical events could be traced back to myths or beliefs of other sorts, then that could be considered as an implicit explanation in itself. The third criterion, therefore, could or not exist in magical realist works losing its defining condition. Apart from the inaccuracy of this taxonomy, it is not sufficient to define magic realism leaving aside other aspects of the genre, like the role of the narrator, which may distinguish it from other literary genres. In Bortolussi’s view there have been important misconceptions in these theories which have caused the theoretical uncertainty the genre suffers from. Bortolussi (2003) then argues that “a more productive future integration of formal and contextual approaches” (p.290) is necessary to understand the genre of magic realism.

 Magic realism, therefore, has come to be considered as a genre after a long process of conceptualisation. This process has had “its waxings and wanings” (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 5) since the term was coined, when the characteristics of a style in painting were adapted to literary works. This unfinished process still suffers from a lack
of theoretical certainty, mainly in relation to what the genre really is, and how and why it is used.

**What is magic realism?**

Magic realism is a literary genre in which the two oppositional codes of the rational and the irrational merge (Bortolussi, 2003). In words of Slemon (1995):

> The term “magic realism” is an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy. (…) Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the “other” [and] never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy. (pp. 409-410)

Slemon’s very much quoted definition of magic realism can be further detailed by analysing the genre’s similarities and differences to the other two genres among which magic realism lingers since “magical realist narrative itself inhabits a peripheral space at the border that separates the two genres of fantasy and realism” (Takolander, 2007, p. 13). Similar to realist texts – and contrary to fantastic ones which portray imaginary worlds – the fictional world in magic realist texts is “geographically identifiable, and the narrative, aside from the instances of the unreal, is often even historically verifiable” (Baker, as cited in Takolander, 2007, p. 34). These references to the real world, however, are not enough to perform the functions of mimesis and reference belonging to the realistic tradition (Faris, 1995; Zamora & Faris, 1995; Bortolussi, 2003; Chanady, 2003) mainly because of “an irreducible element” (Faris, 1995, p.167; Takolander, 2007, p. 22) of magic – fantastic events – in magic realist texts that refuses to be explained logically.

In relation to the genre’s differences with the fantastic, Bortolussi (2003) and Takolander (2007) have made some valuable contributions. According to Bortolussi, the fusion of the two worlds of the rational and the supernatural is a characteristic of both the fantastic and magic realism. What distinguishes them is the effect of the way these events are presented. In fantastic texts, “all the magical, supernatural, fantastic, or bizarre events ensue from one single, obvious source, and are thus united by a coherent
logic” (p. 358), which explains the magic. Furthermore, the narrator presents these events with a serious attitude, thus confirming the plausibility of the facts. The result is that these fantastic events make sense and are acceptable within this fictional world. In magic realism, on the other hand, magical occurrences are not the product of one unique and coherent source. The narrator’s stance, as in the fantastic, is one of seriousness also confirming the occurrence of magical events. However, whereas this serious stance in the fantastic makes the supernatural events seem plausible, an undoubting narrator “towards a world that is inherently incongruous [in magic realism] undermines the very authority of the narrator” (p. 361). This is the creation of an ironic author who aims at parodying the mimetic codes of realism. Takolander (2007) agrees with Bortolussi (2003) in characterizing the tone in magic realism as ironic. For the former, the quality that sets magic realism apart from the fantastic is its “ironic nonchalance [which becomes] a self-reflexive commentary on the farfetched events” (p. 33) that are related. A last determining feature of magic realism is its strong commitment to the situation in which it is born. The marginal position of magic realism between two genres coincides with the marginal position of the places it generally emerges from. For D’haen (1995), in fact, “it is precisely the notion of the ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place ‘other’ than ‘the’ or ‘a’ center” that distinguishes magic realism from other genres” (p. 194). At first, according to Takolander (2007), authors with postcolonial agendas, such as Latin American or Indian writers, were the ones who wrote magic realism; but then other cultural minorities, such as women and homosexuals, started to produce magic realist texts. In every case, not only do magic realist narratives “speak from the margin”, but they speak about them as well, not by the presentation of a magical reality as Carpentier asserted, but by their “cultural and, particularly, historical ‘enrootedness’” (p.188) as a strategy for resistance against hegemonic historical accounts.

In brief, magic realism is the literary genre where realism and the fantastic are combined in such a way that none can outstrip the other. Realistic techniques enable the text to make allusion to the real world though not sufficiently as to perform the realistic functions of mimesis and reference. This is due to the presence of the magical events,
the main feature of fantasy; however, magic realism cannot be considered as part of the latter because of a multitude of arbitrary magical events – provoked by a multitude of different causes – impeding the reader’s acceptance of such an implausible world. This purposeful fictional manipulation by the author is related to the last basic notion to conceptualise magic realism: that of irony. Magic realist authors ironically play with literary devices to challenge hegemonically established conventions.

How and why is magic realism used?

Magic realism has been a topic of critical discussion since the 1950s, but it has generally been only vaguely characterised. Noticing the need for a sound theory, Bortolussi (2003) proposes a set of [four] criteria for characterising the genre that relate to the plot, the narrator, the narrative style and the author.

a) About the plot, Bortolussi observes the “lack of any (…) single cause of the magic or unifying logic underlying all the magical events” (p. 358) thus challenging any coherent explanation for these magical events. The fantastic events related in a magical realist text belong to “different systems of belief: isolated mythologies, folkloric traditions, legends, popular superstitions, some literary heritage (fairy tales), even jokes” (p. 359) among others. The absence of such a “unifying logic” causes a sense of disconnection, incongruity and implausibility in the plot.

b) The narrator in magic realist texts presents these incongruous events in a matter-of-fact way showing his/her belief in them and, thus, appearing innocent and even childlike. The effect on the reader of such a “playful and humoristic irony invested in the narrator’s discourse by the author” (p. 361) is, therefore, one of perplexity and suspicion towards both the fictional world and the narrator.

c) The narrative style is another strategy by which the plausibility of the fictional world is undermined. In this matter, Bortolussi briefly mentions the ideas of Danow and Lopez that feature magic realism “poetics of excess” (Danow, as cited in Bortolussi, 2003, p. 362). Other critics who follow the line of thought Bortolussi proposes, such as Faris (1995) Gesicka (2003), Henitiuk (2003) and Takolander (2007), have also
described the genre’s typical textual properties. The characteristics of the magic realist narrative style these critics generally agree upon may be grouped in three criteria:

- excesses and incongruities through exaggerations, tall tales, hyperboles, aesthetic of the monstrous, humour and unnecessarily detailed description of the fictional world (Danow and Lopez as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 1995; Gesicka, 2003; Henitiuk, 2003);

- questioning of received ideas – like those of time, space and identity – based on reason and science through the use of other systems of belief such as myths, gossip and local lore (Lopez, as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 1995; Gesicka, 2003; Hegerfeldt, 2002; Henitiux, 2003);

- metafictional dimensions (Bortolussi, 2003; Danow, as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 1995; Henitiuk, 2003; Takolander, 2007)

d) The author’s “playfully irreverent” tone produces an ironic distance between the narrator and the reader. By the creation of an ingenuous narrator and of an implausible world in which readers cannot simply believe, the author parodies the illusion of a unifying code sought for by other genres like the fantastic (Bortolussi, 2003; Higgins, as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Takolander, 2007).

Regarding the genre’s purpose, while the subversive power of magic realism is, in general, a feature upon which most critics agree, its specific agendas, that is, what the genre reacts against, is a more controversial issue. The most established view is to consider the validation of other systems of thought over the hegemonic one as the main purpose of magic realist authors. For some recent studies, however, these works aim at showing that all systems of thought are simply human constructions of reality.

Postcolonial studies align with the first idea. Postcolonial criticism studies texts coming from cultures which have been dominated by European Empire and analyses how these texts defy the “false images and myths of the Third (postcolonial) World (...) which have conveniently justified Western exploitation and domination” (Murfin and Ray, 1998, p. 295). In relation to magic realism, postcolonial studies see the strategies of resistance of magical realist texts as a reaction against the marginal position they hold with the purpose of giving the “ex-centric and un-privileged” (D’haen, 1995, p. 195) a
voice. In this sense, magical realist texts are considered to work towards the construction of an identity, helping the “symbolic nation-building” (Chanady, 2003, p. 437) process of every postcolonial community, one that goes against the imperial center. These strategies of both identity construction and resistance are found not only in postcolonial texts, but also in other marginal cultures reacting against centers of power. Members of the second world, women and homosexuals share “their historical marginalization by Western-centric, imperialistic, masculinist, heterosexist or otherwise biased hegemonic representations of the real” (Takolander, 2007, p. 195). Concluding, for these set of critics, apart from casting doubt upon political impositions, magic realist texts also question other cultural hegemonic constructs like “versions of history” (Takolander, 2007, p. 192) and “totalizing systems of [literary] generic classification” (Slemon, 1995, p. 408).

Although they recognise the existent relation between these political margins and magic realism, other critics who analyse the genre from a postmodern perspective do not think about magic realism as a response to this marginal position only. For them, in their claiming that the main purpose of magic realism is the reaffirmation of the Other and a validation of its own identity, postcolonial studies fail to dissociate from Chanady’s and Carpentier’s ideas provoking, in this way, a romantisation and exotification of the Third World (Bortolussi, 2003).

The postmodern approach, however, views literature as a reality in itself and not a representation of reality. For postmodernists, reality “is partially the truth of the questions we pose about it and thus, in some sense, ‘a figment of the imagination’” (Wheeler as cited in Murfin and Ray, 1998, p. 298), and thus, a construction. Postmodern analyses attribute the choice of magic realism to the intention of exposing the nature of all realities as human constructions. For Lopez this is achieved by the creation of an impossible world no reader could believe in:

[...] our knowledge of the world creates an irreducible distance between reader and character that makes it impossible for us to share the latter’s magical perception of the object; we simply know too much to believe such a thing and it is precisely this
knowledge which renders us unable to share the character’s magical worldview. (Lopez, as cited in Bortolussi, 2003, p.362)

Other critics focus on a textual property through which magic realism challenges universally accepted notions and laws: the carnivalesque (Danow, 2003; Gesicka, 2003; Henitiuk, 2003). In her study of the carnivalesque in magic realism, Gesicka (2003) finds that in their mixing of magical elements from totally different origins unrelated to each other, magic realism does portray a magical worldview, but “it is its arbitrary nature that is foregrounded” (p. 393). This fictional manipulation is achieved through the carnivalesque which, with its transgressing of limits and flaunting of rational laws, “gives magic realism its unique capacity of relativizing every single truth or world-view by degrading, mocking and undermining its validity” (Gesicka, 2003, p. 397). Either through the distancing effect Lopez talks about or through the use of the carnivalesque Gesicka refers to, what magic realist authors set out to prove from this postmodern perspective is “the illogical, constructed, mythical nature of all representations of reality” (Bortolussi, 2003, p. 362). Bortolussi goes on to explain that instead of aiming at the validation of the Other and its beliefs and worldviews, magic realism aims at exposing all beliefs and worldviews as “invalid and irrational” (p. 465). From this, it can be concluded that even though there are no universal worldviews, what is universal is the “myth-making function of the human mind” (p. 364).

The misunderstanding, deriving mainly from Carpentier’s premise, that magic realism portrays a marginal reality, is then widely recognised. The genre’s subversive nature is, also, a concept that remains beyond question. Whether the ideas the genre tries to subvert are considered political, literary, cultural, or ontological depends on the critical approach it is analysed from.

Conclusion

Magic realism has long held a problematic status in the critical literature which has attempted to understand the genre. Considered at first as an expression of a real magic world, the genre was mystified from the very beginning. With Chanady and other
critics in the structuralist line, it was framed under a set of specific rules. On the other hand, important insights have also been contributed by postmodern and postcolonial analysis of the genre who give priority to contextual aspects and to the possible purpose behind the use of magic realism. However, most of the studies, structuralist, postcolonial or postmodern, unquestionably adopt Chanady’s taxonomy as a way of defining the genre. This taxonomy, thus, has not been further developed and its limitations have been left unattended. With this as a theoretical background, magic realism continues to cause controversy.

Certain critical works can shed some light on these issues. To begin to define what magic realism is, the analysis of what it is not results essential. Takolander (2007) and Bortolussi (2003) draw clear distinctions between magic realism and realism, as well as between magic realism and fantasy. After critically analysing the very much used taxonomy by Chanady, Bortolussi calls it into question and proposes her own set of magic realist criteria characterising the plot, the narrator, the narrative style and the author. According to these criteria, the purpose the magic realist author pursues is to distance the reader from the narrator and the fictional world. This idea of an ironic author is also supported by other critics that, as Bortolussi, consider that the real aim in using magic realism is to foreground the postmodern idea of “the relativity of all codified systems of belief and on the very nature of reality itself” (Gesicka, 2003, p. 408). Unlike postmodern critics, those studying the genre from the postcolonial approach see magic realist strategies in terms of resistance and identity construction. An analysis not only of how hegemonic ideas are presented in magic realist works, but also of the treatment ex-centric ideas receive in them may help decide which of these two different purposes of magic realism prevails.

Further analysis of magic realism in different literary works could provide more insight into these criteria and even offer other categories of analysis. Additionally, exploring a variety of works could help understanding the purpose behind the use of the genre. In this way, a future line of research could examine whether ex-centric fictions originating from the unprivileged areas make use of magic realism with postcolonial
agendas of resistance or whether they make postmodern claims as regards the nature of reality. Similarly, the interpretation of fictions not generally thought of as magic realist due to their coming from the so-called centers could be enriched by the application of the theories here reviewed. Further research, therefore, is needed to achieve theoretical certainty on this subject.
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