Magic Realism and World Literature

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Abstract: The term magic(al) realism originated some one hundred years ago. Since then, it has been used to cover sometimes widely divergent literary productions. My argument will be that the success of magic(al) realism results from how it resonates with a set of literary-critical dispensations changing over time. I will discuss four of these.

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I will not engage in reflections on the term magic(al) realism, nor in any in-depth discussion of any particular magic(al) realist authors or works. As to the first point, Maggie Bowers in the introduction to her 2004 volume *Magic(al) Realism* says that "the one thing the majority of critical works about the related terms 'magic realism,' 'magical realism' and 'marvellous realism' agree upon is that these terms are notoriously difficult to define" (2). In 2006 Kenneth Reeds summarized the issue more boldly in the title to his article "Magical Realism: A Problem of Definition." Almost fifteen years later, Christopher Warnes and Kim Sasser started off their 2020 edited collection *Magical Realism and Literature* with "magical realism is a concept that has proved stubbornly resistant to processes of naming and definition" (1). Perhaps the most trenchant critique was voiced by Warnes again in the essay "The Hermeneutics of Vagueness: Magical Realism in Current Literary Critical Discourse" published in 2005 in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. As the title suggests, Warnes finds what he calls the "current literary critical discourse" lacking when it comes to a proper treatment of magical realism and to the authors and works it includes under the label in question. Specific targets of his critique are William Spindler, Stephen Slemon, claiming magical realism for postcolonialism, and myself (D'haen), claiming it for postmodernism. In fact, almost no-one who had written on magical realism before his own 2006 essay escapes being tarred one way or the other with Warnes's brush of vagueness. He does judge positively the attempts at formal definition of magical realism advanced by Irlemar Chiampi,

Amaryll Chanady, Eric Camayd-Freixas, and Wendy B. Faris. Still, while he appreciates Camayd-Freixas's 1998 *Realismo mágico y primitivismo: relecturas de Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo y García Márquez* for taking "seriously the need to ground synchronic category construction in diachronic literary history" (Warnes 11), he regrets that it limits itself to Hispanic Latin America. In contrast, Faris's *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004) opens the door to a more global approach. Yet, Warnes argues, Faris's insistence that magical realism "'constitutes an incipient re-emergence of spirit or the sacred' (Faris 68)," and is thus "'a manifestation of a perennial cultural need for a sense of contact with cosmic forces' (Faris 75), a 'curative voice' (Faris 80), and a 'healing fiction' (Faris 86)," in the final analysis leaves us with only "the vaguest, most indeterminate and incorroborative of notions: spirit, mystery, the sacred" (10). Instead, Warnes insists, "the 'irreducible elements' (Faris's term) of these texts—as of all magical realism—can be understood only through close scrutiny of the cultural, material and historical conditions under which they were written" (10). This is also the tenor under which I will approach the topic. Instead of offering new insights, then, as to what magic(al) realism is, or striking revelations with respect to particular authors or works, I propose to historicize and contextualize, in very broad strokes, the conditions under which magic(al) realism has operated since its inception by the German art critic Franz Roh in the 1920s.

My Auerbachian *Ansatzpunkt* are the questions Román de la Campa poses in his extensive 1999 review of Lois Parkinson Zamora and Faris's 1995 landmark collection *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* under the title "Magic Realism and World Literature: A Genre for the Times?" ("¿Cuáles son las posibles historias del realismo mágico? ¿Y qué decir de sus destinos, entre ellos la articulación de este género desde una perspectiva mundial, o global" ["What are the possible histories of magical realism? And what to say about its further fates, among them the development of this genre from a world or global perspective?"]).With his "posibles historias" de la Campa referred to how he saw the Parkinson Zamora and Faris collection as offering the possibility to link magical realism "to an unsuspectedly rich history of related literary forms throughout the world, a study of which can provide new links to earlier periods and different narrative modes" (206), where these earlier periods presumably even predate the coining of the very term magical realism itself. I will not follow de la Campa here, but others have done so. Instead, I will stick to the historically documented period of the use of the term "magic(al) realism." De la Campa's question can then be reformulated as: a genre for which times? My answer is that the success of magic(al) realism results from how it resonates with a set of literary-critical dispensations changing over time. I discern four of these.

As to magic(al) realism's "posibles historias" since the mid-1920s, I see four distinctive periods in which various forms of magic(al) realism function. A first period is the germinative one, to be situated in the interbellum and up to the early 1960s, so roughly corresponding to the era of modernism. Though de la Campa is undoubtedly right that at the time he was writing—the late 1990s—Latin American literature was usually considered to be the primary site of magic(al) realism's enunciation, it manifests itself first and foremost in Europe. Next to the obligatory nod to Roh, although often not even that, English-language criticism has almost routinely ignored the (early) European literary dimension of magic(al) realism. Irene Guenther's essay in Parkinson

Zamora and Faris's *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, and Bowers's 2004 volume are honorable exceptions. There are several reasons for this neglect, I think. First of all, early European literary magic(al) realism manifests in German, Italian, and Flemish literature. Though some English-language authors or works have retrospectively been claimed for magic(al) realism, this has happened largely under the aegis of the Latin American variant and often in a negative way. Second, as no English-language authors or works participate in the early European variant of the genre, it has simply gone unnoticed in English-language criticism, which almost invariably focuses primarily—and often uniquely—on English literature. Third, magic(al) realism was introduced into English-language criticism with respect to literature in general, but with respect also to English literature in particular, with the "discovery" of the Latin American variant in the final third of the 20th century when the works of the boom were translated into English, particularly so in the United States. I do not know enough about the tribulations of magic(al) realism in Chinese literary theory to say very much about it, but if it follows the more general pattern of the reception of Western theory in China in the second half of the 20th century, my guess would be that it has been filtered through the prism of English-language, and primarily American, discourse.

From the interbellum to the 1960s, roughly corresponding to the era of modernism, both the European and the Latin American variant of magic(al) realism function in national-regional-continental contexts expressive of the particular historical conditions under which they arise. In the eyes of at least part of the German art world, the horrors of World War I had discredited the concentrated emotional subjectivity of Expressionism, but also the abstraction and experimentalism of the other avant-gardes, as viable representations of post-war reality. What was needed was a return to representation in an attempt to capture the changed reality as fully and objectively as possible. Roh's *Magischer Realismus* fastened upon the paradox that the very starkness of such objective representation can lead to an almost supernatural effect, hinting at a greater reality behind the surface reality actively represented. The terms *Neue Sachlichkeit* (The New Objectivity) and *Magischer Realismus* for a while hung in the balance as period terms. In the end, it was The New Objectivity that gained the upper hand as such for the visual arts. Magic realism, in the meantime, came to stand for a particular mode of writing. In interbellum Europe the names of Ernst Jünger and Massimo Bontempelli stand out as early practitioners and theoreticians of the genre.

Jünger mentions magic realism in a 1927 essay, and then again in in a collection of diary notations published in 1929 (*Das abenteuerliche Herz. Aufzeichnungen bei Tag und Nacht* [*The Adventurous Heart: Notes from Day and Night*]). In the latter he comes to the realization that there exists a more "real" reality behind the visible reality. In one of the longer passages in the collection, Jünger finds such insights in dreams, in myth, and in literature. In the short novel *Auf den Marmorklippen* (*On the Cliffs of Marble*, 1939) all characters carry mythical or symbolic names. During a confrontation, the two brother-protagonists are shielded by serpents and can flee thanks to a magic mirror. The novel marks Jünger's turn towards the spiritual, and even the religious. But the magic in this novel also serves political purposes. Jünger uses it to mask his political dissent from Nazism and at the same time issue a warning to the world. The "Blutfürst" (blood king) and his cruel rule obviously stand for Hitler and his regime.

Bontempelli used the term magic realism in a 1927 issue of his journal *900—Novecento* in which he called for an art and a literature that learned "anew to tell stories, to combine myths and fables," and saw daily life as "a miraculous adventure." Bontempelli's insistence on myth and fable, but also his interest in Futurism and its fascination with machines, speed, and power, propelled him into the orbit of Mussolini. In the following years, however, he explicitly dissociated himself from fascism, a dissent manifested in his magical realist novels *Il figlio di due madri* (*The Son of Two Mothers*, 1929), *Vita e morte di Adria e dei suoi figli* (*The Life and Death of Adria and Her Children*, 1930), and *Gente nel tempo* (*People in Time*, 1937). Like Jünger, then, Bontempelli used magic realism to by-pass official censorship and yet express, albeit obliquely, some say even ambiguously, his real political views.

By the time World War II broke out, then, the term and concept of magic realism had gained a footing in two of Europe's major literatures. As of then, though often retrospectively by critics and literary historians rather than by creative writers themselves, the term would be applied to a variety of writers in a variety of literatures and genres. Analogous to what had happened after World War I, so too after World War II there resounded a call for a description of a ruinous German reality, which again fed the awareness of a hidden sense behind the observable chaos. The founder of the Gruppe 47, which gathered many of the writers that would come to dominate post-World War II German literature, used the term magic realism in 1947, as did several of the group's members. The Gruppe 47 member that would gain greatest renown was Günther Grass, whose *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, 1959) is now regarded as a classic example of European magic realism, with the protagonist-narrator "Oskarchen" refusing to physically grow beyond the age of three and monitoring German and Polish history from the late 1920s to the 1950s with his insistent drumming. Less well-known are the almost immediately post-World War II magic(al) realist novels by Hermann Kasack and George Saiko, but like Grass's fictions they reflect on Germany's, and Europe's, then recent past and constitute a warning of the dangers of totalitarianism.

I do not want to go too deeply into magic realism in Flemish literature. Suffice it to mention its two main representatives, Johan Daisne and Hubert Lampo. In Daisne's novel *De trap van steen en wolken* (*The Stairs of Stone and Clouds*, 1942), a scientist relieves the boredom of his daily laboratory work by writing a story about a couple that have escaped the Old World to lead an adventurous life in the American Wild West. On this second plane all kinds of mysterious events happen, involving, among other things, a lost temple ruin. Gradually, the two stories bleed into one another, with characters deemed dead or disappeared to far-off countries re-appearing, and events in the "invented" story affecting the lives of the characters in the "real" story. What is important to note is that in a novel written and published during World War II, when Belgium was occupied by the Germans, picturing the United States as offering the protagonist an escape from an oppressive personal situation could also be applied allegorically to contemporary Europe. As such, it can be seen as criticizing wartime Germany and what it stood for. As with Jünger and Bontempelli, then, for Daisne too, magic realism may have served to mask underlying political or ideological motives. The case is less clear with Lampo, whose novel *De komst van Joachim Stiller* (*The Coming of Joachim Stiller*, 1960) is seen as the highlight of magic realism in Flemish literature. The novel mixes various time levels, with, as the title with its religious

echoes suggests, the resurgence, re-appearance, or even resurrection of the Stiller who in one of his incarnations had been an American soldier killed in Antwerp by a German rocket bomb at the end of World War II. At the end of the novel a Joachim Stiller appears at the appointed time and place for a meeting with the novel's narrator, but before they actually make contact he is killed by a truck. That Stiller's spilt blood is interpreted as a guarantee that "the white summer clouds would continue to float peacefully, like big caravels with their sails unfolded, through a bluing sky across this world at the edge of an incomprehensible universe" again only underlines the religious-mythical overtones. For my purposes of periodization of magic realism, it is rather fortunate that Lampo's novel was published in 1960, the date I also see as closing off the first phase of magic(al) realism, in Europe but also in Latin America.

In Latin America magic(al) realism makes its appearance somewhat later than in Europe. Several critics, such as Seymour Menton in a 1982 article, have claimed Jorge Luis Borges as an early magic(al) realist, with his stories of the early 1930s gathered in *Historia universal de la infamia*, and with an article on "el arte narrativo y la magia" in the Argentinian journal *Sur* in 1932. Alongside Borges, Arturo Uslar Pietri figures as one of the first Latin American practitioners of the genre with his story "La Lluvia" ("The Rain") of 1935. More significant, however, is his use of the term magic(al) realism in his essay "Letras y Hombres de Venezuela" of 1949. Like Borges and Uslar Pietri, Alejo Carpentier moved in the ambit of Surrealism in the Paris of the 1920s and early 1930s, and like them he developed an interest in the supernatural. However, in his seminal essay "De lo real maravilloso americano," first published as an article in the Caracas newspaper *El Nacional* on 8 July 1948, then reworked as preface to his novel *El reino de este mundo* in 1949, and still later reworked again in the collection of essays *Tientos y diferencias* of 1967, Carpentier takes great pains to distinguish his use of the supernatural from that of the Surrealists. In fact, he says, he is using the same techniques the Surrealists are using, but while with the Surrealists in their European context these amount to mere "tricks of prestidigitation" (115), the mechanical combination of heterogeneous elements to evoke the frisson of the fantastic, with him they reflect the different reality of Latin America: what is "fantastic" in Europe is only "natural" in the Latin American context. Carpentier seizes upon Latin America's history as ultimate proof for his narrative gambit: "But what is the history of America if not a chronicle of the marvellously real?" (120; "¿Pero qué es la historia de América toda sino una crónica de lo real maravilloso?"). European surrealism uses the unreal to constitute an alternative reality that remains alien, and that is ultimately the creation of Western rationalism, albeit of its crisis—Western language turned against itself. Carpentier's magic(al) realism reveals the existence of an-*Other* reality beyond Western reality. As Western language fails to fit this *Other* reality, it can only be described in the language of Western "un-reason," that is to say magic.

Echoing Pedro Henríquez Ureña who in the 1920s had found Latin America to be "en busca de [su] expresión original y genuina" (55), Luis Harss in 1966 in *Los Nuestros*, a series of interviews with prominent Latin American authors, saw Latin America as united ''en busca de su identidad cultural'' (17). For Elzbieta Sklodowska, "el denominador común'' of Latin American literature of the first half of the 20th century is ''el intento por redefinir la realidad latinoamericana en términos propios del continente" (480). In one of the earliest theoretical reflections on magic(al)

realism in the Latin American context, Ángel Flores in 1955 argued that magical realism provided the answer to Henríquez Ureña's quest in that it signaled ''the inception of a genuinely Latin American fiction,'' the continent's "authentic expression'' (116). Reeds notes that in a number of publications from the 1950s to the 1970s (Irby 1957; Verzasconi 1965; Carter 1966), magic(al) realism increasingly came to be identified as the unique expression of a culturally unified—or to be unified—continent, while at the same time magic(al) realism and the marvelous real merged, with the former becoming the generally accepted term (183).

The continent-wide identitarian drive embodied in magic(al) realism was retrospectively recognized by Uslar Pietri in the chapter "Realismo mágico" in *Godos, insurgentes y visionarios*, a brisk survey of Latin American literature he published in 1986: "Se trataba, evidentemente, de una reacción, reacción contra la literatura descriptiva e imitativa que se hacia en la América hispana, y también reacción contra la sumisión tradicional a modas y escuelas europeas" ("It was clearly a reaction. A reaction against the descriptive and imitative literature that was being written in Hispanic America, but also a reaction against the usual submission to European trends and schools," 136; qtd. in Siskind, "Global" 31). Siskind mentions that Uslar Pietri in the same chapter "defines the literature that he and his colleagues were writing in the 1930s and 1940s as an apprenticeship in learning to see Latin America with Latin American eyes, or, to put it differently, learning to naturalize a strangeness that was specific to Latin America because of its hybrid culture" (31). What Carpentier adds, according to Siskind, is that he "formulates a novel idea—indeed, foundational—that was not present in Roh, Bontempelli or Uslar Pietri: the marvellous real is a cultural condition, and not an aesthetic perception of reality universally available; it is the defining particular trait of Latin American reality" ("Magical" 843). Moreover, with Carpentier's "marvellous real" magic(al) realism adopts a continental perspective, at variance with earlier national/nationalist ones.

In both the early European and Latin American cases, then, I would argue that magic(al) realism in the period from the interbellum to the 1960s constitutes a "national/regional/continental" effort at self-identification by dissociation from dominant models—be it secularizing forms of modernism, neo-realism, or *Heimatliteratur* in Europe, or the social realist-naturalist *indianista* fiction of for instance Ciro Alegría (*El mundo es ancho y ajeno*) and Jorge Icaza (*Huasipungo*) in Latin America.

The discussion about magic(al) realism enters a second stage when the Latin American variant is related to postmodernism. Latin American magic(al) realism caught the attention of the world with the phenomenal success of García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* in 1967 and its translation into English by Gregory Rabassa in 1970. This was the time when postmodernism dominated critical thinking. No wonder, then, that early discussions of magic(al) realism in American critical discourse privileged its relation to postmodernism. Influential in this regard were two essays by John Barth, a prominent American postmodern novelist, critic, and university professor. In his 1967 "The Literature of Exhaustion" he argued that certain fictional techniques, particularly those associated with realism, could no longer serve contemporary authors. The task in hand, then, was to turn the exhaustion of this kind of literature into a source of inspiration for a new kind of literature. This is what he saw Beckett, Nabokov, and especially Borges as doing. In 1980 Barth followed up with "The Literature of Replenishment," in which he praises Borges again, and proclaims *One Hundred Years*

of Solitude his supreme example of postmodernism. In their standard treatments of postmodernism in the late 1980s, Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale included Borges and García Márquez. The Peruvian critic and scholar Julio Ortega in 1988 also discussed several Latin American magic(al) realists under the aegis of postmodernism. Parkinson Zamora and Faris, in their introduction to their 1995 anthology, and Faris in her 2004 *Ordinary Enchantments*, still situate magic(al) realism primarily within a postmodern context. Eugene Arva in a 2008 article called magic(al) realism "a postmodern phenomenon *par excellence*" ("Writing" 69). In his 2011 monograph on magic(al) realism and the traumatic imagination, he argues that magical realist fiction typically serves to work through histories of violence, whether on the personal or the collective level (*Traumatic*). Stephen M. Hart proves as much in a recent article on *Cien años de soledad* as working through both individual/family traumas and local/national historical ones ("Scripting"). The relation to collective trauma is evident in Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (1949) and *El siglo de las luces* (1962), as in Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Hombres de maíz* (1949) and *El Señor Presidente* (1946) initiating a stream of dictator novels during the *boom* and beyond, such as García Márquez's *El otoño del patriarca* (1975) or Mario Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del chivo* (2000). That the form continues to work also beyond Latin America is shown by NoViolet Bulawayo's 2023 novel *Glory*, situated in an animal kingdom reminiscent of her native Zimbabwe.

In the article I contributed to Parkinson Zamora and Faris's 1995 collection, I proposed on the basis of a number of technical features then commonly listed for both postmodern and Latin American magic(al) realist fiction, that they should be seen as complementary sides of the same coin (D'haen). I saw postmodernism in its classical manifestations—fictions by authors such as John Barth I mentioned earlier, but also by other at the time very well-known US authors, almost invariably male, almost invariably white, such as Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, and Paul Auster, to name only some of the most famous ones—as chronicling the loss of confidence of white male middle-class America. This loss had to do with extra-literary developments, primarily the Vietnam War and its repercussions in American society, economics, and politics. I called the literature reflecting the loss of confidence of what Carlos Fuentes has called "privileged centres" (157) "centr-al" postmodernism, an even better term would have been "centr-ic" literature. The magic(al) realist literature of the same period I called "ex-centric" as it was produced outside of the privileged centers, but also because it challenges these centers, or, as I argue, "de-centers" these centers by undermining the central tenets of a dominant discourse. For Latin American realism this pertains in first instance to its use of the Spanish language as predicated by Carpentier. It also manifests in how Latin American magic(al) realist novels denounce pseudo- or neo-colonial conditions ruling the economic, and thereby also the social and often even the political realities of Latin American nations, and of the (sub)continent as a whole. Suffice it to think of the strike of the banana plantation workers, and its bloody repression, in *Cien años de soledad*, modeled on a real event of 1928. Julio Ortega found in the great novels of Rulfo, Arguedas, García Márquez, Cabrera Infante, Fuentes, and Lezama Lima, a "Latin American groundtone [that] reveals itself as an artistic and cultural practice that re-shapes the traditional models and the need for innovation into new, unique, and powerful articulations of historical necessities, into penetrating statements of critical and political convictions" (206). "These

novels," he maintained, "have their roots in the common scene of international Postmodernism, while at the same time confronting it with its own needs, problematizing it, and parodying it" (206).

Interestingly, the ex-centric possibilities of magic(al) realism Latin American style can also be used by parties internal to privileged centers but excluded from power. This applies to African Americans in the US—think for instance of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). But it also accommodates other so-called minorities (though they may actually form a majority of the population), such as for instance women. Think for instance of the English Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). But perhaps we can also extend this approach to Mo Yan, who is often hailed as a Chinese magic(al) realist (Li and Yang 133–146). His fictions could then be seen as "de-centering" in two ways. On the one hand they dissociate themselves from Chinese mainstream social realist fiction by using techniques familiar from Latin American magic(al) realism, for instance myths and oral traditions. On the other hand, they align his fiction with that of what has come to be called the Global South, in opposition to a dominant Global North. At the same time, he both underlines and remedies the ex-centricity of contemporary Chinese literature with respect to world literature (He 332–344). But I do not know enough about Mo Yan, or Chinese literature in general, to really pronounce on this.

With the ex-centric and emancipatory possibilities of magic(al) realism we also have entered the third phase of the genre's life: the postcolonial. In the late 1990s postcolonialism replaced postmodernism as the main framework for discussing magic(al) realism. Postcolonialism entered literary discourse with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Stephen Slemon in 1988 published an article on "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse." Two years later, Homi Bhabha confidently proclaimed that "'magical realism' after the Latin American Boom, becomes the language of the emergent post-colonial world" (7). In an article of his to which I already had occasion to refer, Siskind provides what is probably the most comprehensive discussion of magic(al) realism in relation to postcolonialism. He sees magic(al) realism as traveling "from Latin America in the 1960s to the postcolonial world at large since the end of the 1970s; from a restricted Latin American specificity to a more universal form of particularism: magical realism as a postcolonial universal" ("Magical" 834).

Crucial to magic(al) realism developing into a "postcolonial universal," according to Siskind, was the Cuban revolution of 1959 which triggered "continental imaginaries of economic, political and cultural emancipation" and led to "discourses expressing the desire to achieve a self-determined Latin American identity, a question about how to engage in a process of modernization while remaining faithful to the cultural particularities of the region" (852–853). The Latin American boom, and foremost *Cien aõs de soledad*, were quickly perceived as the literary answer to this dilemma. The immense success of García Márquez's novel then further secured magic(al) realism's breakthrough as the postcolonial genre *par excellence* (860).

The question from which to start, for Siskind, is whether magical realism is "a universal aesthetic that unveils the supernatural core of the real anywhere," as in its European conceptualization, "or […] an aesthetic that belongs organically to non-Western, or rather marginal, cultures?" (834). Siskind unhesitatingly opts for the latter. From my earlier analyses of European magic(al) realism it will be clear that I do not follow Siskind here. And I follow him

even less when, echoing Carpentier's depreciation of the surrealist's use of the fantastic as mere prestidigitation, he posits that "if in Latin America, the marvellous is an organic, omnipresent component of reality, in Europe and metropolitan cultures in general, it is a mere artifice, an entertaining gimmick" ("Magical" 844). "Texts written from a hegemonic position of enunciation, or produced in post-postcolonial sociocultural situations, tend to merely reproduce the technical gesture of magical realism while emptying it out of its cultural–political potential," Siskind proclaims (852). As examples he cites Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* (1982), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Patrick Süskind's *Perfume* (1985), and Marie Darrieusecq's *Pig Tales* (1997). While I cannot pronounce on Allende, Süskind, or Darrieusecq, not knowing them well enough, I do uphold that in Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, or to give another example not mentioned by Siskind, Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988), respectively referencing feminism and native Americanism, magic(al) realism can be as emancipatorily functional in "subaltern" cultures operative within Western hegemonic constructs as *bona fide* postcolonial works by for instance Ben Okri, whose *The Famished Road* (1991) is routinely cited as the example of African magic(al) realism. These works seem to me to fully satisfy Siskind's injunction that "magical realism should not be considered solely as an aesthetic form that can be forged anywhere, under any sociocultural conditions, but as a discourse emerging from cultural formations marked by the perception of a lack and the register of emancipatory desires" (851). Stephen Hart and Jordan Hart argue that magical realist writers "stimulate the general public into thinking about how to read between the lines of politicians' speeches and actions, and subsequently become a seasoned defender of truth" (159–160). He does so with a reference to Anne Hegerfeldt, who in her eponymous 2005 book characterizes British magic(al) realist fiction of the period 1980 to 2000 as "lies that tell the truth." Clearly, I see earlier 20th-century European magic(al) realism as fitting the same pattern.

Interestingly, another critic, Michael Valdez Moses denies magic(al) realism all emancipatory or resistance potential, and sees it as merely an example of Graham Huggan's postcolonial exotic. This, then, is where we enter the fourth stage of magic(al) realism's critical trajectory in its relation to present-day world literature studies. The concept of world literature goes back to the early 19th century. Until the turn of the 21st century, though, it largely slumbered in the recesses of Western literary critical discourse. With works by Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and especially David Damrosch, world literature shifted into the center of attention. As of approximately 2010 it displaced postcolonialism as the reigning paradigm of literary studies, not just in the West, but also in China—witness for instance the numerous publications on the topic by Wang Ning and Zhang Longxi. What is beyond doubt is that if we follow Damrosch in his definition of world literature as comprising all works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, whether in the original or in translation, magic(al) realism squarely fits the bill. This holds true most obviously for its Latin American champion *Cien años de soledad*. But it also applies to such other blockbusters as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and to the works of Allende, Orhan Pamuk, Mo Yan, Mia Couto, or Paulo Coelho. To explain the huge success of the latter's *The Alchemist*, Stephen Hart aptly invokes magic(al) realism's "broadly based public appeal" ("Cultural" 305).

If it is beyond doubt, then, that magic(al) realist works are part of today's world literature, in terms of sales as well as scholarly attention, the question, as with the earlier literary critical

paradigms, is what function it fulfills under this new dispensation. Again, opinions vary widely. Siskind, in an essay he originally published in 2012 and updated in 2023, focuses on the mechanics of the commercialization of *Cien años de soledad*, the orchestration of which he sees as instrumental in the making of magic(al) realism as a world genre, specifically in a postcolonial perspective. "Writers, scholars, and journalists engaged García Márquez's novel as a symbolic surface where they could appropriate magical realism as an aesthetic-political form that helped them interrogate and shed light on their own social realities," Siskind posits ("Genres" 302). Specifically, he proposes that "English-speaking postcolonial intellectuals were the ones who first saw the novel and magical realism as a game of mirrors that reflected a familiar fragmented image that could afford them an original way of intervening in their own postcolonial societies" (302; see also Linguanti et al.). The result was "the global rise of magical realism as a transcultural generic formation" and "a symbolic horizon" that allows for the interpretation of novels that would otherwise have been "understood only in relation to nationally or locally bound ethnic and generic formations" as instances of a "globalized interrogation of traumatic experiences of oppression" (302). At the same time, Siskind sees the very success and what he calls "the efficacy" of magic(al) realism as leading to "the reification of its aesthetic value, transforming generic form into commodity form" (303). As examples he cites Allende's *House of the Spirits* and Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989).

Valdez Moses airs a similar critique. "Far from representing an alternative to or a subversion of an emergent world order" (105), magic(al) realism for Valdez Moses is "both an effect of and a vehicle for globalization." It "offers only the newest form of the world museum" (117) and "the literary equivalent of a skilfully marketed tour of a dead or dying culture" (119). Like Scott's historical fictions of the 19th century, magic(al) realist fictions express a nostalgic longing for a world that is irrevocably past. In this respect it is not a coincidence, Valdez Moses argues, that Carpentier and Ángel Asturias were strongly interested in "anthropology, ethnology, ethnomusicology, mythology, and folklore" (126). In fact, Valdez Moses alleges, "the secure confines of the worlds represented in magical realist novels possess a nostalgic appeal or sentimental attraction because they allow the reader to temporarily reside within a virtual organic community without having to assume the social burdens and obligations of its historical counterpart" (132). Next to the works mentioned by Siskind and Valdez Moses, we might think, for instance, of Arturo Pérez Reverte's *La tabla de Flandes* (*The Flanders Panel*, 1990) or *El Club Dumas* (*The Club Dumas*, 1993), mystery detectives set in antiquarian art circles that border on magic realism. *La Sombra del viento* (*The Shadow of the Wind*, 2001), by Carlos Ruiz Zafón, and *Die unendliche Geschichte* (*The Neverending Story*, 1979) by Michael Ende, start with a ten-year-old boy picking out a book, the first from the "cemetery of lost books," a library in the old heart of Barcelona, the other in an antiquarian bookshop. Both boys lose themselves in the books they read, but for both the world of the books starts to interfere with their real-life world, to the point where the two fuse. In these works, magic(al) realism indeed has become a formula, akin to that of other popular literary genres such as the novel of adventure, the thriller, or adult romance.

Still, I also want to counter the negative assessments of Valdez Moses with respect to magic(al) realism in general, and of Siskind with respect to non-Western uses of the genre, with

reference to a few instances that, at least to me, continue to show its resistance or revelatory potential. In the Portuguese Nobel Prize winner José Saramago's *A Jangada de Pedra* (*The Stone Raft*, 1986), the Iberian peninsula breaks off from the European continent and drifts off into the Atlantic Ocean, coming to rest between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. 1986 is the year in which Spain and Portugal joined the then European Economic Community (now the European Union). Saramago's novel amounted to a statement on how he saw Portugal's, and Spain's, destiny not in such a united Europe but as a bridge between the various continents to which these two countries were linked through history. *A Jangada de Pedra* is Saramago's most obviously magical realist novel, but *Memorial do Convento* (*Baltasar and Blimunda*, 1982) and *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis* (*The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, 1984) also qualify. Another and more recent Polish Nobel Prize Winner, Olga Tokarczuk, also uses magic(al) realism to delve into the traumatic 20th-century history of her country (Wampuszyc 366–385). In contemporary Dutch-language literature there is *Fata Morgana* (2007) by Chika Unigwe, a Nigerian-born writer who first wrote her novel in English but, living in Belgium at the time, had it first published in Dutch. She now teaches creative writing in the United States. In 2009 the novel appeared in English as *On Black Sisters' Street*. The original Dutch title *Fata Morgana* signals the unrealistic expectations with which many migrants, for whatever reason, but in the case of the four African women from the novel in question for what we might call "economic" ones, come to Europe. "Black Sisters' Street" refers to the actual name of the street in Antwerp on which the brothel in which the women work is situated: Zwartzusterstraat, after the nuns' convent located there. The nuns in question tended to the sick and needy, and the novel's English title plays both on the ironic relationship the African prostitutes' work bears to that of the nuns and on the real sense of sisterhood that grows between the women. Magic realism comes into play when Sisi, the woman who arguably is the main focus of the narrative, at the very moment she seems about to escape her life as a whore, is murdered on the orders of the Nigerian pimp who runs a string of brothels, among them the one in which Sisi is employed, and her ghost travels to the pimp's home in Lagos, there to put a spell on his two little girls, condemning them to a life of misery, never knowing love, and ruining their father's life as he ruined Sisi's father's life.

Earlier, I recalled how in one of the most often cited passages from *Cien años de soledad* a real strike is referenced, and how it serves to link Macondo's fictive existence to real-world issues of the neo-colonial economic exploitation of what used to be called the Third World. Over the last decade or two, there has developed a branch of world literature studies that explicitly focuses on this topic, particularly so from an environmental perspective. It finds its most prominent embodiment in *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* by the Warwick Research Collective. This approach offers room for fresh considerations of magic realism as a world genre. Jennifer Wenzel, for instance, relates the occurrence of magic realism in Nigerian fiction to the disruption caused by the oil industry. Andrei Terian labels "proto-magical realist" (500) Cezar Petrescu's diptych *Pământ şi cer* (*Earth and Heaven*, 1931–1934) and Mihail Sadoveanu's *Nopţile de Sânziene* (*Midsummer Nights*, 1934). He sees these two interbellum Romanian novels as illuminating "the relationship between the intensification of neoextractivism and the emergence of magical realism as a specific narrative form whereby (semi)peripheral

cultures make their entrance onto the scene of world literature" (486). In the terminology of the Warwick Research Collective, magic(al) realism speaks for those excluded or marginalized by the capitalocene ruled by Euro-America.

In conclusion: I hope to have demonstrated how magic(al) realism fulfills different functions under four different literary-critical dispensations answering to four distinct historical periods. During the period of full modernism to high modernism, roughly speaking from the interbellum to the 1960s, it serves to delineate national, regional, or continental identities. Under postmodernism, from the 1960s to the 1990s, it features as, in Fredric Jameson's words, "a possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary postmodernism" (302). Then, starting in the late 1980s, it becomes, citing Bhabha, "the language of the emergent post-colonial world" (7). Finally, in the world literature perspective operative from the early 2000s, it variously becomes "a transcultural generic formation" and "a symbolic horizon" (Siskind, "Genres" 302), a formula genre like other popular genres, and an instrument for ecocritical critique. So much for de la Campa's "posibles historias" of magic(al) realism. "Qué decir de sus destinos" remains an open question.

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