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MAGICAL REALISM: THEORY, THEATRE, FILM

Introduction

⊙ Stephen M. HART

Hunan Normal University

This collection of essays is based on a conference that was hosted on 27–28 April 2024 in the Foreign Studies College at Hunan Normal University, and co-ordinated by Professor Stephen M. Hart. This conference brought together a number of experts from China, Belgium, Peru, Portugal, the United States, and the United Kingdom to discuss the ways in which magical realism has evolved over the last fifty or so years. Magical realism was originally used in 1925 by an art critic, Franz Roh, to indicate the birth of a new artistic movement which rejected the abstraction that characterized Expressionism and sought to express a more concrete sense of the nature of things in the world, including their innate “magical” qualities. It was subsequently expanded as a terminological definition to include a number of literary masterpieces which, in the 1940s and 1950s, started to have an international impact. These included Miguel Ángel Asturias’s *Men of Maize* (1949), Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), and Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1955), but all of these works were trumped by Gabriel García Márquez’s extraordinary novel, which came out in 1967, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The book provided a vision of the world in which magic and reality seemed to come seamlessly together, and which fascinated readers across the globe. The vogue of magical-realist novels took off when García Márquez won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, and before long, novels sprouted up in every corner of the globe which depicted the world using the Colombian writer’s formula, while—at the same time—carefully moulding it so that it fitted the local reality. Magical realism was compared to postmodernism, it was famously described in the mid-1990s by Homi Bhabha as “the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world,” and it was seen in the 21st century as an intrinsic component of the new “genre” of “world literature.” Magical realism has been studied in the context of environmental studies—particularly “climate change”—as well as therapeutic and trauma studies, and its ability to mutate in new directions has surprised—and sometimes irritated—new generations of readers. The magical-realist recipe has had an important impact in the 21st century in a variety of fields, including poetry, visual culture, cartoons, new media, film, theatre, graffiti, and the videogame.

In this collection of essays, we have attempted to provide a new understanding of magical realism, with particular reference to the variety of its expressions in recent years. To do so, we have needed to provide some essays which provide a historical mapping of its origins.

Thus, Jorge Kishimoto, in his essay, “César Vallejo, Peru’s Universal Poet,” shows how the discourse of magical realism was incubated in Latin America in the first half of the 20th century but then migrated and spread all around the world, and had a highly significant impact on Chinese literary movements such as the roots-seeking movement; he also points to its intrinsic importance for Latin America’s most important poet, the Peruvian César Vallejo (1892–1938). Theo D’haen and Elizabeth Nightingale, in their respective essays, on “Magical Realism and World Literature” and “Magical Realism: The Problem of Definition,” show how magical realism has mutated over time and expressed itself in various genres and literary forms, while getting itself intertwined with a number of theoretical movements such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, and environmentalism.

Wendy Faris focuses on the ways in which magical-realist texts describe and instantiate an awareness of the overlap and connectiveness between the human and non-human kingdoms; she shows that magical-realist texts allow us to see the kinship that binds together the respective worlds of the animal and the Anthropocene—these are the connections that our human culture invisibilizes and distorts.

Maggie Ann Bowers, in her essay “Enacting the Impossible: Techniques and Limitations of Staging Magical Realism,” takes a hard look at the ways in which magical realism has infiltrated the discourse of theatricality, particularly in the 21st century. It is a scorecard that shows the limitations as well as the opportunities presented by the enactment of magical realism on the stage before a live audience, and it points to ways in which the imaginative turn underpinning magical realism can be articulated in new theatrical performances which co-ordinate the theatrical and the filmic in an exciting new symbiosis, particularly in the East. Finally, Geoffrey Kantaris and Stephen Hart, respectively in their essays “Genocide and the Plague of Fantasies: *La Llorona* and *Sueño en otro idioma*” and “The Magical-Realist Videogame,” point to the ways in which the imaginative valency of magical realism has revolutionized the language of film in the 21st century, in terms of a significant social impact that has been seen right across the world. Magical realism, it seems, is never far from the surface of global culture in the 21st century.