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Implausible Worlds, Ingenuous Narrators, Ironic Authors: Towards a Revised Theory of Magic Realism

The introduction to this volume identifies the most prominent problems with current conceptualizations of and approaches to magical realist fiction, and suggests that the solution for breaking out of the impasse and making theoretical headway lies in finding a solution to inadequately resolved, fundamental issues of form and genre. This paper will argue that a more cogent theory of magic realism emerges from a revision of the main conditions that traditional critics had identified as essential features of the mode. More specifically, it will demonstrate that what defines magic realist fiction is in fact the opposite of what these early critics claimed. The first part of the paper identifies the flaws inherent in previous theories, especially Chanady's. The second proposes concrete alternatives, and illustrates that thinking of magic realism in this new way actually brings it in line with some interesting insights within contemporary theory that focus on context, and therefore contributes to bridging the gap between textual and contextual approaches. The third section attempts to set the record straight by subjecting a variety of fictional works classified as magic realist to an analysis based on the revised theory; by showing in what concrete ways these works have been misclassified, this analysis will make the difference between magic realist and non magic realist fiction clearer.

Summarizing all the definitions of magic realism that have been published would by far exceed the scope of this paper. Fortunately, the list of most frequently accepted and recurring criteria for identifying the mode is tractable. At the broadest level of generality, it was agreed that the distinctiveness of magic realism resided in a) the ontology of the fictional world, and b) the discourse of the narrator. These basic criteria were first formulated more than half a century ago by Latin American critics such as Alejo Carpentier, Angel

Flores, and Luis Leal, and later developed by Chanady (Flores 1955; Leal 1967; Chanady 1985). Each of these criteria will be examined in turn.

With respect to the ontological nature of the fictional world, the three critics argued that magic realism distinguished itself from other genres through its portrayal of a recognizably real world environment in which the magical occurrences are a normal part of reality. This was believed to differentiate magic realism from pure fantasy (the marvelous), whose fictional world is recognizably not our own, given that it is populated by creatures that don't exist in our world — fairies, wizards, talking animals, and that it responds to physical laws that don't correspond to our own. The same feature was also thought to differentiate magic realism from fantastic literature, in which the real world is recognizably our own, but whose magical events are depicted as discordant with our conventional sense of reality. By holding up Kafka's *Metamorphosis* as a prototype, and concluding that like its predecessor, magic realism presents a world in which "the unreal happens as part of reality" and is accepted by other characters as real, Angel Flores suggests that the specificity of magic realism is situated at the level of the ontology of the fictional world; in other words, magic realism creates a possible world that mirrors our own in that it is inhabited by real human beings, but is unlike our own in that events that in our world would be inconceivable, occur and are accepted as real (Flores 1995). To this insight Leal adds the observation that the magic realist author "does not need to justify the mystery of events, as the fantastic writer has to", explaining that, because in the fantastic, "the supernatural invades a world that is governed by reason" (123), the narrator needs to provide a rationale for the anomalous occurrence. For Leal, the specificity of magic realism resides at both the level of the ontology of the fictional world -the magical depicted as natural, as well as at the level of narration -the absence of an explanation by the narrator (Leal 1995).

With respect to the discourse of the narrator, it seemed clear that the creation of such a fictional world imposes restrictions on the narration. In order for the magical events to be perceived as a normal part of reality, the narrator must present them as such. This requires that: a) the narrator's language uphold the magic by not casting the slightest doubt on its authenticity, and b) that narrators refrain from providing an explanation for the magic on the assumption that no explanation is required for occurrences that are perceived as normal. Recognizing that the properties Flores and Leal describe do not go far enough towards differentiating magical realist from other genres, Chanady attempts to articulate the specificity of magic realism

with more precision by formulating what she perceives to be its three main conditions (which do not depart significantly from her predecessor's concepts). Her first condition is the co-existence of two autonomous codes — the supernatural and the real; the magic realist fictional world is a correlative of our own recognizable reality, with the exception that in it fantastic, magical, or supernatural events occur. Her second condition is that of resolved antimony; magic realism resolves the antimony between the two worlds, or codes, in the sense that both characters and narrator experience the fantastic events as natural. Her third condition is that of authorial reticence; the author is reticent to provide any explanation that might undermine the authenticity of the fantastic occurrence (Chanady 1985). The first two points had already been developed a few years earlier by Irlemar Chiampi, who had written on the marvelous real. Chiampi too believed that the realms of the rational and the magical were presented as non-contradictory, and that by abolishing the polarity reason/non-reason, the author creates a fictional world in which the real and unreal are contiguous, and perceived as such by the reader (Chiampi 1983).

Although these insights were not new in so far as the understanding of magic realism was concerned; Chanady contributed to the theory a contrastive comparison between magic realism and the fantastic based on these principles. As she explains, in both magical realism and the fantastic there exist the two autonomous codes, but the fantastic mode differs from the magic realist in the last two criteria. With respect to the second condition, the fantastic leaves the antinomy unresolved in the sense that the narrator presents, and the characters perceive, the supernatural, magical, or strange event not as natural, but as an anomalously discordant with the laws of the real world. With respect to the third condition, the author/ narrators of the fantastic also withhold "information and explanations about the disconcerting fictitious world" (16), but for a different effect, namely to "create an atmosphere of uncertainty and mystery" (149).

As will now be demonstrated, Chanady's theory in fact does not distinguish magic realism from the fantastic; indeed, not only is her analysis of the fantastic and magic realism inaccurate, but what she claims about one actually defines the specificity of the other. In other words, magic realism and the fantastic are the opposite of what she maintains. In order to illustrate this contention, it is necessary to examine each of her conditions in detail.

Autonomous

Codes

Although Chanady recognized that the first condition is equally necessary in the fantastic, she draws attention to it to differentiate the universe of both magic realism and the fantastic from the related genre, the marvelous. However, the idea that magic realism juxtaposes a rational, real world (rational code) with a supernatural, magical world (code of the irrational) is confusing at best. Can we say the fictional world resembles our own if it admits of magical occurrences? And if it does admit such occurrences, how can we conclude that the two "codes" coexist autonomously? Let us remember that the world of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is one in which the wizard Melquiades can stop time in one room of the protagonists' house and magic carpets fly overhead. More than a world that is recognizably our own, such events create a fictional world that is closer to that of the marvelous, or pure fantasy. And more than a coexistence of two autonomous codes, what this particular fictional world achieves is a merging of the two, which only heightens the sense of incongruity, and thus unreality. Therefore, contrary to what Chanady and Chiampi claim, magic realism foregrounds the unreality of the fictional world, and this foregrounding functions as a means of undermining, perhaps even parodying or deconstructing established codes of mimesis and representation.

Secondly, Chanady's notion of the two autonomous codes further blurs the boundaries between genres by failing to provide guidelines to distinguish between them. How much magic or distortion of the real world is permitted before the fictional world no longer mirrors one that we recognize as our own? For example, works like *Gargantua it Pantagruel, Harry Potter,* or John Ford's popular fantasy novel, *The Dragon Waiting* all combine in one fictional world realistic individuals and settings with magical or mythical beings and events in the same way as Garcia Marquez' masterpiece does. Those fictional worlds are as recognizably like or unlike our own as that of *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* In fact, these fictional worlds are not very different from the worlds depicted in fairy tales, which also contain human characters in a world that in some respects resembles our own. Also, it is not clear from Chanady's work if in order to qualify as recognizably "our world," it must be situated in a modern setting, or if it can include works set in previous historical periods, as in *The Dragon Waiting,* in which an earlier version of our world is depicted, but which strikes us as unfamiliar because of the historical distance. In other words, can historical novels be magic realist? Due to a similar confusion about

the relationship between the real/ unreal, Chiampi before her had been equally unsuccessful in distinguishing the fantastic from the marvelous real. In spite of these flaws, this condition is still quoted as valid. For example, the post-colonial critic Baker also maintains that magic realism is "characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a rational world view, and the other on the acceptance of the irrational as part of everyday reality" (Baker 1991, 57). To draw our first conclusion, by creating fictional worlds that are ontologically similar to those of fantasy (the marvelous) and the fantastic in their fusion of magic and reality, magic realist narrative foregrounds the fundamental implausibility of those worlds, thereby flaunting its violation of the realistic codes of mimesis and reference.

Antinomy in Magic Realism and the Fantastic

By invalidating the notion of the two autonomous worlds, the fantastic and the rational, one also, by extension, invalidates the very notion of antinomy, at least in the ontological sense, for if the two "codes" are fused within the same fictional world, then logically there is no tension between them. Antinomy is not possible at the ontological level, but only at the level of the response of the characters, narrator, and readers to the magical events. Here too, both Chanady's and Chiampi's analysis miss the mark. Contrary to the former's contention that the fantastic sustains the antimony between magical events and represented reality through the response of characters, narrator, and readers, while magic realism resolves it through the "natural" presentation of and response of the magic events, and contrary to the latter's contention that the reader perceives the two realms as non-disjunctive, it can be easily demonstrated that what actually happens in these two genres is the opposite: the fantastic resolves the antinomy while magic realism sustains it.

Within the realm of the fantastic there are several examples in which the antinomy between the supernatural events and real world is resolved through the "natural" presentation of the events by the narrator and the "natural," or unquestioning acceptance of the events by the characters. Two excellent examples are the nineteenth century novels, which are always classified as "fantastic," *El Caballero Encantado (The Enchanted Gentleman),* by Benito Perez Galdos, and *El Caballero de las Botas Azules (The Gentleman of the Blue Boots),* by Rosalia del Castro. Set in nineteenth century Spain, the first novel stages a mythical and magical mother figure, named simple "la Madre," who transforms a number of morally wayward, but nonetheless redeemable

aristocrats, in order to regenerate them, and through them, Spain. Following a magical metamorphosis of a private, residential space into an exotic one populated by a group of sensuous Ama2onian women, the aristocrat-protagonist, Gil, finds his identity and living conditions transformed. First he is a peasant, then a laborer and lower class worker who, under the guidance of "la Madre," is subjected to a long, magical, quest-like journey through rural Spain in which he witnesses the injustices of a social system he himself helped to create. For example, while in Madrid Gill sees in a mirror and speaks with his beloved living in Paris; when Gil is shot to death by a guard, he is resurrected to life; and in the end, before he returns regenerated to Madrid society, he and other aristocrats are transformed into fish inhabiting a huge aquarium-like structure in one of Spain's rivers. Nowhere in this novel does the narrator cast the slightest doubt regarding the authenticity of the magical events in the fictional world, nor are the characters shown to react with the slightest incredulity, doubt, or suspicion; the Madre's magical powers are accepted as natural.

A different mythical and magical female appears in *El Caballero de las Botas Azules.* At the beckoning of a disgruntled man seeking fame and fortune, a Muse appears and transforms him into an incomparably wealthy, refined, and enigmatic aristocrat with magical powers. Members of societies' most influential families compete with each other for his attention, but he shuns and mocks their social lifestyles and values, and gradually comes to exercise a regenerating influence on them. While the narration does stress the awe that all characters experience in his presence, it is not related to his magical powers, but rather to his unprecedented polish, style, unshakeable composure, and display of incomparable wealth. There is nothing in the narration to suggest that the magic performed by the transformed gentleman is discordant with the natural laws of their world. Nowhere does the narrator suggest that the "caballero's" powers are false, or that his presence is not real.

Within the realm of classical magic realism, two novels by Miguel Angel Asturias disprove Chanady's notion of "resolved antinomy." The first is *Hombres de Maiz (Men of Maize),* which critics typically hold up as a prototype of magic realism. In this novel, the transformation of the curator into a deer is not accepted by all of the characters, and one in particular only comes to believe it after considerable persuasion by his companion. When Nicho Aquino begins his magical descent into the underworld, he is at first disconcerted by the changes that mark the beginning of his transformation to an animal state. When the arrogant Colonel Chalo Godoy meets his gruesome,

magical death, the event produces a sense of dread. Furthermore, the novel presents Euro-centric characters, such as Father Valentin, Don Deferic and Dona Elda, who disdain and reject the indigenous characters' mythical beliefs. In Asturias' *Viento Fuerte (Strong Wind),* supernatural events such as the Shaman's voodoo, which brings about the hurricane, as well as the menacing presence of the spirit of the trees, inspire awe and fear in the characters. In this work typically accepted as magic realist, neither the narration nor the response of the characters can be described as "natural."

Therefore, our second conclusion is that magic realism and the fantastic can be similar in terms of both the narrator's presentation of the event and the characters' reaction to it. The degree of "natural" presentation and reception is a function of the nature of the event: the more frightening the event, the greater the shock and discomfiture of the characters, and the ensuing sense of discordance relative to the real world. There is no intrinsic reason why magic realist works cannot present frightening events, or, contrary to Chanady's contention, why magical events must be presented and received as "natural," or why the antinomy must be resolved. The condition of resolved antinomy can occur or not in works of any genre in which elements of the magical and the real combine.

Authorial Reticence

The condition of authorial reticence, based on the alleged absence of "explanation" regarding the magical occurrences, is also problematic. To begin with, like the term "natural," the concept of "explanation" is ambiguous. Can it include an inferable explanation about the existence or cause of an event, that is, can it be inference based on real world knowledge and/or beliefs, or does it require an overt rationale and explanation by the narrator or a character within the narrative for the cause of the event? If the former, then works such as Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw," in which ghosts with certain powers are an unwelcome part of reality, and Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist,* about demonic possession, do have an explanation, which is grounded in popular beliefs in the afterlife and evil spirits or the phenomenon of demonic possession. For some readers, the premises of life after death and demonic existence are not inconsistent with their real worldview, and the belief can itself provide the implicit explanation.

If the latter, these two works do not contain an explanation, because we are not told how it is that ghosts exist or how they acquired such powers, or

what the nature, origin, or modus operandi of the evil demon might be. In such examples, an articulated explanation is not required because the reader is able to access the extra-textual cultural source and bring that knowledge to bear during the reading process. This is not different from what happen in magic realism. The presence of ghosts in *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* and *Like Water for Chocolate,* or events such as resuscitation and levitation in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* are rooted in universal popular belief systems, which constitute explanations in their own right.

Another problem with the condition of "authorial reticence" is that it is easily disproved by concrete literary examples. Chanady's claim that the narrator of the fantastic withholds an explanation for the extraordinary event in order to heighten the sense of mystery or awe is accurate only insofar as certain literary examples are concerned. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" is one such example; another is the Spanish author Juan Valera's fantastic story, *La MujerA.lta (The Tall Woman).* In this story, the appearance of a strange woman coincides with the death of some characters. Although one can infer that the woman is death incarnate, there is no trace of explanation validating this interpretation of the coincidences, and the reader is left with a sense of ambiguity, not knowing for sure if the events really happened or were just imagined.

However, in other works of the fantastic there is a clear explanation for the supernatural events. Some of the most representative examples of horror fiction that come to mind certainly contain a very elaborate explanation that renders the fantastic compatible with the logical, real world code of the text. One could argue, in fact, that it is the very explanation, and not the lack of it, that increases the sense of dread, because it lends credence or plausibility to that which is perceived as discordant with our normal perception of reality. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* the explanation for the fantastic events is stated explicitly. In the former, the Austrian doctor formulates a "scientific" explanation, based on his research on the phenomenon of were-wolves, regarding how the monster werewolf came to be, and in the latter the monster is explicitly depicted as a scientific creation. In both cases, we are told how the unnatural is made possible within the limits of the laws of nature.

If clearly inferable explanations can substitute for narratorial ones, then Chanady's conclusion is further disqualified by magic realist texts. In Asturias' *Men of Maize* and *Strong Wind,* the implicit explanation for magical events such as a character's drinking of an entire river to quench his thirst, animal-human

transformations, and magic-induced catastrophes is undeniably the logic of Mayan mythology. Although Asturias reconfigures characters and events in accordance with the dictates of his own aesthetic project, the magical events are nevertheless grounded in classical Mayan texts.

In other magic realist texts there is indeed an explicit explanation. One example is Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate,* in which the explanation for many of the magical events is the extraordinary power of passion and emotions. Others are Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits,* and Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* in which the extraordinary, if not supernatural power of clairvoyance is attributed to, or presented as an unusual, but genuine human talent. In some of Allende's stories contained in the collection *The Stories of Eva Luna,* extraordinary powers are always associated with marginalized women.

Therefore our third conclusion is that magic realism, fantasy, and the fantastic can either include or exclude a rational explanation for the supernatural, magical events. The lack of clarity as to what constitutes an "explanation," and its ambiguous absence or presence in both works of magic realism and the fantastic suggest that the condition of authorial reticence is not a sufficient criterion for any of these genres. As with the previous condition, there is no intrinsic requirement that magic realism withhold an overt or inferable explanation for all of the fantastic events.

Towards a Revised Theory of Magic Realism

So far the focus of this paper has been an analysis of what is not magic realism, from which one positive element emerged, and that is that magic realism foregrounds the *implausibility* of the fictional world, thereby flaunting its rejection of the realist codes of mimesis and representation. However, even the negative conclusions drawn are significant for the redefinition of magic realism when viewed in conjunction with a) other features of the text, such as plot features, and the role of the narrator, and b) some intuitive consideration of the responses of real readers. The next section of this paper will elaborate a revised theory of magic realism in its relation to other genres based on these considerations.

1) Magical Plot Events: Coherence vs. Discontinuity

It is difficult to understand why the level of plot has not been considered in the formulation of a poetics of magic realism, for it is precisely at this level that one observes the most obvious differences between magic realism on the one hand, and fantasy and the fantastic on the other. An even superficial review of the plot of traditional works of the fantastic reveals that all the magical, supernatural, fantastic, or bizarre events ensue from one single, obvious source, and are thus united by a coherent logic. The presence of such a causal, coherent logic creates a sense of plausibility, an "effet du réel" that constitutes an implicit explanation for the magic, and renders possible the readers' willing suspension of disbelief. Authors of traditional fantasy or the fantastic take their narratives seriously and invite the reader to do the same through voluntary submission to the rules of the game. Although readers may not believe in the events depicted, for the duration of the reading they accept them as real and true within the fictional world.

Let us consider some examples. In *The Turn of the Screw,* everything that happens is due to the nefarious power of ghosts; everything that happens in *Dracula* has to do with the powers of the transforming monster, everything that happens in the *El Caballero Encantado* is traceable to the will and power of the "Madre."

In these novels, as in any fairy tale, the characters can respond differently to the magic because their response is a function of the specific magical events, but the narrator consistently maintains a serious, undoubting stance that legitimates the occurrence of the supernatural. And it is precisely because the narration creates its own internal logic that the narrator does not need to provide an explicit explanation.

At the level of the plot, magic realism is very different from the fantastic or fantasy. In all classical magic realist narratives of Latin America, there is a notorious lack of any such single cause of the magic or unifying logic underlying all the magical events. Garcia Marquez's masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a prime example of a work in which the magical events that occur are obviously construed to defy the notion of coherence. While the repeated visits of Prudencio's ghost to José Arcadio Buendía may be tied to real life popular belief in ghosts and the afterlife, and the isolated episode of Remedio the Beautiful's levitation to the religious belief in the Ascension of the Virgin Mary, it is impossible to relate other events of the novel to any religious world-views that might be construed as an explanation. Some

examples are: the magical homeward journey of Jose Arcadio's blood after his assassination, the swarms of butterflies that always accompanied Mauricio Babilonia, the age-defying nature and magic of the wizard Melquiades, the birth of babies with pig tails, the eruption of the angelic force that makes the children levitate when they enter Aureliano's room, the fantastic filling of Ursula's pot with worms, the rain of yellow flowers, the characters' ability to read each other's dreams after drinking Ursula's herbal concoction, the occurrence of the insomnia plague, and the flying carpets, to mention a few. Many of these strange events can be traced to different systems of beliefs: isolated mythologies, folkloric traditions, legends, popular superstitions, some literary heritage (fairy tales), even jokes, etc., but their coexistence can hardly be reduced to a coherent source. Wizards and Virgin Maries, biblical plagues and flying carpets are not compatible within any one referential sphere. While it is true that many Latin Americans, and many North Americans are superstitious or religious and may believe in some of these events, it is very unlikely that anyone believes in the possibility of all of the magical events depicted in the Colombian writer's novel. It is precisely this lack of unifying logic that engenders the sense of implausibility. This implausibility is deliberately and playfully self-conscious and intended to make us resist any facile interpretation based on referential reality.

A similar lack of coherence at the level of magical plot elements is also a feature of Asturias' *Men of Maize.* While it is certainly true, as mentioned earlier, that the story draws from Mayan mythology, this is but one of the sources of the magical events. Like Garcia Marquez' novel, Asturias' blends many divergent belief systems, and foregrounds not the validity or unifying logic of any one belief system, but rather the incongruity of the human myth-making function, by means of which individuals can recast mythological or religious elements to construct reality in accordance with their particular needs, interests, and abilities. As the author himself admitted in an interview, he uses the term "magic realism" to allude to the function of the magical imagination that leads humans to interpret as real that which they perceive in their environment, especially *(but not exclusively)*[^1] when a religious or cult mentality is at work (Lorenz 1970). Asturias emphasizes that aspect of social life whereby real events are transformed into legends by popular imagination, and legends come to incarnate real, everyday events. In other words, he draws

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1   The italics are mine.

our attention to the fact that human perception is not pure and unmediated, but conditioned by the historical and social context, and inevitably influenced by memory and the imagination; knowledge, remembrance, and the imagined merge. We see this in the role that Manuela's story and the Maria Tecún myth acquire for the people; the latter causes men to lose their bearings and fall of the edge of a cliff. We see it also in the character of Hilario, who believes that what he imagines is true. Myths, both Mayan and urban, are shown to exist alongside legend, superstition, gossip, and the imagination, all of which are all sources of magic in the novel. Thus the magical events of this novel are by no means indicative of an underlying logic or coherent code.

Therefore, as argued previously, the condition of "resolved antinomy" applies not to works of magic realism, but to the fantastic, in which the antinomy is resolved in the sense that an explanation for the occurrence of the magical, whether explicit or clearly inferable, is provided. While characters may react with reticence at the beginning, under the effect of shock, they gradually come to accept the anomaly as real, albeit with trepidation. Characters, narrator, and readers understand the why and how of the supernatural. This is true even of gothic horror. On the contrary, in magic realism the antinomy is unresolved in the sense that the panoply of magical events remains discontinuous or disconnected, and therefore incongruous, even if accepted as natural by both characters and narrator. But if indeed the magical events foreground for the reader the lack of coherence of our perception and the constructed nature of our reality, what conclusions can we draw about the magic realist narrator who takes the events at face value without manifesting the slightest doubt regarding their validity? What are we to think of a narrator who accepts that a dead character's blood can miraculously find its way to the mother's house and avoid staining the carpet, or that a character can ascend in the sky wrapped up in her neighbors' sheets, as happens in *One Hundred Years of Solitude'?* The fact that these are two of numerous, disconnected events makes the attitude of the narrator all the more perplexing. Answering this question requires further analysis of the status of the narrator and the relationship between the narrator and the reader.

2) Narrators: Authoritative vs. Ingenuous

As we have seen, characters in works of fantasy, the fantastic, or magic realism, can accept the magic as a natural part of their reality or not, but in all three modes or genres, the narrator is always presented as someone who

believes in the magical events. The difference is that in the first two modes or genres, the narrator's stance towards the fictional world invests him or her with authority, and this in turn reinforces the seriousness of the author-reader pact, which demands a surrendering to the illusion of reality. Contrastively, in magic realism, this same stance towards a world that is inherently incongruous undermines the very authority of the narrator. Obviously, empirical research with real readers is necessary to provide sufficient evidence about how readers respond to the magic in magic realist and fantastic texts, and to date only informal experiments have been conducted. Experience with readers such as students in literature classes, or acquaintances, has repeatedly confirmed that readers are not only disconcerted by the lack of coherent rationale for the magical events, but also perplexed by the ingenuous attitude of the narrator towards the magical events. Real readers are often surprised that the narrator is not surprised by anything s/he narrates. Thus, the very status of the narrator is rendered suspect. This position is contrary to Chanady's; she argues that the natural presentation of the events by the narrator, whom she treats as reliable, engenders a natural response in the reader, who accepts the magical events as real and natural within the fictional world (1985, 22). Certainly the narrator is not unreliable in the sense of being insane, immature, or suffering from the effects of delusion or an over-active imagination. But is this sufficient to interpret the narrator as reliable in the classical realist sense?

Postmodern critics have understood that the very language and style of the magic realist text suggest to readers that they are intended to recognize the playful and humoristic irony invested in the narrator's discourse by the author. As will be demonstrated in the next section, what these critics have understood is that the narrator's stance must not be interpreted literally or accepted unquestioningly, as Chanady assumes. By claiming that the attitude of the narrator towards the magic is a signal that prompts readers to interpret the magical events as part of a belief system that is equally as valid as their own, she misses the ironic intention with which the magic realist work is invested (Chanady 1985). The narrator of the fantastic is invested with authority; the narrator of magic realism is invested with ingenuousness, understanding by this word the quality of "showing innocent or childlike simplicity and candidness" (1989, 621). Obviously, this investment is the doing of the implied author. Therefore, in magic realism, the distance between narrator and implied author is ironic.

3) Implied Authors: Serious vs. Ironic

To attribute a serious authority to the narrator of magic realist narratives is to ignore the spirit of the mode, communicated by the textual properties of the works. Several post-formalist critics have understood this spirit. One of these is Danow. In his book, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magic Realism and the Grotesque,* he describes the carnivalesque properties of magic realist fiction, coining the term "poetics of excess" to describe the self-reflexive undertones of the mode (Danow 1995)). Another is Lopez, who defines magic realism as "a mimesis of excess" (Lopez 2001). Humor, carnivalesque exaggerations, tall tales, hyperboles, myths (of varying sources), gossip, popular beliefs, and catachresis all typify the language of magic realism, and these devices have the effect of distancing the reader from the fictional world. Higgins cleverly points out that the magical events in the novel are "counterbalanced by an ironic, irreverent tone which subverts the very legend it is propagating" (Higgins 1990, 144). Cooper also perceptively points out that magic realist novels produce a distancing of the reader with respect to the magical world of the characters, and considers this distancing to be a fundamental part of the mode (Cooper 1991). Lopez regards the act of reading as an activity that "moves beyond the simple opposition of (active) representer/(passive) represented' to become play" (157). Like Cooper, Lopez understands that western readers cannot respond naively to the magical events, and that our real-world knowledge:

> 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, that is, this body of knowledge ... which renders us unable to share the character's magical worldview. Our relation with the character, then, is one of *distance* and *alterity.* (156)

What these critics say about the characters' response to the magic is also true for their response to the narrator. Although expressed differently, what contemporary critics have identified is one of the fundamental features of magic realism — the presence of a playfully irreverent implied author, which produces an ironic distance between the implied author and the narrator. While it is true that the narrator is represented as someone who takes the magical events for granted, it is impossible to naively accept the authenticity of the incongruous fictional world, and the reader reacts to the narrator's "ingenuity" with prudential skepticism.

provides a further explanation for this authorial strategy:

> The world of magic realists is one in which the "realistic" world is no sooner established as such than its validity is questioned through fictional manipulation. The writers thus reassert the fact that reality is not given a priori but constructed through the novelists' perception of their material and handling of language. (Durix 1998, 135)

The "fictional manipulation" is precisely what establishes the ironic distance between implied author and narrator. If magic realist narratives lack an explanation for the fantastic events, it is simply because the implied author chose to playfully employ a repertoire of magic events that are not reducible to a coherent, causal logic, thus there cannot be a coherent explanation. Contrary to Chanady's conclusion that magic realist works are governed by a logical code, and, by contrast, the fantastic "creates a world view which cannot be explained by any coherent code" (Chanady 1985,12), it is in fantasy and the fantastic that the author goes to great lengths to create an illusion of such a coherent code; in magic realism, the author goes to great lengths to undermine, perhaps even parody, that illusion. Authors of fantasy and the fantastic could articulate the underlying cause, or logic of the fantastic events if asked; authors of magic realism could not, for the simple reason that none

as intended.

Disconcertingly, having made the pertinent insights mentioned above regarding the style and language of magic realist fiction, the ironic stance of its implied author, and the distancing effect that these features engender in the reader, the same critics undermine their anti-mimetic conclusions and commit the referential fallacy of positing a correlation between mythical world views and an imagined Other. For example, Danow's claims that "the magical realism of Latin America responds to the mythological and cosmological beliefs that still animate the world of indigenous tribes..." (Danow 1995, 6), and the post-colonial critic Lopez' contention that magic realism is "the movement of a literature that arrives as almost pure alterity" that constitutes a "writing-of-the-other-who-will-not-be-absorbed" (Lopez 2001, 152) are extensions of Chanady's assertion that the world view in magic realist fiction is held up, and accepted by the reader as one that is equally valid as our rational perspective. In a similar vein, Theo D'Haen maintains that magic realism "is a means for writers coming from the privileged centers of literature to dissociate themselves from their centers of power, and to speak on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged" (D'Haen 1995, 195). This also recalls

Jameson's now famous contention that both post-colonial culture and magic realist literature are characterized by the encounter of "pre-capitalist and nascent capitalism" (Cooper 1991,127). What statements like this betray is a naively romanticized view of Latin Americans as irrational and naive. A denigrating, untenable assumption that is grounded in stereotypical presuppositions about our southern "other" that is negated by empirical textual evidence. As our analysis of the features identified in our revised theory of magic realism has shown, rather than represent any marginalized group with the intention of validating a "magical" perspective of the world, magic realist authors maintain a prudential distance with respect to both center and margin, challenging accepted notions of reality that emerge from both, and showing, if anything, that all partake of a more universal, archetypal myth-making function of the human mind. Brenda Cooper has eloquently described two problems with such an interpretation of magic realism: "the twin dangers of assuming too much from the classification and homogenization of whole worlds on the one hand, and the romanticization and exotification of the Third World, on the other" (Cooper 1991,129).

Part of the problem is a lingering attachment to Alejo Carpentier's misguided 1949 concept of the "real maravilloso," or marvelous real. Springing from a conscious desire to establish an adversarial distance with respect to the colonizing power of Europe, it amounts to a passionate declaration that all of Latin America — its history, geography, and people, are marvelous in a sense that Europe and the rest of the world are not, and that Latin American literature must capture this quality. Eventually critics erroneously conflated the term with magic realism, assuming that the specificity of magic realism lies in its ability to reflect this ontological reality. In his book *Posts and Pasts: A Theory of Postcolonialism,* Alfred Lopez repeats Garcia Marquez' claim that Latin American reality is fundamentally an "unbridled reality" that is "in itself out of proportion," adding that the excess of magic realism serves to "capture that reality more realistically than traditional realism" (Lopez 2001). In so doing, he, and others who accept Carpentier's argument, in fact erect the false dichotomies "us"/"them," "our reality"/"their reality," "western"/"other," "rational"/"mythical," holding these up as givens with real world correspondents. The properties of magic realism discussed in this paper invalidate this referential fallacy.

A more sensible view that is supported by the textual evidence adduced is that magic realist authors set out to thwart facile and romanticized representations of the other and their simplistic dichotomies through the distancing effect produced by excesses and incongruities, which expose the illogical, constructed, mythical nature of *all* representations of reality. Magic realism could then be said to ironically challenge the distorting conceptions of homogenous Latin American or other "third world" cultures. Rather than prompt us to regard other belief systems and worldviews as equally valid as our own, the magic realist work helps us to see them all as equally invalid and irrational. Chanady argued that when a reader of a magic realist story closes the book, s/he returns to the real world with an amplified concept of reality that leads to a questioning of one's own "conventional view of reality" (Chanady 1985, 27). Magic realism should thus lead all readers, North American, European, Latin Americans, and others to question their own, and others' perceptions of reality.

Perhaps the best way to describe how magic realism functions is in terms of an analogy with the narrative context of tall tales. When a speaker transmits a tall tale to a listener, s/he instantiates a communicative game: communicating in seriously feigned earnestness, the speaker expects an expression of awe or marvel, real or seriously feigned, from the listener. Often the tale is punctuated with comments such as "I swear it really happened," "I saw it with my own eyes." A listener who expresses disbelief in the content of the tale ruins the game, as this amounts to an impolite dismissal of both the tale and the teller. Magic realism elicits an analogous response. Often drawing from oral modes of story telling, authors of the magic realism recapture this playful dimension of the oral communicative pact.

Setting the Record Straight

Valuable insights have emerged in the scholarship of the past fifteen years. However, the failure to critically revise inconsistencies or flaws in previous scholarship, in particular with respect to the boundaries between magic realism and other modes and genres, a naive reliance on unquestioned assumptions, the tendency to infer generic specificity on the basis of random similarities and correlations, and the acceptance of broad generalities at the expense of a coherent theory, have generated much confusion regarding the nature and scope of magic realism. The criteria for defining magic realism proposed in this paper can serve as a heuristic tool for testing typological accuracy. In other words, they can help us assess whether works classified as magic realist really fit the label. Before subjecting a few examples to the test, let us summarize briefly the criteria. Magic realism is that literary form that manifests

the following properties and features: a) disconnected, incongruous magical events lacking a common source and unifying coherence recur throughout the work at the level of plot; b) these events are presented at face value by an ingenuous narrator; c) the authority of this narrator is undermined by the very incongruity of the events, and the implausibility of the fictional world by the narrative style based on excesses and exaggerations; d) all of which point to the ironic, distancing intention of an implied author who flaunts his/her distance not only with respect to the fictional world and its denizens, including the narrator, but also the realist conventions of mimesis and representation.

If these new criteria are applied rigorously, it becomes apparent that many works have been, and continue to be, misclassified as magic realist. The following are but a few examples. Among the many stories that David Young and Keith Hollaman include in their anthology, *Magical Realist Fiction,* are Alejo Carpentier's "Voyage to the Seed," Carlos Fuentes' *Aura,* and Julio Cortazar's "Axolotl" (Paris 1995). Parkinson Zamorra places Juan Rulfo's "Pedro Parramo" under the same rubric, as well as William Goyen's ghost story *House of Breath* (Parkinson Zamora 1995).

If we bear in mind the distinctions drawn earlier between magic realism and the fantastic, then it is obvious that these works are all examples of the latter. To begin with, all of the magical/fantastic events depicted in these works owe their existence to a common cause, and are united by a unifying logic. In "Voyage to the Seed," it is the phenomenon of time reversal; *in Aura* it is the magical transformation of an old woman into a young one, and then again into an old woman; in "Axolotl," it is the transformation of a man into a fish (whether real or imagined); in "Pedro Párramo" it is the existence of spirits in world of the dead; and in *House of Breath* it is the existence of spirits in the home of the narrator's childhood town. In none of these stories do we find the disparity of incongruous events that appear in the classical Latin American fiction. Furthermore, in all of these stories, the narrative is obviously intended to create a realistic effect, and is told with all seriousness, inviting the reader to willingly suspend disbelief. Instead, magic realism cautions readers against the suspension of their disbelief. The existence of magic or the supernatural in these works is not enough to qualify them as magic realist. This kind of classification is clearly an example of the family resemblance approach mentioned in the introduction to this volume; the net is cast far too wide, drawing in specimens that do not belong.

Both *The White Hotel, The Book of Laughter and forgetting,* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* have been classified as magic realism; the first two by Paris, and the third by D'Haen (D'Haen 1995; Paris 1995). These novels cannot possibly be magic realist, if for no other reason than because the magic in them is limited to very limited episodes. Paris' only explanation for her classification of the first as magic realism is that "Lisa's pains .. .appear *before* she experiences the atrocities at Babi Yar that cause them and kill her" (Paris 1995, 168). In the second, the only magical event is levitation, but in only occurs on very limited occasions. As for *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* there is really no magic in the novel, but rather an interesting effect of temporal manipulation. As with the misclassified stories, these novels do not contain the array of incongruent magic realist events that is typical of the classic prototypes. The fact that they share some features with postmodern fiction does not qualify them as magic realist. Again, the typological flaw is the result of the undiscriminating family resemblances approach.

The last example is not one that has been misclassified, but rather one that is now typically forgotten by scholars, and that is Alfred Kubin's 1908 novel, *The Other Side,* which Ernst Junger believed to represent the essence of magic realism as it was then understood. It is mentioned here as an example that suggests a generic line of continuity that begins with pre-war European fiction, and continues in Latin America. As mentioned earlier, this connection has been all but forgotten as critics too easily dismiss the European version of magic realism on the unproven assumption that the mode or genre really began in Latin America. In this discomfiting novel, monkeys work as barbers, insomnia, animal, and insect plagues occur, strange creatures such as the one thousand armed polyps, as well as camel's heads make periodic appearances in bizarre circumstances, characters grow to inhuman heights, a demonic god-like character displays extraordinary supernatural powers, including the power to change- form at will, characters in the story world undergo the uncanny experience of encountering their doubles, etc. This extradaordinary panoply of incongruous events is certainly in keeping with the logic of Garcia Marquez' masterpiece. Some differences do exist at the level of narration and the implied authors' stance towards the fictional world; the narration strongly suggests the expressionist blurring of the boundaries between interior and exterior, dream and reality, so that the reality of the represented world is rendered ambiguous. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily disqualify it as magic realist. The representation of the fictional world as either ambiguously real or blatantly implausible in magic realism is really only a matter of degree. Kubin's narrator can be perceived as ingenuous as any magic realist narrator in the sense that he relates the events with utmost sincerity. It is true that the

implied author's stance toward the fictional world and the narrator does not betray the same playful, self-reflexive irony that is typical of some of the Latin American classics, but we have seen that this kind of humorous self-reflection is not typical of all Latin American magic realism either; Asturias is a case in point. Nevertheless, the foregrounding of the implausibility of the fictional world manifests an ironic distance that is equally as significant. Perhaps the real differences lie in the themes; the European authors were more concerned with the theme of the relationship between self and world, interior and exterior, dream and reality, while the more contemporary authors are more concerned with the mythical strata of the human mind, although one could argue that the difference is only a matter of degree and focus. In fact, this reveals another similarity, and that is the preoccupation with the constructed nature of reality. Miguel Angel Asturias' understanding of magic realism as a function of the imagination also applies to Kubin's novel in spite of the fact that the latter does not deal with the religious imagination per se. From a strictly formal point of view, this work is magic realist, a conclusion that supports the claims made earlier that the postcolonial dimension is not intrinsic to magic realism, and that there is no reason why it can only arise in postcolonial contexts.

Conclusion

Scholarship produced within the postmodern and postcolonial paradigm has brought some interesting new insights to the study of magic realism. The exposure of the self reflexive nature of the discourse, the irreverently playful or ironic stance of the author, the foregrounding of the constructed nature of reality and its inherent questioning of all systems of representation and codified notions of reality, and the equalizing of all belief systems through the exposure of the myth making function of the human mind are all features that capture the spirit of magic realist texts. However, these insights have never been integrated into a coherent revision of magic realist theory, with the results that we have seen in the introduction to this volume and throughout this essay. Hence, the need to return to square one and revisit the fundamental problems and issues that have constituted, and continue to constitute major conceptual stumbling blocks for scholars of magic realism.

Indisputably, a poetics of any literary form cannot by itself address all the pertinent issues that arise in the study of any individual work or group of works. Issues related to thematic content, individual style, or the relationship

of a work to the context of production and reception are all issues that require different analytical methodologies. However, it is equally indisputable that conclusions drawn about a work in the absence of textual evidence grounded in a firm understanding of the text's formal configuration can only lead to arbitrary and spurious inferences and assumptions. While the revised theory proposed in this paper will not resolve all the issues related to magic realism, at least it helps us to determine what we can consider magic realist. This is the first step that must not, indeed cannot be ignored without very confusing consequences. Only when we know what we mean by magic realism can we proceed with other kinds of analysis and studies.

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