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"Magic/al Ir/realism" lesson for *The Literary Fantastic* BA lecture course

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THE LITERARY FANTASTIC (ANGBA3- Literature Survey Course) Magic/al Ir/realism

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Olvasási idő: 60 perc

AIMS: The chapter offers an introduction to magical realism as a mode of writing and a modality of interpreting existence grounded in the combination of defamiliarisation and fantasfication, driven by the dual aim to reveal magic as real and reality as magical.

TOPICS to be discussed:

- Difference between magic realism, marvellous realism, magical realism
- Difference between European, epistemological, scholarly and Latin American, ontological, mythic, fokloric type of magic realism
- Magical realism as a postmodern genre
- Historiographic metafiction
- Fantastification and Defamiliarization of space, time, bodies
- Demythologisation and Enchantment

COMPULSORY READING:

- Jeanette Winterson. *The Passion* or
- Angela Carter. Nights at the Circus

KEY AUTHORS:

• Gabriel García Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortazar, Italo Calvino, Günter Grass, Michael Ende, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, Isabel Allende, Toni Morrison

Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain, dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001.









A confusing term based on oxymoron

Magical realism: Magical + real

- Is it a genre, a mode of writing, a representational strategy, a literary device?
- Is it an attitude towards reality, a modality of interpreting existence, a way of seeing?
- Main theme and narrative engine: combination of defamiliarization & fantastification
- \rightarrow Magic is revealed as real and the real is revealed as magical!
- \rightarrow Creates confusion & curiosity
- "A simple matter of the most complicated sort,","a capacity to write about all dimensions of reality" (Isabel Allende)
- "A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, & that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty" (Gabriel Garcia Marquez: Nobel lecture, 1982)

Difficulty of definitions

Magic realism: Prose writing that "interweaves, in an ever shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with material derived from myth and fairy tales." Present-day novels which achieve their effects in large part by exploiting a realistic manner in rendering events that are in themselves fantastic, absurd or impossible" Examples: Borges, Garcia Marquez, Grass, Fowles (M.H.Abrams: *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 1993, 135, 174)

Magic realism: Novels and stories with a "strong narrative drive, in which the recognizably realistic mingles with the unexpected and the inexplicable, and in which elements of dream, fairy-story or mythology combine with the everyday, often in a mosaic or kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence. English Magic Realism also has some affinity with the neo-Gothic" Examples: Borges, Garcia Márquez, Carpentier, Grass, Calvino, Fowles, Emma Tennant, Angela Carter, Rushdie (*The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. Margaret Drabble, 1985, 606-7)

Summary: We use the label Magic(al) Realism to refer to all narrative fiction that represents magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact tone, deals with the supernatural as an everyday occurence, integrated into rationality and materiality of literary realism. On the other hand, it also reveals the magical aspects of consensus reality. It mingles the realistic with the unexpected and inexplicable. Elements of dream, mythology, and fairy story combine with the everyday of waking life in a kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence.

More recent theoretical approaches:

provide a more sophisticated definition by taking into consideration the historical transformations, cultural variants, and different connotations of the term See: Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris. Eds. *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, Durbam: Duka UR

History, Community. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. Bowers, Maggie Ann: Magic(al) Realism. London: Routledge, 2004.







The evolution of the term

Zamora & Faris differentiate between three modes/stages: 1. magic realism (1920s' German painting), 2. marvellous realism (1940's Latin American arts/spirit), 3. magical realism (1950s' fiction)

1. **magic realism**: *magischer Realismus*: 1920s' Germany: Post-expressionist painting of the *neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity): clear, sharp-focus images portraying the improbable fantastic, unreal in a realistic manner, attempt to capture mystery of life behind surface reality, a deeper understanding of non-material aspects of reality, "mystery [that] does not descend to the represented world but rather hides and palpitates behind it" use political themes with satirical connotations, eg. Otto Dix, George Grosz, Max Ernst (Franz Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neusten europäischen Malerei*. Lepizig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1925.) (Italian Massimo Bontempelli applies the term to literature first in 1926)



Otto Dix

War cripples playing cards, 1920 German post-expressionist painting *Magischer Realismus* Neue Sachlichkeit (new objectivity)

 "a mystery that hides and palpitates behind the represented real": see secret interior of external world & reach a sense of unreality

aim at a deeper understanding of the non-material aspects of reality hesitation+ epiphany

terrestrial horrors of own times are worse than the horrors of hell

♦ focus on absurd, inexplicable aspects of being (trauma of war)

oplitically/ethically self-conscious admiration of magic of being

 \rightarrow adopted to US with 1943 exhibition of Charles Sheeler & Edward Hopper in MMA: defamiliarization of American dream, fascination by transitory spaces (which belong to no one and everyone) and uncanny atmosphere of metropolis







COLOMBIA

MÁGICO

2. **marvellous realism**: *lo real maravilloso*: 1940's Latin America: combination of realist and magical views of life, of rational and superstitious perspectives in the context of the differing cultures of Latin America, incredible juxtapositions exist by virtue of Latin America's historical, geographical, demographical, political diversity (Cuban Alejo Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real in America." 1949)

Marvellous realism (lo real maravilloso, 1940) Latin America as a source of wonder

Combine rational & superstitious perspectives,

Combine rational a superstitudo perop	couves,	A DESCRIPTION OF THE OWNER
EUROPEAN MAGIC REALISM	LATIN AMERICAN MAGIC REALISM	1
epistemological, scholarly type	ontological, mythic, fokloric type	
magic as narrative/pol. strategy (Postcolonialism, feminism)	mestizaje cult. heritage-based, visionary (superstitions, legends, rituals)	- li
magic stems from observer's visions, author's stylistic feat, word magic	America itself is marvelous, magic resides in the land/cultures: hist, geogr, pol, demogr. diversity	COLUMN DE LE COLUM
postmodernist formal innovation	inherited tradition: family legends,	
recycles, myths, Fairy tales, surrealism, modernism	folk lore, slave narratives, oral tradition	Call Call
destabilization of rationality: magical causality, retellings of familiar (his)stories, hesitation, unreliable narrators, madness	miracle, epiphany, vision, FAITH	Gabi el Carci d'Arro One Hundred Yea of Solitude
defamiliarization	supernaturalization	
Angela Carter: Nights at the Circus 1984 Mikhail Bulgakov: The Master & Margarita (1941) Günter Grass. The Tin Drum (1959) Michel Tournier. The Erl King (1970) Toni Morrison: Beloved (1987)	Gabriel Garcia Marquez: One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967)	

Patrick Süskind. The Perfume (1985)

3. **magical realism**: *realismo magico*: 1950's term for Latin American fiction, later internationalisation: generalised to refer to "all narrative fiction that includes magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative" (Bowers 2), "the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it *is* an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing. It is a simple matter of the most complicated sort." (Zamora-Faris 3) (Angel Flores, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction," 1955, Jorge Luis Borges, 'El arte narrative y la magia' 1961) Eg: Borges,

New history of influences: Cervantes's Don Quixote, <u>Kafka's Metamorphosis</u>, <u>de Chirico's cold industrial</u> <u>landscapes</u>







Watch Julie Taymor's film Frida, 2002

Shilo Shiv Suleiman's TedX lecture on an Exploration of Magical Realism and Technology, 2012

SZÉCHENYI 2020

Art History's Lecture on Otto Dix

How can we reconcile the fictional world of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, populated by characters ascending to heaven amidst bedsheets, mysteriously levitating while drinking cups of chocolate, and turning into snakes or puddles of pitch, in a world benighted with deluges lasting several years and yellow flowers faling from the sky with the claim that the New World fiction is subject to a control of the imaginary based on the mimetic representation of the continent's reality, especially bearing in mind the importance of positivs in Latin America? (Zamora & Faris on Marquez)

The main fantastic characteristics of a magical realist narrative

- ✤ narrates magical happenings in matter-of-fact tone as inherent part of reality
- ✤ a fantastic "illogic" not questioned but accepted by the characters
- ♦ presents extraordinary events as ordinary, or ordinary events as extraordinary, highlights the mysterious, miraculous wanders of everyday life, defamiliarizes the familiar and adds a magical dimension to the real by supplementation, excess →invites to re-vision, seeing with fresh eyes, as if from unbiased perspective of a tourist, an alien or a child
- plays of cyclical, deadened time, kaleidoscopic perspective, mirrorings, open endings, magical causality confusing cause and effect,
- magical transgressions implying hybridity, excess, metamorphosis,
- universal quality yet historically specific, political potential
- * explores/ transgresses ontological, political, geographical, generic, gender boundaries
- richness of sensory details, lively simulated orality
- ✤ Fantastic: unresolved antimony (ambiguity is the foundation of the story) ↔ Magical Realism: resolved antimony (no uncertainty about magical events)
- Social critical layer beneath fantastification: urges to reconsider our normative perspectives, to learn to see through others' eyes, to consider exchangeability of real and imaginary, project of destabilization teaches empathy

A subgenre of the fantastic?

Todorov does not refer to magical realism in his theory of the fantastic because of the lack of

uncertainty about whether the magical happenings have rational explanations or supernatural causes. Rosemary Jackson calls *fantastic realism* the dialogue between fantastic and realistic narrative modes, where realism's monological vision is disrupted by Gothic, fantasy, romance, melodrama, sensationalism (Jackson 124))

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Magical Realism as a Postmodern genre

relativizes hierarchies, demythologizing rewriting, metafictional quality, alternative identity positions

- RELATIVIZES HIERARCHIES: A fundamentally postmodernist mode of writing: it purposefully relativizes hierarchies, challenges hegemonic systems, ordered spaces and subjectivities, and its magical acts are frequently rhetorical performances which produce metatexts constituting self-destabilising frames to the stories (Bényei 1997, 53-149).
- DESTABILIZES TRUTH: Self-conscious epistemological, ontological, political, cultural disruption: readers are encouraged to destabilise accepted 'realistic' conventions of truth, knowledge, reality, representation (mimesis) and perception (Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*),
- CELEBRATES ALTERNATIVE IDENTITY POSITIONS: Writing against the keysignifiers of totalitarian regimes, repressive systems, 'self-homogenizing' cultures has the potential to reclaim and empower previously marginalised, alternative identity positions, narratives, (his)stories,
- ✤ REVISIONARY POLITICAL/ ETHICAL ASPECT: renegotiates marginality and fosters cultural diversity → popular among postcolonial authors (Rushdie), womenwriters (Allende), minorities (NatAm Silko)
- DEMYTHOLOGISATION: strategy of 'recycling,' rewrites ready-made ideas, truths, reworks genres, revisits familiar stories to tell them with a difference
- ✤ METAFICTIONAL QUALITY
 - Literary Metafiction: Calls attention to the constructedness of the literary text, reminds readers that they are reading a fictional work. Focuses on the narrative performance, the act of writing. The creation of fictional other wor(l)ds is emphasized, foregrounded. The text invites 'close' identification and provides an ironic, 'distanced' commentary on itself → bifocal readerly perspective (identification+ironic metatext, stand within tradition+rework tradition)
 - <u>Historiographic metafiction</u>: "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (Hutcheon 1988), awareness of textuality of history & historicity of fiction. Reinvents silenced, alternative his(her)stories, demonstrates that "eternal mythic truths" are just as much essential components of our collective memory as historical events (Faris 170) and that both are culturally constructed and thus de/reconstructable
 - <u>Corporeagraphic metafiction</u>: makes readers recognize their misrecognition in the socially disciplined, normalised bodies and reveals the subversive capacities of corporeality (heterogeneous, metamorphic, performative bodies)
- KEY TERMS with postmodernism: postcolonialism, cross/multi-culturalism, feminism, transgression, subversion, re-vision, relativization, carnivalesque, heterogeneity, hybridity, solidarity, community





Heterogeneous influences

- ➢ by non-Western cultural systems that privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation, myths, legends, rituals, communal performative, oral traditions, superstitions over enlightened rationality, science, pragmatism (Zamora-Faris 3)
- Latin American superstitions, family legends: Marquez,
- > African American oral tradition, slave narratives, jazz/blues: Morrison,
- Chinese tales: Maxine Hong Kingston)
- Greco-Latin mythology, European fairytales, folklore, surrealism, 'other voices' infecting the realist novelistic tradition: Angela Carter
- > Combinations of the above: patchworking and rewriting are hallmarks of the mode

Problematic dilemmas of magic realism

- What counts as magic? (matter of readerly judgment, authorial intention, cultural context → magic can be sg ordinary portrayed from an extraordinary perspective)
- **4** Belief and Incredulity are cultural context-dependent
- Escapist & apolitical or overpoliticized?

Apolitical	Politicised	
political potential limited by magical aspect	pictorial magic realism introduced during	
the point is different kinds of magic's	the Weimar Republic, literary magic realism	
intersection in text	in Mussolini's fascist Italy,	
unlike surrealists: lacks a political manifesto	gives voice/visibility to the subordinated	
potential 'frame' furthers the uncertainty:	political implications/ consequences:	
Oscar in Grass' The Tin Drum writes in a	Rushdie: fatwa, Allende: exile, Kingston:	
madhouse, Beloved disappears as a bad dream	use mythic quality as a safeguard against	
in Morrison, Grenouille is an unreliable	immigration office	
psychopath narrator in Süskind's The Perfume		
\rightarrow is magic really a part of reality then?		

- Preserves tradition, lends voice to othered minorities OR builds on cultural appropriation, consumerization of exotica, and colonized magic?

More new names: neofantastic, hysterical realism, neosurrealism, irrealism, neo-gothic











Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus

DIFFERENT MODES OF MAKING MAGIC blur within text:

- circus' carnivalesque space as enchanted sphere where anything can happen, (aerialiste flight, dancing tigresses, clever apes using the human body for the demonstration of the Darwinian theory, clowns going mad on stage)
- confidence trickster birdwoman, bodily magic: metamorphosis, excess, hybridity
- pure marvellous picaresque, (toy train turns real, clowns are blown away by the whirlwind)
- Siberian shamanistic tribe (a culture of high semioticity, magic is part of reality),
- pathologized magic in Museum of Female Monsters, (Madame Schreck)
- uncanny puppet master, (Grand Duke, Cristian Rosencreutz)
- household magic, (Lizzie's handbag, consmetic decorations: making herself up as a star)
- the wonder of romantic love, (Lizzie & Walser)
- the miracles of storytelling: fictional worldmaking, play with readerly doubts (Fevvers and Lizzie personify Scheherazade doubled, journalist Jack Walser enacts the ideal reader seduced, shaped by the text: as he metamorphoses from pragmatic journalist to circus clown to write a special report on the nights at the circus, he falls in love with Fevvers/the text, does not want to solve her enigma, but merely to share its pleasures)
- "demythologizing business:" "put new wine in old bottles especially if the pressure of new wine makes old bottles explode" (Carter 1983, 71), demythologisation and mythomania, (re)construct her stories (Fevvers undertakes to interweave into her interview dictated to Walser the stories of all the female freaks surrounding her, "the histories of those woman who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been" (Carter 1994, 285))
- Fictional autobiography: self-fictionalisation
- rewriting fairy tales with a feminist twist, mock "happily every after" scenario (*The Bloody Chamber* volume)
- hybrid creature: monster/marvel/freak: bird or woman? fact or fiction? sincere or hoax? sublime or grotesque? angel or monster?: bordercrossing, interspecies confusion, "aerial giantess," "Helen of the high wire", "Cockney Venus," Fevvers= feather + fever
- a lusus naturae pretends to be a circus act? a fake pretends to be a genuine birdwoman →her being a fantastic figure or freak depends on the spectator's ability/readiness to believe →her mysterious identity remains unresolved until the very end
- > postmodern relativisation of socially defined categories of normativity
- postmodern patchwork narrative: influenced by Perrault, Brothers Grimm, Greek and Roman mythology, surrealism, medieval legends
- > laughter as a narrative engine (clowns' merriment, winged woman's last laugh, children's *joie de vie*)
- "magical mannerist" (Carter in Haffenden 1985, 79) instead of magical realist: a hint at her willingness to reject all claims at a trustworthy realism or authentic historicity, as well as at her tendency to *unmake* truths instead of asserting them
- a richness of sensory details, a lively simulated orality, a proliferation of figurativity and the semioticisation of the fictional world via a self-enhancing magical imagery (literalized metaphors: Fevvers falls head over heels in love, has the last laugh)
- > play with time (Grandfather clock stops)







CARTER'S OEUVRE

- > Carter's scenes: the toyshop, the junkshop, the fairground, the circus, the masquerade, the music-hall or the theatre, spectacular, open spaces of a carnivalesque topography
- > Epiphanic temporality: New Year's Eve, equinox, solstice, the turn of the century, (re)birthdays, time zones becoming magical spaces where Grandfather clock is stopped by her heroines who aim to denounce Father Time
- > Carter's themes: destabilized identity categories, blurred gender boundaries, violations of human anatomy's frontiers, fantastic body transformations, adolescence, menopause, physical development/ decomposition, revelatory journeys, suspension of space and time.
- > Characters: grotesque bodies, freaked corporealities, the wolfish Red Riding Hood and the tender wolf, through the distorted faced Beauty, and the pregnant man, to the murderous clown, the aerial giantess, and the set of licentious septuagenarian twin seductresses.



EXERCISE

Read the quotes below. Discuss which mode of magic is realised?

What a cheap, convenient, expressionist device, this sawdust ring, this little O! Round like and eye, with a still vortex in the centre, but give it a little rub as if it were Aladdin's wishing lamp and, instantly, the circus ring turns into that durably metaphoric, uroboric snake with its tail in its mouth, wheel that turns full circle, the wheel whose end is its beginning, the wheel of fortune, the potter's wheel on which our clay is formed, a wheel of life on which we are all broken. O! of wonder, O! of grief."

With that, she batted her eyelashes at Walser in the mirror[...]He continued to take notes in a mechanical fashion but, as the women unfolded the convolutions of their joint stories together, he felt more and more like a kitten tangling up in a ball of wool it had never intended to unravel in the first place, or a sultan faced with not one but two Scheherazades, both intent on impacting a thousand stories in one single night.

The bitter knowledge that she has been fooled spurred Fevvers into action. She dropped the toy train on the Isfahan runner—mercifully, it landed on its wheels—as, with a grunt and whistle of expelled breath, the grand Duke ejaculated. /In those few seconds of his lapse of consciousness, Fevvers ran helter-skelter down the platform, opened the door of the first-class compartment and clambered aboard

The Shaman was the pedant of pedants. There was nothing vague about his system of belief. His type of mystification necessitated hard, if illusory, fact, and his mind was stocked with concrete specifics. With what passionate academicism he devoted himself to assigning phenomena their rightful places in his subtle and intricate theology!...the main, pressing, urgent, arduous task in hand, ...was the interpretation of the visible world about him via the information he acquired through dreaming.

'Who worked for Madame Schreck, sir? Why, prodigies of nature, such as I. Dear old Fanny Four-Eyes, and the Sleeping Beauty, and the Wiltshire Wonder, who was not three foot high, and Albert/Albertina, who was bipartite, that is to say, half and half and neither of either, and the girl we called Cobwebs.

All present agreed it was a fitting climax to the great clown's career, that chase after the Human Chicken, round and round the great ring...while the other clowns dashed hither and thither, at a loss as to what to do, concerned only to give the illusion of intentional Bedlam, for the show must go on. And even if Buffo at last had contrived to plunge his carving knife into the viscera of the Human Chicken, nobody in the vast gathering of merry folk would ever have been permitted to





believe it was a real manslaughter, it would have seemed, instead, the cream of jest.

What made her remarkable as an *aerialiste*, however, was the speed—or, rather the lack of it—with which she performed even the climactic triple somersault. When the hack aerialiste, the everyday, wingless variety, performs the triple somersault, he or she travels through the air at a cool sixty miles an hour, Fevvers, however, contrived a contemplative and leisurely twenty-five, so that the packed theatre could enjoy the spectacle, as in slow motion, of every tense muscle straining in her Rubenesque form. The music went faster than she did, she dawled. Indeed, she did defy the laws of projectiles, because a projectile cannot mooch along its trajectory, if it slackens its speed in mid-air, down it falls. But Fevvers, apparently, pottered along the invisible gangway between her trapezes with the portly dignity of a Trafalgar Square pigeon flapping from one proffered handful of corn to another, and then she turned head over heels three times, lazily enough to show off the crack in her bum.

She led. She steered Walser round the ring with complete assurance and wonderfully grave concern./ One, two, three. One, two, three./...Walser, supported by the unforged steel of the tigress' forepaws, thought: There goes Beauty and the Beast. Then, looking into the tigress's depthless, jewelled eyes, he saw reflected there the entire alien essence of a world of fur, sinew, and grace in which he was the clumsy interloper and, as the tigress steered his bedazzlement once more round the Princess's white piano, he allowed himself to think as the tigers would have done:/Here comes the Beast, and Beauty!

Walser, half-laughing, half-wondering, almost, yet not quite, convinced himself the woman had been in no more danger than a parrot might be if pushed off its perch. And though he was altogether unwilling to believe this might be so, still he was enchanted by the paradox: if she were indeed a *lusus naturae*, a prodigy, then—she was no longer a wonder. /She would no longer be an extraordinary woman, no more the Greatest Aerialiste in the world but—a freak. Marvellous, indeed, but a marvellous monster, an exemplary being denied the human privilege of flesh and blood, always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- What is the difference between magic realism, marvelllous realism, and magical realism?
- What is difference between European and Latin American Versions of magical realism?
- How does magical realism relate to postmodernism?
- What are the fantastic characteristics of magical realism?
- What are the problematic features of magical realism?
- Can you name a few magical realist works in visual arts?
- What are the magical realist features of Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*?
- What are the magical realist features of Angela Carter's *The Nights at the Circus*?
- How does enchanted space appear in Winterson's Venice/ Carter's Circus?
- What kind of fantastic bodies emerge in magic realist novels?
- What is historiographic metafiction? What is a fictional autobiography? How do they reiterate the postmodern relativization of truth?



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Magyarország Kormánya







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