

Towards a Culturally Grounded Typology of Magical Realism

Jelena Kovacevic-Löckner

Abstract:

Among the recent publications which seek to offer yet another re-definition of magical realism, Christopher Warnes' study *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* accomplishes a double feat: while bringing into dialogue the development of both the term 'magical realism' and the mode itself, Warnes develops two paradigms representing two major structural and functional tendencies in magical realism. One is based on an attitude of faith towards the cultural values represented by the supernatural in the texts, the other is characterized by an irreverent stance towards both the real and the supernatural. Applied to some of the key works of magical realism by Borges, Carpentier, Asturias, García Márquez, Rushdie, and Okri, the two paradigms produce acute readings of the cultural and political functions of the deployment of the mode in each individual work. The result is not a redefinition of magical realism, but a thought provoking re-contextualization which offers a typology capable of spanning the varieties of the mode.

How to cite:

Kovacevic-Löckner, Jelena: „Towards a Culturally Grounded Typology of Magical Realism [Review on: Warnes, Christopher: *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*. New York et al.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.]“. In: *KULT_online* 28 (2011).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2011.623>

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Warnes, Christopher: *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel. Between Faith and Irreverence*. Basingstone: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 208 pp., hardcover, £50/€62. ISBN: 978-0230545281

Faith-based or Irreverent Naturalizations of the Supernatural

Magical realism may well be one of the most intriguing and most frustrating genres in the study of contemporary literature, posing, as it does, serious problems of categorization. Warnes addresses these issues in the introduction to his book, in a very concise and pointed overview of the debate on definition, aptly identifying the major desideratum of a combination of narratological, structuralist approaches with postcolonial and culturally and historically oriented perspectives. Warnes starts out with a very reduced formula of a consensus definition of magical realism as "a mode of narration, that naturalises [...] the supernatural" and in which both levels are brought into "a state of equivalence" (p. 3). Regarding both 'magic' and 'realism' as discursive and representational systems "linked to collective world views" (p. 11), Warnes highlights the cultural functions of the mode's central "capacity to resolve the tension between two discursive systems usually thought of as mutually exclusive" (p. 2). The focus on this core operation guides all chapters of the book. Rejecting the simplifying idea of magical realism as one global mode, Warnes opts for the parallel existence of different versions governed by two tendencies. The first, which he uses to describe mainly Latin American magical realism, is characterized by a "literary and mythico-cultural" "faith", reclaiming lost "knowledge, values, traditions", which grants access to a culture of "participation" (p. 12), thus reconciling the two paradigms and legitimizing alternative world views. The second tendency, "irreverent" or "discursive" magical realism, reveals the western world view to be "culturally and historically contingent" (p. 12), its claims to truth are subverted by irreverent imitation. Warnes combines concepts from religious studies (Tambiah) and anthropology (Lévy-Bruhl) to show that the two paradigms create a culture of either "participation" or "causality" (p. 11). Although Warnes is not the first to call for a close attention to the connections between "form and underlying cultural dynamics" (p. 8), his explicitly interdisciplinary approach exposes recent criticism's bias towards the irreverent strand and does much to help theorize the concept of magic in terms of its cultural functions in an attempt at "rescuing the term [...] from its relegation to the domain of the illusionary, the primitive and the childish" (p. 8).

History of the Term: The Darker Side of Magical Realism's Political Agenda

The first part of the second chapter addresses the convoluted history of the term's multiple coinages. After Anne Hegerfeldt's (2005) convincing refutation of any attempt at constructing

continuity in the discontinuous genesis of the term "magical realism", one might indeed wonder what benefit would come from it for an analysis of the literature itself. But as disparate as the individual coinages' objects and contexts may seem, Warnes uncovers surprising philosophical undercurrents, pointing out an indebtedness to (German) idealism, which offers new perspectives on the mode's political agenda. Several aspects are new about Warnes' account of the term's genesis. First, he does not trace the earliest coinage of the term to German art critic Franz Roh's 1925 essay on New Objectivity, but to the early Romanticist poet Novalis, who uses the phrase *magischer Realismus* in a fragment. Both Novalis and Roh use the term "magical realism" in an exploration of "the limits of mimesis" (p. 25) in reaction to a previous art movement deemed over-subjective and irrational. The term's function is to create a synthesis, whether in Roh's case of Impressionism and Expressionism, or in Novalis' case of Neo-Classicism and *Sturm und Drang*.

Second, Warnes goes on to trace the usage of the term to the "right-wing intellectuals" (p. 28) Ernst Jünger and Massimo Bontempelli, exposing the nationalist and essentialist undercurrents in their visions of a "political institutionalisation of syntheses of myth and history, the magical and the real." (p. 28). If Warnes' study is concerned with magical realism's postcoloniality, it is here that its much hailed political agenda is revealed to be anything but limited to a celebration of plurality. It also carries a potential for expressing chauvinist ideas.

This chapter is no doubt the most pioneering and thought-provoking of the book, especially concerning the hitherto untapped German romanticist and early modern contexts. However, by abandoning the core definition of naturalizing the supernatural and focusing more generally on the operation of combining mutually exclusive discourses, Warnes presupposes a very broad understanding of 'magic' and 'realism', which at times seems to conflate very different concepts. One might, e.g., wonder whether the German term 'das Wunderbare' coincides at all with 'magic'. Warnes draws these connections at the expense of terminological sharpness—an issue much lamented in scholarship on magical realism.

History of the Mode: The Politics of Imperial Romance

Warnes' exploration of the literary historical genesis of the mode in the second part of the chapter also abandons the well-trodden paths of earlier criticism. Often viewed as a writing-back at the realist paradigm and the historical processes that inform realism, Warnes instead theorizes magical realism as postcolonial romance, as a response to the historical or imperial romance of the 19th century as showcased by Scott, Kipling or Forster.

In its characteristic combination of realism with romance, imperial romance casts the romance elements as "the exotic, the mysterious, the strange" (p. 37), while the realist level works to "other" romance, rendering it "archaic" (p. 34). The synthesis of the two levels is thus a hierarchized one, based on an "epistemological rupture" already prefigured in the very first novel, in Cervantes' anti-romance *Don Quijote*, "in which inherited or sacred conceptions of the world are forced into the margins by a notion of reality which is sceptical in its attitude to received knowledge" (p. 11).

Magical realism thus originates "as a postcolonial response to this logic" (p. 36) of a genre that has "conditioned the colonial imagination" (p. 36). Importantly, the chapter shows that magical realism's multiple subversions of genre conventions are clearly directed at the cultural values that undergird them as representational regimes. However, a few more examples of just how magical realism uses imperial romance in what Warnes calls "ambivalent acts of reclamation and assertion" (p. 36) would have been welcome.

Carpentier, Asturias, García Márquez, Rushdie and Okri

The afore established paradigms of faith and irreverence only reappear in the analysis chapters (three through six) as interpretation patterns for works by Carpentier, Asturias, García Márquez, Rushdie, and Okri—works rarely treated in a single study. If the classification of Rushdie's magical realism as "irreverent" or of Okri's as "faith-based" does not surprise, Warnes' fresh look at Carpentier's and Asturias' political agendas highlights the importance of the philosophical contexts elaborated earlier. Even Borges, otherwise often placed at an awkward position of not-yet-quite-magical-realist, is awarded his rightful place as originator of the irreverent strand of magical realism.

The conclusions drawn may not sound new, as they reveal magical realism to be a literary response to the "limits of definition" (p. 154) set by colonialist post-enlightenment epistemologies and their modes of representation. However, the strength of Warnes' analyses lies in allowing the categories of faith and irreverence the needed flexibility to account for the spectrum of magical realism's cultural and political functions, while pointing out how these remain informed by the contexts of the mode's development.

Conclusion

The book does not so much theorize the postcolonial novel nor rely on postcolonial theory, contrary to what the title might suggest. It rather—and thankfully—steers the discussion away from some of the ubiquitous binarisms and commonplace statements and opens magical realism up to a more culturally, historically, and philosophically grounded analysis. However, in spite of his call for a "renewed close attention to form and structure" (p. 8) Warnes does not develop categories for a narratological analysis. Nonetheless, the fresh look at the individual author's strategies in deploying the mode and the flexible, function oriented typology of faith and irreverence render Warnes' study a major contribution to the field. It remains to be seen whether this typology also holds for magical realist novels from the West. While its complexity of argumentation may overwhelm those uninitiated to the topic, the book is highly recommendable for anyone exploring magical realism, postcolonial literatures or hybrid genres.