

MAGICAL REALISM: THE HISTORY OF A CONCEPT

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In the last decades, magical realism as a critical term has imposed itself by the vast reference bibliography¹. But the diversity of studies written on this topic, far from exhausting the meaning(s) of the syntagm, confirms the fact that it is a topical and, indeed, ambiguous subject. Imprecise definitions, vague concepts, the use of magical realism as a hermeneutic key for too many (heterogeneous) texts have raised incommensurately different reactions among critics. Some of them considered the term indispensable for the analysis of the postmodern² novel, others, on the contrary, affirmed it to be a theoretical void³, a worn-out term precisely because of its prolix definitions.

Magical realism is surrounded by a heterogeneous semantic field, with contradictory, rather than complementary definitions, varying according to the historical period, the cultural spaces and the textual occurrences of its elaboration. Magical realism proves to be a chameleonic concept borrowing its ideas from the dominant ideologies in order to articulate its own specificity, by using: first, the formalist and dominant aesthetically-centered judgments; subsequently, the ontological anchorage in myth or the South-American regional-identification; finally, to account for its global success, the assimilation with postcolonial literature.

1 Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, (eds.), *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments. Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, Amaryll Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic. Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*, Jean Pierre Durix, *Mimesis, Genres and Postcolonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism*, David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival. Magic Realism and the Grotesque*, Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, Jane Robbinet, *This Rough Magic. Technology in Latin American Fiction*.

2 Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, (ed.), *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 1995, pp.1-14.

3 Roberto Gonzáles Echevarría, *Myth and Archive. A Theory of Latin American Narrative*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1998, p. 7.

I. The manifestos period

Even if magical realism is far from being a unitary movement, with a coherent program, the essays published, generally by writers, in Europe and South-America, between the two World Wars, played the role of some veritable manifestos for the critics who would later try to elaborate definitions of the expression, putting together a corpus of canonical texts.

1. The European Legacy

1.a. *Magical Realism and Expressionist Painting*

The collocation "magical realism" is used for the first time by the art critic Franz Roh, in an article of 1925, promoting European post-expressionist painting. In this text, „*Magischer Realismus*” is actually an equivalent for „*Neue Sachlichkeit*”, the “new objectivity”, a meaning intended by the German author as a new realism („*ein neuer Realismus*”)⁴. This manifesto promotes the return to the real, after the abstract style of the expressionist painters, but it remains suspended between the objective rationality and the remains of “irrational” expressionism.

“With the word ‘magic,’ as opposed to ‘mystic,’ I wished to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it.”⁵

The values emerging in post-expressionist paintings were the celebration of the mundane, of objectivity, of precise contours and the precision of the detail (as the German critic Fr. Roh rejected excess and baroque agglomeration). Roh proclaims the autonomy of the objective world, preferring the inherent qualities of objects and phenomena. Paradoxically, this vision ignores precisely the “magical” component of the collocation, the one which will remain in the future re-definitions in the literary field. This new perspective on the world, a new way of seeing the familiar, everyday reality is the distinctive

⁴ Franz Roh, *Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism*, in Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

sign of Roh's commentary.

Herman Broch interprets in a similar way the delimitation of the different tendencies in the arts:

"If Impressionism is considered a special art of treating air and light, it should be the result of the wave-theory in physics, and the progress from wave-theory to quantum physics is reflected in the passage from the vibration effects of the impressionists and neo-impressionists to the firm contours adopted by the *Neue Sachlichkeit* group."⁶

Just as the Austrian writer, Franz Roh expresses, in his study on post-expressionism, not only the return to the concreteness of everyday life after the abstract-mystical style of the expressionists, but it foregrounds the role of the visual art elements of the expression in creating an ineffable vision of reality. Thus, magical realism offers in arts an equivalent for the perspective called "defamiliarization" by the Russian formalists.

"The objects perceived repeatedly start to be perceived through a process of recognition: we know the object is in front of us, but we don't see it anymore... And what we used to call art exists precisely to restore the sensation (feeling) of life, to feel things, to make the stone become stone (again). The purpose of art is to produce a sensation of the object, and this sensation should be a seeing, not just a recognition. The artistic procedure is one of defamiliarization of things."⁷

1.b. The Migration of the Concept from Art into European Literature

In visual art, Roh's term, "magical realism", was to be eclipsed by the

6 Herman Broch, apud Vera Călin, *Alegoria și esențele*, București, Editura Pentru Literatură Universală, 1969, p. 202.

7 Viktor B. Șklovski, *Artă ca procedeu*, în Mihai Pop (ed.) „*Ce este literatura? Școala formală rusă*”, București, Editura Univers, 1983 p. 386.

“new objectivity” (associated with post-expressionist painting). But in the inter-war period the term would be borrowed by European literary magazines; the process imposed magical realism as a literary term and imposed it in several analogical collocations. The resulting family of terms, with many affinities and also significant divergencies, manifested the inevitable differences of translation between languages or between the visual art terminology and literary criticism⁸.

Ernst Jünger, influenced by Alfred Kubin⁹ and Franz Roh, published in 1927 the article „*Nationalismus und modernes Leben*”, (*Nationalism and modern life*). Referring to post-expressionist paintings, the novelist expressed his admiration for the precision of drawing and, speaking of fiction, he could be seen to seek for clarity as the expression of uncompromised thought, which tries to reveal the magic hidden inside things. He proposed as equivalent literary terms “magical realism” and stereoscopy, and tried, by using widely the collocation, to reconcile German romanticism and modern technology.

The Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli¹⁰ offers an interpretation closer to the literal meanings to follow; in his articles, published in the magazine *900* (and edited in Italian and French), he speaks of “the other dimension” which opens mythical and magical perspectives upon reality; he mentions “an aware primitivism” which allows the reconciliation between the quotidian and the miraculous¹¹.

With this load of stereoscopic signs, tying together nationalistic and social tones with the pure aesthetical and stylistic ones, the term magical realism crossed the Atlantic in 1927, when Roh’s article was translated into Spanish and taken up by Central and South-American writers.

⁸ Irene Guenter, *Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic*, in Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 61.

⁹ Alfred Kubin publishes *Die andere Seite* (1909), a novel with drawings, which places him among the precursors of the mode, although he doesn’t use the syntagm, but the terms “strange” and “miraculous”, “the other side of reality”.

¹⁰ His best known novel is *Gente nel tempo* (1937).

¹¹ Johan Daisne, Belgian writer, refers to „*fantastischrealistisch*” (*fantastic realistic*), then, after reading Bontempelli’s articles, he uses “magical realism”: „*Magisch-realisme*”.

¹² Cf. Ilinca Iliescu, *Magical Realism in Latin America*, 2008, p. 25

¹³ Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Magical Realism: The Art of the Novel*, [ditl.info/arttest/art15](http://www.ditl.info/arttest/art15)

2. Latin America and the Regionalization of the Concept

The first essays on magical realism appeared in South-American literature only after the Second World War, but the authors were three writers who had studied in the 1920s in Paris, having multiple connections with the European avant-garde movements. Arturo Uslar Pietri, from Venezuela, Miguel Angel Asturias, from Guatemala, and the Cuban Alejo Carpentier grew in the climate of cultural effervescence of the European inter-war period, assimilating the surrealists' interest for primitive cultures, for aesthetic experiment and the undermining of Western rationalism; on returning to their countries of origin, they would value in their literature the cultural complexity of Latin America.

Miguel Angel Asturias, however, is considered to be one of the first writers to have assimilated in their literature the results of anthropological study¹², by making the beliefs and the myths of the Maya population the main themes of his novels. The novelist considers magical realism a particular way of interpreting the world, but also a literary mode appropriate for representing the (mythical) world vision of the local population.

"There is a third reality, between the real reality and the magical one. This third reality is not the product of the visible and the tactile, neither only hallucination and dream, but the result of the fusion between the two... what we could call magical realism".¹³

In the preface to his novel *El reino de este mundo* (1949), Alejo Carpentier speaks of "the American marvellous real" (*lo real maravilloso americano*), opening, on the one hand, the polemic with the European surrealism (considered an artificial marvellous) and, on the other hand, with Roh's magical realism. The whole history of America, states Carpentier, is a "chronicle of the marvellous real" and magical realism is just its literary aspect. Carpentier invokes the

12 Cf. Ilinca Ilian, *Romanele lui Julio Cortázar și literatura europeană*, Editura Bastion, Timișoara, 2008, p. 25

13 Miguel Angel Asturias, apud Amaryll Chanady, *Le réalisme magique*, in „DITL”, <http://www.ditl.info/arttest/art15807.php>.

first chronicles of Spanish colonizers and states that those descriptions would be expressions of the "marvellous real" existing *per se*, naturally on the South-American continent. There is, irrespective of our opinion or understanding, a marvellous reality. It is the created outcome/result of the spectacular geography, the socio-cultural hybridization, the history of European colonization (and the implicit fictionalization of the "New World" in the Spanish chronicles), the precarious political situation and some further factors.

In a later conference, *The Baroque and the Marvellous Real* (1975), the writer associates the European artistic formula of the baroque with the realities of pre-Columbian America: the architecture, the cosmogony and the poems of the locals are true "monuments of the baroque", underlying incessant transformation, excess, the incessantly poly-chrome and the richness of language, in conjunction with the creole spirit which is, due to its being a cultural merger, essentially baroque. This European mode, exported to South America when the first Spanish colonizers arrived, found in South America the fertile soil to develop even more valuable forms than the European ones. The marvellous real is, therefore, defined as a restoration of the historical Baroque. Summing up Carpentier's argument, the marvellous appears:

"...from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality, or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state [*estado límite*]."¹⁴

Carpentier considers his generation to have literary maturity and his fellow writers to be the interpreters of the Latin American reality. In his remarkably premonitory sayings: "we shall be the classics of an enormous baroque world", the author anticipates what later critics would call the South-American Boom. Thus, beginning with Carpentier's essays, magical realism

¹⁴ Alejo Carpentier, *On the Marvelous Real in America*, in Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 86.

becomes a regional (territorial)¹⁵ property, *lo real maravilloso Americano* transfers the debate from aesthetics to ontology.

“Carpentier’s strategic reformulation of the label of magic realism through the term *real maravilloso* produces not a realism to be transfigured by the ‘supplement’ of a magical perspective, but a reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic.”¹⁶

The critical studies that followed used “magical realism” in connection with Carpentier’s novels or with the fiction by Asturias, Borges and Cortázar, continuing Carpentier’s idea: magical realism is a particular “brand” of fiction pertaining to Central and South America; this distinctive feature would be at the root of literary works as good as certain European models.

We can speak of a new direction in the history of the concept: it is not only “a literary mode to represent reality” (an aesthetic representation or a narrative technique), but also “an attitude towards reality”¹⁷. Magical realism is not “the creation of imaginary worlds and beings”, but “the discovery of those mysterious relations existing between man and his environment”, writes Leal, in a polemic with Angel Flores¹⁸. The ontological side doubles the “technical” aspects of magical-realist literature and becomes more important than the latter.

Together with the South-American boom in the USA and Europe, the critics adopt this position of a literal magic, presupposing a direct connection between the text and the extra-textual reality.

“The Latin American writer preferred to place himself on the far side of that borderline aesthetics described by Roh, on the side of

15 Amaryll Chanady, *The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms*, in Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 15.

16 Frederic Jameson, apud Scott Simpkins, *Sources of Magic Realism/Supplements to Realism in Contemporary Latin American Literature*, in Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 148-149.

17 Luis Leal, *Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature 1967*, in Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

18 Angel Flores, *Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction, 1955*, in Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 116.

the savage, of the believer, not on the ambiguous ground where miracles are justified by means of a reflexive act of perception, in which the consciousness of distance between the observer and the object, between the subject and that exotic other, generates estrangement and wonder."¹⁹

This "legitimation" of the imaginary in ontological²⁰ terms is stated in the Nobel lecture made by Gabriel García Márquez in 1982. The Colombian writer refers to a "supra-dimensional reality" and not only to its literary expression:

"A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune. Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude."²¹

There is a small distance between this confession and the subversive, anti-colonial meaning of magical realism or the falsifying appropriation of the Orient by the Occident, underlined by Edward Said's ethno-criticism of. In the same context (of *The Nobel Prize Lecture*), Márquez anticipates the postcolonial critique which considers that some exterior labels such as magical realism, far from helping in understanding a different culture, assimilates it to our Eurocentric stereotypes. Magical realism, just as "Latin America", is a simplification of the European inventions which mystify an infinitely complex reality.

19 Roberto Gonzales Echevarría, *apud* Scott Simpkins, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

20 Amaryll Chanady, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

21 Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America*, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/Márquez-lecture-e.html

"It is only natural that they should insist on measuring us with the yardstick that they use for themselves, forgetting that the ravages of life are not the same for all, and that our quest for identity is just as arduous and bloody for us as it was for them. The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own, serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary. Venerable Europe would perhaps be more perceptive if it tried to see us in its own past."²²

II. The Critical (Theoretical) Reflection of Magical Realism

The first (book-length) studies on magical realism appeared only in the 1980s, not under the impact of the South-American Boom, but due to the import of this literary mode in other cultural spaces: Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1980), D.M. Thomas, *The White Hotel* (1981), William Kennedy, *Ironweed* (1981), Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987), Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (1991) are just a few titles which, meanwhile, became part of the magical-realist canon.

The debates on magical realism follow, mainly, two directions. The first one is the analysis in terms of the narrative technique, genre particularities, aesthetical effects, which continue in the wake of the structuralist studies, after Tzvetan Todorov's canonical book, *Introduction to Fantastic literature* (1975)²³. The other direction is opened by cultural studies, where magical realism is associated to postmodernism, feminism and post-colonialism, analyzing the ideological implications of these movements in magical-realist literature.²⁴

²² *Ibidem*

²³ Other English critical text about fantastic and magical realism: Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, Amaryll Chanady, *Magic Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy*, 1985, Kenrick E.A. Mose, *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez*, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989, Lois Parkinson Zamora și Wendy B. Faris, (eds.), *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 1995.

²⁴ David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1995, Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Routledge, New York, 1996, Jean Pierre Durix, *Mimesis, Genres and Postcolonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism*, Palgrave,

1. Magical Realism and Post-Structuralist Critique.

The first book on magical realism from this perspective was written by the Brazilian Irlemar Chiampi. Unfortunately, being published in Portuguese²⁵, this study does not have an English translation, so its influence is reduced. According to second-hand sources²⁶, this author considers that magical realism implies either a de-naturalisation of the real, or the naturalisation of the miraculous. Meanwhile, she delineates the concept from the fantastic (another successful term of those years). In magical realism (unlike in the fantastic narratives), the causality is diffuse, unproblematic, and the reader is not trapped in the hesitation between the uncanny and the marvellous (a position typical for fantastic literature, *apud* Todorov). On the other hand, unlike realistic novels which hide the act (process, position, technique) of narration, the narrator's position and self-referentiality are foregrounded, or central in magical-realistic texts²⁷.

The first influential critic who wrote about magical realism was the Canadian author Amaryll Chanady. In her book, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic. Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (1985), she follows Chiampi's premises, using structuralist methodology and the definitions given by Todorov which present magical realism in contrast with the fantastic²⁸. Chanady considers that magical realism aborts the traditional antinomy between the autonomous codes of the natural and the supernatural while solving it at the

Macmillan, 1998, Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 2004, Stephen M. Hart (ed.), *A Companion to Magical Realism*, Tamesis, Woodbridge, 2005, Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005.

25 Irlemar Chiampi, *O realismo maravilhoso: forma e ideologia no romance hispano-americano*, São Paulo, Editora Perspectiva, 1980, Spanish translation: *El realismo maravilloso: forma e ideología en la novela hispanoamericana*, 1983.

26 <http://www.erudit.org/revue/vi/1991/v17/n1/200946ar.pdf>.

27 Cf. Mary Ellen Ross, *Réalisme merveilleux et autoreprésentation dans „L'Amélanquier” de Jacques Ferron*, <http://www.erudit.org/revue/vi/1991/v17/n1/200946ar.pdf>.

28 Also Christine Brooke Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1981), classifying texts in two categories: *The unreal as real* and *The real as unreal*; also Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion* (1981), a polemic approach to fantastic, against Todorov's view; many of the characteristics attributed to fantastic literature coincide with what is called magical realism.

narrative level, through auctorial reticence and the lack of surprise which accompanies unbelievable histories.

Brian McHale, in his reference book, *Postmodernist Fiction*²⁹, writes a separate chapter on authors like Cortazár, Rushdie, Márquez, but he avoids using the concept "magical realism". In the chapter *A World Next Door* the critic defines a more general concept, the postmodern fantastic, which contradicts Todorov's definition (the fantastic as the exceptional intrusion into the real) and the latter's hypothesis on the disappearance of the fantastic in the 20th century. The American author talks about a diffuse fantastic, present nearly everywhere in postmodern literature. Accordingly, the hesitation between the uncanny and the marvellous (essential in Todorov's view) is transformed into a hesitation between different ontological levels of the text. There is an ontological poetry inherent in the postmodern fantastic, and the mysteries of these texts refer to language rather than to the fictional world represented.

"It looks as if hesitation has been transferred from ontological structure to *language* in this text... Let us say, then, that the mysteries of these texts are mysteries of language, not of their fictional worlds... These are ontological oppositions, ontological hesitations, although not the oppositions and hesitations associated with traditional fantastic writing. Hesitation has been displaced from the frontier between this world and the "world next door," to the confrontation between different ontological levels in the structure of texts. This explains the general diffusion of fantastic "charge" throughout postmodernist writing: a displaced effect of the fantastic persists wherever a dialogue springs up between different ontological realms or levels."³⁰

In his 1990 volume *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative*, Roberto Gonzales Echevarría is rather sceptical about the usefulness of the concept and proposes the abandonment of "magical realism", as it has

29 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Routledge, New York, 1996, pp.73-83.

30 Brian McHale, *op.cit.*, pp. 81-83:

become prolix, excessively used and applied to very heterogeneous texts. Interestingly, the critic makes the difference between epistemological magical realism (dependant on the author's vision) and the ontological magical realism (referring to a magical reality, independent of the viewer).

2. Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Studies

In the last decades of the 20th century "magical realism" becomes a useful term for the fiction written in Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Asia, South-Africa. South-American regionalism is replaced by globalization. It is the period when magical realism is frequently associated with postmodernism, postcolonialism and feminism. In the 1990s, magical realism is called "the predilect style of postcolonial literature".³¹

We can take into consideration the "ideologization" of the term: according to postcolonial criticism, magical realism extends so as to cover any novel containing mythical elements taken from the culture of the colonized peoples, which interrogates the rational, linear narratives of the colonizers.

In Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (1981), Keri Hulme, *The Bone People* (1984) or Thomas King, *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), realistic fiction (along with its conventions) is juxtaposed to the stories of "primitives", a process which underlines the conventions and artifices implicit in Western cultures, based on elements previously considered "natural", beyond critical thinking. Novels like Rushdie's and Marquez's make use of non-mimetic modes of narration, configure a social and conceptual space where meaning has political dimensions.

In the same postcolonial context, magical realism enters another conceptual web: "Commonwealth literature", „mongrel literature"³². Bahtin's definitions were adopted enthusiastically by poststructuralists and applied to magical-realist novels, in order to emphasize the social, cultural and linguistic

31 Stephen Slemon, *Magical?? Realism as Postcolonial Discourse*, in Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 408-409.

32 The latter term was launched by Salman Rushdie, a synonym of „pluri-lingvism" and functioning along with Bahtin's term, „poly-glossia", a term applied by the Russian author to the novel in general, "an autonomous genre in which is expressed the carnivalesque laughter and the poly-vocalism of those groups rejected by institutions."

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patch-potch in those areas where an attitude towards reality generated a particular expression of this vision, coincident in many points with the principles of postmodernism and postcolonialism – “magical realism”.

One of the first analysis to establish an ideological kinship between these trends is Linda Hutcheon's *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). The Canadian author analyzes novels by Marquez and Rushdie applying the concept of “historiographic metafiction”. Although she doesn't use the term “magical realism”, Hutcheon considers these novels parodical and self-reflexive, challenging from inside the traditional forms, not by direct rejection of realistic conventions, but through the contamination with fantasy and the rules of traditional oral story-telling³³.

More Recent Magical Realism Studies

The theoretical anthology *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995) edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, remains the main reference book for magical realism, as it gathers the “founding” texts of Roh, Carpentier, Flores, Leal (cited above, in English translation). The introduction imposes magical realism as a global literary phenomenon, the most important trend in contemporary literature. The studies of contemporary authors analyze magical realism from historical³⁴, aesthetic³⁵ and sociological perspectives, invoking the postcolonial theories³⁶.

David K. Danow structures his study³⁷ on the same coordinates, offering a new perspective: the techniques used in magical realist fiction are analyzed in connection with the carnival theories. The main literary corpus is

33 Linda Hutcheon, *op.cit.*, pp.186, 187.

34 Irene Guenther, *op. cit.*, și A Chanady, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

35 Jeanne Delbaere Garant makes the distinction between magical realism and its variations: psychological realism, mythic realism, grotesque realism, in Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 252-260.

36 Theo L. D'Haen, in *Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers*, assimilates magical realism to postmodernism underlying descentration and the submination of dominant discourse. The common features would be: *self-reflexiveness, metafiction, eclecticism, redundancy, multiplicity, discontinuity, intertextuality, parody, the dissolution of character and narrative instance, the erasure of boundaries, and the destabilization of the reader*. Apud Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.191-208

37 David K., Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1995.

that of the South-American novel, and the analytical premises are common to Carpentier's, stipulating the existence of an ontological magical realism and a poetics of excess as consequences of a world where everything is possible.

The juxtaposition of fancy and misery is presented in a carnival-like manner, and the description of the political atrocities in South-American dictatorial regimes invokes another aesthetic category, ignored in previous studies about magical realism: the grotesque.

Jean Pierre-Durix, professor at Dijon University, is one of the few French critics to write about magical realism. In his book, *Mimesis, Genres and Postcolonial Discourse*³⁸, he extends magical realism to a literary genre basing on a hybrid aesthetics (mimetic/non-mimetic), using Bakhtinian concepts (polyphony, hybridization). The parodic relation with carnival and the picaresque literature and the anchoring of magical realism in postcolonial discourses are the premises of this later study which declares magical realism to be a genre.

A similar study is Stephen Hart's, in the introduction to the *Companion to Magical Realism*³⁹. Magical realism is considered the literary expression of the postcolonial world. Born in the gap between two faiths, two social groups, magical realism has the capacity (essential in postmodernism) to express "a fissured world, marked by cultural dislocations, distorted". Hart implies the grotesque when he emphasizes the fact that magical realism does not appear in serene worlds, but in societies disrupted by invasions, dictatorship, political corruption. The British author engages in polemics with prominent critics who associated magical realism with Third World literature (Frederic Jameson), but ignored its use even in the old centres of power⁴⁰. Magical realism is, in many cases, politically engaged, but it can also be a style without political content, a manner."

Wendy B. Faris's book (2004)⁴¹ is up to now, the best comparative study on magical realistic literature. From a generic perspective, the author consid-

38 Jean Pierre Durix, *Mimesis, Genres and Postcolonial Discourse: Deconstructing MagicRealism*, Palgrave, Macmillan, 1998.

39 Stephen M. Hart, (ed.), *A companion to magical realism*, Tamesis, Woodbridge, 2005

40 England: Angela Carter; Germany: Gunter Grass.

41 Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 2004.

ers magical realism a mode, at the crossroads between modernism and post-modernism, implying the aesthetics and the program of both. Historically, Paris adopts a global perspective: she tries to establish the predecessors in the Kafka's and Gogol's fiction and to prove the continuity in point of ideas and stylistics between the novels of the '50s and the contemporary narratives: from Grass and Carpentier, to Kundera and Saramago. In our opinion, although the theoretical pages are very well written, this wide corpus of texts is not the best choice. The author sacrifices the historical and cultural context, the specificity of each text, in order to emphasize (to generate) an improbable continuity. Also, in a not very pleasant manner, the book ends in the superlative register, considering magical realism the most important tendency in contemporary world literature.

Although we do not share this enthusiastic vision, we consider magical realism an important literary mode which imprinted the narratives written in the second half of the 20th century. A correct definition, in relation with other related currents (as realism) or modes (as the fantastic) and also a diachronic description, searching for its genealogy in the baroque, romanticism and postmodernism would make the concept less prolix and would open it for the study of the Central European literatures, written during the communist regimes and after 1989, including here some recent Romanian literature.

Our study here represents therefore the first step – or just an attempt – preliminary to clarifying the different meanings of this oxymoronic collocation, a very successful and contradictory critical term in the readings of the last century.

Realismul magic : istoria unui concept (Rezumat)

Acest studiu prezintă „istoria realismului magic” din perspectiva metamorfozelor semantice ale expresiei de-a lungul secolului XX, pornind de la ideea că „biografia” unei idei sau a unui termen se poate dovedi extrem de interesantă și fertilă din perspectiva unei istorii a mentalităților, dar poate aduce și indispensabile lămuriri terminologice în interpretarea operelor literare.

Termenul apare în artele plastice (în deceniul al treilea), asociat cu pictura post-expresioniștilor, apoi este adoptat în literatură (în Europa interbelică), perioadă pe care o putem numi a „estetizării”, prin asocierea realismului magic cu insolitarea propusă de formalisții ruși, cu dezvăluirea „feței ascunse” a lucrurilor prin relevarea poeticității lor. O a doua etapă în „evoluția” termenului este cea „ontologică”, evidentă în eseurile sciitorilor sud-americani. Alejo Carpentier marchează ceea ce s-ar putea numi „regionalizarea” realismului magic, prin punerea în relație cu realitățile continentului sud-american, proces consolidat și de „El boom”-ul romanelor din anii '60. Odată cu recunoașterea mondială a acestei literaturi are loc un proces invers, de universalizare a conceptului, prin adoptarea lui ca modalitate narativă în multe dintre literaturile statelor post-coloniale. Tot anii '80 marchează și asocierea cu teoriile postmodernismului și postcolonialismului, care pun în valoare componenta ideologică a sintagmei.

O scurtă prezentare a studiilor critice care abordează realismul magic evidențiază o similară schimbare de paradigmă, de la cercetarea de tip structuralist, analiza naratologică și stilistică și definirea realismului magic în opoziție cu literatura fantastică, la studii care consideră „realismul magic” drept limbajul predilect al lumii postcoloniale.

„Realismul magic” rămâne un pseudo-concept cu definiții multiple și contradictorii, potențate de oximoronul sintagmei, care justifică și fascinația față de acest tip de literatură și eterogenitatea corpusului textual, dar poate fi totodată și argumentul pentru un concept-metaforă, dincolo de rigorile teoretice tradiționale, în bună „tradiție postmodernă”.

Le réalisme magique: l'histoire d'un concept (Résumé)

Cette étude présente „l'histoire du réalisme magique” dans la perspective des métamorphoses sémantiques de l'expression le long du XXe siècle, en partant de l'idée que la „biographie” d'une idée ou d'un terme peut être extrêmement intéressante et fertile du point de vue d'une histoire des mentalités, mais peut offrir aussi des clarifications terminologiques pour l'interprétation des œuvres littéraires.

Le terme apparaît dans les arts plastiques (durant la troisième décennie du XXe siècle), associé à la peinture des post-expressionnistes et adapté par la suite à la littérature (dans l'entre-deux-guerres). C'est la période que nous allons appeler celle de l'esthétisation”, en associant le réalisme magique avec l'effet d'étrangeté (*ostranenie*) proposée par les formalistes russes qui dévoilent le „visage caché” des choses en relevant leur poéticité. La deuxième étape dans l'évolution du terme est celle „ontologique”, évidente surtout dans les essais des auteurs sud-américains. Alejo Carpentier marque ce qu'on pourrait nommer la „régionalisation” du réalisme magique, par la mise en relation avec les réalités du continent sud-américain, processus consolidé également par le *El boom* des romans des années 60. Avec la reconnaissance mondiale de cette littérature se produit un processus inverse qui consiste dans l'universalisation du concept, par son adoption en tant que modalité narrative dans plusieurs littératures postcoloniales. Et c'est toujours dans les années 80 qu'on assiste à l'association des théories du postmodernisme et du post colonialisme, qui mettent en valeur la composante idéologique du syntagme.

Une brève présentation des études critiques qui abordent le réalisme magique met en évidence un changement similaire de paradigme, allant de la recherche de type structuraliste, l'analyse narratologique et la définition du réalisme magique en opposition avec la littérature fantastique, aux études qui considèrent le „réalisme magique” comme le langage essentiel du monde postcolonial.

Le „réalisme magique” reste un pseudo-concept aux définitions multiples et contradictoires, mises en valeur par l'oxymoron du syntagme, qui jus-

tifie aussi bien la fascination exercée par ce type de littérature que le caractère hétérogène du corpus textuel, mais peut être aussi l'argument pour un concept-métaphore, au-delà des rigueurs théoriques traditionnelles, dans la bonne „tradition postmoderne”.

Key-words: *magical realism, Latine America, boom, post-structuralism, postcolonial-criticism*

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