

SPECIAL ISSUE

POST-MAGICAL REALIST WORLDS

INTRODUCTION

Agata Mergler

York University

Justyna Poray-Wybranowska

Independent Scholar

7

Several years ago, we, the editors of this special issue (Agata Mergler and Justyna Poray-Wybranowska) met in Professor Susan Ingram's graduate course on Comparative and World Literature. We discussed issues that led us to create first a call for papers for a conference, then a research group, and finally the journal issue you are reading now. But it was not until Poray-Wybranowska's doctoral defence that our obvious shared interest in postcolonial, decolonial, and magical realist contemporary literature, film, and other cultural media came to light and ignited an idea. That idea, in turn, prompted us to propose a panel that eventually found its cozy place at the Canadian Comparative Literature Association conference in 2020. The setting of the conference, despite being scheduled in the very early days of a global pandemic, ended up being auspicious for us: with four panels, entirely online, it allowed us to bring together a large group of international participants at various different stages of their careers, and afforded further possibilities for later meetings. As a growing number of scholars expressed interest in joining these conversations, we decided to meet regularly, and became confident that "the persistence of magical realism in literatures from around the globe" (Perez and Chevalier 1) was a topic worthy of further research, particularly in the current tumultuous times of global crises such as

the pandemic that was the background for working on this CRCL/RCLC issue. Thus, the Post-Magical Realist Worlds research group emerged under the umbrella of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association (CCLA).

- Connotations of World Literature, world-building, and worlding aside, the most obvious question our issue title poses is: what does the “post-” in “post-magical” realism mean? Initial understandings of magical realism were diverse and complex, and its meaning and reach have since expanded and spread globally. It has now become widely recognized (and debated) as “the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world” (Bhabha 7). No matter whether we pinpoint the beginning of magical realism as Franz Roh’s description of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Expressionism in 1925, or, as Angel Flores suggests, in 1935 when Jorge Luis Borges published *A Universal History of Infamy* (Flores 113), and whether or not its territory is limited to the Latinidad, today magical realisms thrive globally in new and surprising ways. The “post-” in “post-magical” realism is a way to embrace the plurality of literary, artistic, and cultural reactions to it, whether as expansions or reconstructions of the origins of the genre, or a mode and an aesthetic and a style, or even a movement. If magical realism is a mode (of cultural expression) as Zamora and Faris propose (9), and as we have discussed in our working group, then this mode works alongside the realist mode, most prevalent and defined and refined by Western culture, expanded into its colonies and dominating almost globally. As an “alternative” to the “objective,” “rational” mode of writing of Western modernity, magical realism has been contrary to the realist “flat” take on being. In an ontological magical realist view, there is more to being than realism proposes. Thus, magical realist writing overflows (in comparison) with beings, layers of actions, histories upon histories, psychological traumas and dramas, and the richness of the Baroque, associated with the specific Latin American Baroque style, supposedly present on every page. But the “dichotomy encoded in the critical term ‘magical realism’ positions its users outside of the world portrayed in the ‘magical realist’ texts we wish to enter, for the term implies a clearer opposition between magic and reality than exists within those texts” (Zamora and Farris 3). Therefore, magical realism might also be a mode of reading, even a way of othering that the reader enjoys or rejects. A critique of such use of the magical realist framework would be part of post-magical realism’s theoretical work. It is this critical problem that this journal issue explores.

Alejo Carpentier calls magical realism an authentic way of being specific to the context of Latin America: “The marvelous real is found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates in the history of the continent and who left the names that we still carry” (87). Christopher Warnes calls this approach to magical realism “ontological” magical realism, a mode of culture (13-15). Fredric Jameson and Homi Bhabha later extend magical realism to the postcolonial world, expanding its borders beyond Latin American cultures to all postcolonial ones. Whereas Salman Rushdie also signals that it speaks to a “genuinely ‘Third World’ consciousness”, dealing with “what Naipaul has called ‘half-made’ societies, in which the impossibly old struggles

against the appallingly new” (Rushdie 301-02), Jameson likewise sees magical realism as much more than what Roh and Carpentier initially imagined. Can it be both a mode of writing and a mode of reading? Jameson equally argues that it is a mode invested in the national allegory: “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69), thus also being a way of reading social history.

Over the decades, magical realism has received much critical attention, debate, and reevaluation. Power relations in the postcolonial world have shifted since this debate began, retaining similar but indifferent assemblages, and postcolonial, decolonial, and Indigenous literatures still use magical realism as a mode of expression to critically engage with regional histories as well as histories of its reception and its meaning. Therefore, in looking at these different approaches, our research group members and contributors brought forth, we decided to use the term “(post-)magical realism” as a way of differentiating what is now happening in literary and cultural scholarship and cultural production from what was happening in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as during the Boom of the genre in the 1950s and 1960s.

9

Sections in this issue emerged organically from the conversations we had with our research group members, and from papers presented at the CCLA conferences in 2020 and 2021. These sections relate to several groups of thought that emerged in our meetings and revolved around clarifying, interrogating, and challenging definitions and boundaries of magical realism, and thus attempted to solidify a new umbrella term that we call post-magical realism. We have chosen this organizational pattern for our contributions for two reasons. First, we intentionally veered away from a regional approach to this collection. This is connected to our thinking about the world not in a “first-”, “second-”, and “third-world” way that is typical of the Cold War era, and that perpetuates the power relations that it presumes to critique. In this, we are following Spivak’s area-studies critique in *Death of a Discipline*. Second, we wanted to do justice to the liveliness that the magical realist mode of expression brings to so many different things. We see it present in many different genres and aesthetic forms and regions and historical periods. Analyzing it regionally cuts it off from its lively core.

The first part of this special issue focuses on theoretical topics such as the historiography of magical realism in film (Cody Lang) and the ontological and metaphysical underpinnings of magical realist literature (Gabriel Chin). The second part of the issue contains articles addressing methodological and historical issues, including the interpretation of the reception of Jorge Luis Borges (Ceyda Elgöl), the contemporary significance of reactions to the Latin American boom in the 1960s by writers of the *McOndo* group (Thomas Nulley-Valdés), the discussion of magical realism as an aesthetic or a genre in film (Noelia Gregorio), and the transformations that magical realist tropes undergo when they are brought up in a different cultural context (Ryan Milov-Córdoba). The third section provides close readings of specific literary texts. Primary texts discussed in this section include Pakistani author Mohammed Hanif’s

novels (Pooja Sancheti), Congolese authors Jacques Bergeyck's and Sony Labou Tansi's works (Lieselot De Taeye), and Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel (Chinelo Ezenwa). The fourth section deals with contemporary magical realist tropes connected to mechanisms of Othering in the context of race, Indigeneity, and settler-colonialism. These articles focus on contemporary science fiction films such as *Alien* (Travis Hay) and *Ex Machina* and *Venom* (Angie Wong). The fifth and final section of this special issue, the Post-Scriptum, is the product of our continued collaborative work on the topic of Post-Magical Realism. It contains responses to the peer-reviewed articles themselves by members of our PMRW research group, including scholars Kurosh Amoui, Jill Planche, Salman Akhtar, Pooja Sancheti, Angie Wong, Sanjukta Banerjee, Ceyda Elgöl, and Lieselot De Taeye. Thus, the discussion of the meaning of PMR continues therein.

- 10 Gabriel Chin finds in the writing of Haruki Murakami a deep connection to the initial magical realism definition provided by Franz Roh. That this description, focused on visual arts, transcends media, national borders, and, most strikingly, historical limitations is at the core of Chin's discussion of what magical realism might be as demonstrated in Murakami's novels. The focus on language, imagery, and world-building permits us as readers to see the aesthetics that (post-)magical realism has become in contemporary global literature. But in his initial connection of Roh's theory to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Chin makes an analogical connection between current post-magical realism and Object-Oriented Ontology in Murakami's writing, thus making a compelling argument for a metaphysical underpinnings of the post-magical realist mode of literature.

Another kind of argument for (post-)magical realist mode in film can be found in Cody Lang's article. Just as his dissertation explored the history of magical realism as a film genre, aesthetics, and form of expression in depth, his article provides a variety of connections to numerous films that can lead readers onto their own search of elements of filmic post-magical realist mode. However, he focuses on the role of history in magical realist cinema, and the three films he cites as examples—*Daughters of the Dust*, *Happy as Lazzaro*, and *Underground*—could not be more different from each other. Still, they all prove that magical realist filmmaking is a global phenomenon, and Lang sees the basis of globalization of magical realism in historicity, the common thread of these films.

The historical meanderings of the Latin American magical realist literature's reception and influence on the next generations of writers globally are addressed in Ceyda Elgöl's account of the reception of Jorge Luis Borges in Turkey in the 1980s and Thomas Nulley-Valdés's discussion of revisions to the anthology *McOndo* that rejected the reductionist visions behind the "Latin American magical realism" label in the 2000s. The favourable reception of the Latin American writers in translation and the rejection of the Latin American magical realist literary style or genre in its countries of origin demonstrate different issues with magical realist appeal.

Elgöl's article outlines how Latin American magical realism was brought to

Turkish readers, by editors in the 1980s, for its social and political potential of achieving freedom at least creatively, as well as the violence that was perceived as a figurative and literal feature of magical realist writing. Focusing on Borges's reception, Elgül claims that the (dis)similarity between Latin American magical realism and Turkish literary traditions is a key factor in the reception of this literature and its influence on the new novel in Turkey.

A close reading of Robert Rodriguez's film trilogy *Spy Kids* is the basis for Noelia Gregorio's argument for what she calls *magicorealism*. The choice of these Mexican-US-American films as case studies is not random, since the commercialized magical realist tropes in these films demonstrate a subversive way of discussing the contradictory but necessarily dialogical relations between Latin American and Anglo-American interpretations of magical realism. It also conveys the need to include a contemporary understanding of *Chicanismo* and its use in Rodriguez's dialogue with the Anglo-American world of mainstream Hollywood film production.

Angie Wong's article studies representations of Asian characters in *Venom* and *Ex Machina*, two films that use techno-Orientalist elements to blur the line between the real and the magical. Wong's close reading reveals how both works rely on Yellow Peril tropes common in American cinema, arguing that these same tropes continue to make Hollywood films successful in the present.

11

Travis Hay offers a postcolonial/settler colonial reading of three of the *Alien* films, showing how they explore the violence and horror of European colonization through their representation of radical otherness, conquest, and expansion. Hay proposes a mnemonic reading of these films in which horror and science fiction elements are exposed as devices to reflect the historical consciousness of settler colonial societies.

In her article, Pooja Sancheti examines the works of Mohammed Hanif and argues that they use magical realist elements in ways that set them apart from the majority of other contemporary South Asian novels in English and, indeed, against important tropes common to the mode of magical realism itself. Focusing on representations of women, Sancheti foregrounds how these works use the "magical" to push back against not only the "real" but also the patriarchal, but that pushback falls short of liberating the women characters within the works.

Chinelo Ezenwa examines the telling and retelling of the history of the colonization of Zimbabwe in Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions*. Ezenwa demonstrates that, by employing the common magical realist trope of telling and retelling the story of colonization many times and from many different perspectives, the novel can critique and subvert the colonial legacy, as well as give voice to subjects that have been traditionally excluded from hegemonic power.

Lieselot De Taeye's "Living Presence in Postcolonial Congo" compares the narrative role of ancestral spirits in two twentieth-century Congolese texts: Jacques Bergeyck's *Het stigma* and Sony Labou Tansi's *La vie et demie*. De Taeye's piece situates these texts within the political and historical context leading up to the Congolese independence movement. She explores how each writer works through the compli-

cated political situation in Congo in the wake of colonialism, and employs magical realist modes to negotiate the interplay between animist precolonial belief systems and colonial Christianity.

Ryan Milov-Córdoba's article centers on the *1001 Nights*. He compares four unique takes on the work and, in tracing the differences that each emphasizes within it, produces a constellation of different perspectives from which the *Nights* have been conceived and received in different cultural contexts. In so doing, Milov-Córdoba conducts a detailed history of the reception of one of the most well-known pieces of magical realist world literature.

- The last section of the issue, the Post-Scriptum, gathers a limited selection of responses to some of the articles in this issue, written by members of our research group. This welcomed collation of voices reflects only partially the variety and the number of discussions we have had since the 2020 CCLA conference panels that initiated the research group's work. With the inclusion of these responses, we wanted to
- 12** highlight the collaborative and inclusive aspect of working in the field of Comparative Literature and in the field of World Literature. Diversity and inclusion in literature are keys to a wider, better, greater, and more in-depth understanding of humanity. We understand post-magical realism as a representation of this wider, anticolonial, post-Westernized vision of what it means to write literature, make films, and create worlds, and of what fiction might become.

The aforementioned functioning of our research group also reflects its engagement with postcolonialism and decolonialism. Our model doesn't require a "head" or "chair," and "leaders" are temporary positions connected to specific work. We aim at a radically horizontal collaborative community, as we are interested in knowledge building and knowledge sharing, inspired by the precedents of Gilles Deleuze, Walter Mignolo, and Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons*. Master's students and tenured professors are welcomed equally, and contribute voluntarily, at their discretion, to the work of the group. Meeting topics are suggested by group members and led by members who volunteer to lead them. The editors of this issue got the ball rolling, and our colleagues have picked it up and keep the work we do alive. The research group has now been running for two consecutive years—a very long two years in pandemic time. This special issue is the culmination of the thinking we have done during this time. We invite you, the reader, to reach out to our research group members and fellow contributors to this issue, to discuss the themes and questions and ideas that we research and discuss together. We are passionate about the work we do, and we know others are too, so please write to us. This is an open invitation.

We all stand on the shoulders of others, not just giants of intellectual thought and of literature, but on the shoulders of colleagues, more and less established scholars, more and less recognized authors and artists, as well as those figures working in the background or behind the scenes who help out along the way, create or join discussions, organize conferences, panels, associations, work groups, meetings, funding,

journals, etc. We want to thank all the members of the Post-Magical Realist Worlds group, members of CCLA, and the CCLA itself for embracing our ideas and giving our research group a place.

WORKS CITED

- Bhabha, Homi K. *Nation and Narration*. Routledge, 1990.
- Carpentier, Alejo. "Marvelous Real." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke UP, 1995, pp. 75-88.
- Flores, Angel. "Magical Realism in Spanish America." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke UP, 1995, pp. 109-18.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." **13** *Social Text*, vol. 15, 1986, pp. 65-88.
- Perez, Richard, and Victoria Chevalier. *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. Granta Books, 1991.
- Warnes, Christopher. *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris, editors. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Duke UP, 1995.