Reframing (Post-)Magical Realist Celluloid: *Magicorealism* in Robert Rodriguez's *Spy Kids* Trilogy

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From literary adaptations to original narratives, magical realism has motivated long-running debates in contemporary film studies. Some critics, such as Maggie Ann Bowers and Gerret Rowlan, consider magical realism just a visual aesthetic within certain realistic films. In more recent years, though, this claim has been completely debunked by putting the spotlight not only on the avant-garde aesthetic that takes up the ideas of pioneers Roh or Carpentier, but the transgression and complexities that the geopolitical and cultural elements, as with their literary counterpart, have brought into (post-)magical realism and the Latin American tradition.

Following this trend, and drawing a parallel between magical realism and postmodern theories, Frederick Luis Aldama interrogates the concept of magical realism prompted by the "boom" writers by identifying contemporary magical realism as "*magicorealism*," an expression applied to ethnic writers and filmmakers of the late twentieth century, especially those coming from the Latinx sphere. This term is used to construct global narratives of resistance that, apart from making subaltern modes dominant and turning the "other" into the main subject, embrace their dialogical intersection with European/US narrative modes. In the case of Latinx studies, this postmodern conception of magical realism encompasses contemporary Latinx/Hispanic cinema, in which Robert Rodriguez's *Spy Kids* trilogy can be included. In this particular work, as I will argue in this article, the persistent presence of both sociopolitical Mexican and US references and a magical realist visual aesthetic brings these films to the aforementioned cinematic conception.

Elements of magical realism have been ever-present in Hispanic cinema over the past decades, as we can observe both in Guillermo del Toro's films such as *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and in more recent Latin American movies such as *Tigers Are Not Afraid* (2017) and *La Llorona* (2019). As Deborah Shaw

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states, this trend is intended to reach wider global audiences with its combination of realism, fantasy, and the supernatural. The ambivalence of Rodriguez's *Spy Kids* trilogy, however, emanates from the use of *magicorealism* as a commercial tool, suggesting an intentional blending between Mexican and Anglo-American cultural aspects and displaying a concomitance with the Indigenous-European transcultural essence of magical realism itself.

Chicano cinema used to have, and still maintains, the "battle against the Anglo oppressor" as one of its fiercest emblems. Nevertheless, Robert Rodriguez's films are exceptions to this trend, showing that Chicano identity is also the result of socio-historical fluctuations and embracing, thanks to the inclusion of magical realist elements, a transnational concept of the Latinx heritage onscreen. In this way, this article examines Rodriguez's *Spy Kids* trilogy from the point of view of one of the most influential and transnational manifestations in Latin American culture: magical realism. As I will further explore in this article, new trends as *magicorealism* help to create "new realities" that unify the two "Americas" to which Alejo Carpentier referred, and that can also be seen in the cinema of Rodriguez as well as in contemporary *Chicanismo*. Magical realism in Rodriguez's trilogy confers on the "other" the unequivocal possibility of being the subject, starting a dialogic conversation between the Hispanic and the Anglo elements within a family genre film production. Thus the intertwining of Latin American and Anglo-American narrative and visual resources permits Rodriguez's *Spy Kids* to translate some magical realist codes to a Hollywood genre that, until that moment, had strictly delved into the fantasy realm.

Development of the Magical Realism Concept

The oxymoronic term *magical realism* refers to the combination of realism and fantasy, both in literature and in the cinema or the plastic arts. This kind of fiction combines the realism and the fantastic such that the fantastic elements spring from the reality represented in the texts and it becomes substantially difficult to distinguish between real and non-real events. The mythical and the supernatural are integrated into the cognitive structure of reality without a direct correlation to the understanding of the characters. Magical realism, from its conception, aimed to create "new realities" or deal with existing ones from a perspective opposed to that of social realism or avant-garde literary techniques (Camayd-Freixas 33), and this is how it has been expanded up to now.

In the preface of his first novel, *El Reino de este mundo* (1949), Alejo Carpentier coined the term "*lo real maravilloso*" ("the Marvellous Real") as a narrative strategy born from the experience of the Americas, where the "marvellous real" was inherent not only to Haiti, geographical location of the novel, but also was extended to all of Latin America, where it was possible to find cultural and geographical phenomena intertwined in a natural, intrinsic way. What the author identified as marvellous

incorporated the hyperbolic, the overwhelming characteristics of the landscapes, the coexistence of various time periods within a single structure, and the cosmological and mystical ritual beliefs that bestowed a distinct approach upon the improbable, incredible, and miraculous. Carpentier concludes his essay with a commitment to the “marvellous real” as the only American mode of representation, in a manifest crosscultural aspiration. Magical realism, then, must be understood as an attitude towards reality that can be expressed either in a cultural or popular way, with an elaborate or primitive style and with defined or more open structures. That is why magical realist authors over the past decades have used history, legends, and other folk elements of certain cultures in which popular tradition abounds, as in the case of Latin America or the US Latinx tradition.

As Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris have aptly claimed, magical realism combines the real and the fantastic in such a way that magic seems to emanate organically from the ordinary, blurring the distinction between both terms. Either because of this improved version of reality, or given the intersection between magic and veracity, “magic seems to emerge almost imperceptibly from reality” (Parkinson Zamora and Faris 174), as if the magical realist author were selecting the exceptional aspects that are hidden in the Western imaginary, making them reliable. Although fantasy fiction also takes magical events for granted in a similar way to magical realism, magical-realist fiction emphasizes the mundane in order to fragment the hegemonic realistic narrative and thus render these elements as transgressions of realistic conventions, causing uncertainty in the reader/spectator. Due to its ability to subvert Western realist narratives, magical realism has been identified as an inherently postcolonial mode, which seeks to (re) address the cultural hierarchy imposed by the colonizer, reevaluating alternative or non-Western systems of thought and presenting them as correctives or supplements to the dominant world view (Parkinson Zamora and Faris 57). However, as we will explain, the interests of magical realism through the prism of postmodernism have led to substantial changes in its definition regarding the postcolonial viewpoint.

Magical Realism under the Auspices of Postmodernism

In *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism*, Kim Sasser recognizes that “a marked furtherance in magical realist theory occurs when critics begin to recognize the mode’s affinities with postmodernism” (9). This use of postmodernist techniques and concepts, together with a growing expansion of Latinx authors and directors who perceive magical realism from a more inclusive perspective, authorizes in this new trend any text containing not only a resistance to oppression, including a criticism of Western empiricism or capitalism in the global age, but also a celebration of the transnational cultural vibrancy that *Chicanismo* and Latin American culture have-

brought to the US cultural arena.

As early as 2005 in "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction," Wendy B. Faris had already exposed the crucial role that magical realism would play within postmodernism, highlighting "performativity, metafictionality, and shifting references" as some of the postmodern components inserted in magical realism (175-81). Nonetheless, what makes this contemporary aspect of the Latin American phenomenon worth noticing is its determination to display the suprarational to destabilize Western hegemony in postmodern terms. Within postmodern magical realist texts, we move from the postcolonial spectrum to the counter-hegemonic range. Although the resistance-oriented value of these texts is obvious, they are not focused exclusively on colonialist forces but rather on totalitarian regimes, thus blurring the colonizing/colonized binary and giving way to a more blended, crosscultural, and global vision.

Concerning the Hollywood approach to Latinx artistic referents, the insertion of postmodern artifacts into the magical realist display, such as parody, pastiche, intertextuality, or even distortion of time, provides a much more market-profitable film product for an audience attuned to these cinematic characteristics. For that reason, postmodernism emerges as a vital necessity for those filmmakers who want to share magical realist features onscreen in contemporary Hollywood cinema, whether in Latinx productions or not.

The reason why magical realism has been a crucial element in crosscultural literature and artistic works is appropriately summed up by Stephen Slemon, who argues that within magical realist texts we encounter a fierce battle between two opposing systems, each one working towards the creation of a fictional world different from the other. Given that the rules of both worlds are incompatible with each other, neither of them can fully materialize, and each of them remains suspended, trapped in a continuous dialectic with the "other" (Slemon 410). Thus, what magical realism achieves is a suspension between two discursive systems, which in turn approaches the old colonial subject—now transnational—suspended between two worlds or cultural systems.

On the other hand, we should question whether the concept of "magical realism" identifies a narrative subgenre, a style of narration, or a cultural and ethnic representation. We should even question the location of this phenomenon within a specific historical-cultural period such as postcolonialism or postmodernity, since it is plausible that magical realism transcends any kind of periodization. The status of magical realism, its global popularity, and the critical use of the term are subject to debate as magical realism represents a decolonizing style that allows new voices and traditions to be heard within the mainstream, while at the same time "it is denigrated by others as a commodifying kind of primitivism that […] relegates colonies and their traditions to the role of cute, exotic psychological fantasies" (Faris 101).

In "Magical Realism and Postmodernism," Theo L. D'haen celebrated magical realism "as a postmodern voice that destabilizes epistemic and ontological centers"

(191), identifying how magical realism appropriates dominant discourse techniques to duplicate the existing reality and thus create an alternative space. His philosophy, therefore, circulates throughout the postmodern theory of margin/centre destabilization. This aspect is one of the most interesting standpoints for analyzing the *Chicanismo* embedded in Robert Rodriguez's work, as he certainly uses Hispanic elements, such as magical realism, in order to create a third space capable of destabilizing both cultures. Departing from this postmodern idea that recognizes magical realist narrative as a representative of the (post-)capitalist society, D'haen relates postmodern magical realism with other current theories such as those of the "spectacle society" or the "hyperreal" (see Baudrillard; Debord). In these theories, the external and theatrical representation of our world today covers the effects of exploitation and oppression that capitalism exerts on people in the world. As D'haen explains, "it is precisely the notion of the ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place 'other' than 'the' or 'a' center, that seems […] an essential feature of that strain of postmodernism we call magic realism" (194).

Other scholars, such as Tamlyn Hosking, have analyzed magical realism from a crosscultural point of view, showing the peculiarities of the societies that produce the texts. From a contemporary theoretical point of view, magical realism is a crosscultural technique, insofar as it crosses a multitude of cultures without being specific to any one in particular. This global and transnational conception of the phenomenon of magical realism is related to the classification that Melissa J. Standley provides, in which we observe three types of magical realism within the contemporary global narrative: dialogical magical realism, which is represented by someone who does not participate in the culture that is shown, with Carpentier's depiction of Haitian culture in *The Kingdom of This World* as one of the leading examples; figurative magic realism, emerged in the heat of nationalist movements of the 1960s, in which authors reaffirm their feeling of cultural separation and nationalism in their texts, as seen in novels such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) or Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989); and postmodern magical realism, demonstrated in examples such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1982) or Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1995). This last permutation of magical realism, which Hosking considers a combination of the previous ones, presents a narrative that juxtaposes the "magical" and "non-magical" points of view within the same culture in order to destabilize the reader/spectator's consciousness.

Within the postmodernist parameters, and identifying (post-)magical realism with the new theoretical trends from Latinx/Chicano studies, the name of Frederick Luis Aldama stands out. Aldama departs from the postcolonial and ethnic assumptions of magical realism to then identify contemporary magical realism as "*magicorealism*," a concept ascribed to certain writers and filmmakers of the late twentieth century that leads to more global, more transnational, and less ideological-oriented works. This term is used in order to construct global narratives of resistance that make subaltern modes dominant, turning the "other" into a subject, but they do not exclude

the dialogical interplay with Western narrative modes. With its move from postcolonialism to postmodernism, *magicorealism* appropriates techniques of the dominant discourse to create an alternative world that could replace the existent reality. This fact is highly relevant in the filmography of Robert Rodriguez, especially within the *Spy Kids* trilogy, with the continuous presence of Anglo-American references, which somehow relocates these films from the traditional, primitive magical realism into a much more globalized understanding.

Magical realism, as mentioned above, is a concept that is not specifically located in a single culture. It is not surprising then that, in recent decades, magical realism has been considered a common denominator not only in Latin America but in the "Americas" as a whole. With this reasoning, Shannin Schroeder refutes the notion that defines magical realism in geohistorical terms since a comprehensive vision of this theory illustrates the traditions of the entire hemisphere, both due to its geography and shared literature, as well as its historical marginalization, as we can observe in Chicano and Latinx culture. In such a way, the origins of magical realism have an undeniable connection with the foundations of the Chicano theory. Beyond the mere primitive description, both manifestations rewrite their own history and the roots of their environment without neglecting the target culture, whose influence is equally powerful. In magical realism, as in *Chicanismo*, we witness a dialogue between universalism and the indigenous, the local and the foreign. Although magical realism is framed in terms of "Americanism," it has also been entrenched in European/Western culture.

The necessity of rewriting everything anew and of creating "its" America is the cultural and transnational genealogy that genuinely encompasses the agenda of the Latin American novel and, later on, that of magical realism and Chicano culture, creating a place where the Latin American and Latinx communities can be recognized through language, territory, beliefs, customs, and common history. However, certain scholars warn of the danger of joining magical realism and postmodernism without making a distinction between them. As Anne Hegerfeldt points out in her analysis, without a clear awareness of the tradition of the culture of origin, magical realism can act as a playful and irreverent artifact, where "postcolonial critique becomes pure postmodern playfulness, ex-centricity as a pose, where magic realism deteriorates into a cliché" (2). One of the precise critiques that Rodriguez's trilogy has dealt with is whether, indeed, the Latin and pre-Hispanic dimensions of his films are results of the commercial vision that the Hollywood industry has promoted of these pre-Hispanic cultures; or if, on the contrary, mainstream cinema is intended to approach Chicano culture from postmodernist paradigms. In other words, we can ask whether magical realism can be transferred to the big screen without being culturally compromised by the new artistic format to which it is directed.

Current film theories not only reject the idea that magical realism cannot adhere to the cinematographic realm, but also underline its importance within postmodernist film theory by affirming that for each formulaic and "exotic" magical-realist

text is another that challenges the viewer with its (re)vision of both dominant and marginal conventions (Aldama 10). Aldama exemplifies this with the examples of Bille August's *The House of the Spirits* (1993) or Alfonso Arau's *A Walk in the Clouds* (1995) and *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992), films that "exoticize" the idea of magical realism, and with Deepa Mehta's *Midnight's Children* (2012), Julie Dash's D*aughters of the Dust* (1991), or Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983) on the other hand. Robert Rodriguez's trilogy represents a balance between the commercial hybrid narrative fiction-based approach of the first group and the purely anthropological artifact of the second. By inserting magical realist motifs into his trilogy, Rodriguez presents a reality that equally exposes and criticizes a globalizing capitalism that turns violence and oppression of marginalized groups into a sort of spectacle. The insertion of several storytelling techniques and the blending of divergent cultural points of view throughout the trilogy destabilize the cinematic text and protect the viewer "from spectacular tricks to distract from the harsh reality of today's capital-imperialist oppression" (Aldama 43). The intention of *magicorealism* in Rodriguez's films is, in this way, to "show" the representation of the real, hosting a reality in which the narrative travels between the "real" and the "magical," between the Anglo-American and the pre-Hispanic culture in a cultural syncretism that evokes the *magicorealist* premise.

The *Spy Kids* Trilogy through a *Magicorealist* Lens

The *Spy Kids* trilogy narrates the adventures of the Cortez family in three films: *Spy Kids* (2001), *Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams* (2002), and *Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over* (2003). The trilogy stars the spies Gregorio Cortez[1] (Antonio Banderas), Ingrid Cortez (Carla Gugino), and their children Carmen (Alexa Vega) and Juni (Daryl Sabara), and tells the story of Gregorio and Ingrid, two retired super spies who take up a dangerous mission and are kidnapped by the evil Floop (Alan Cummings). After this event, their children Carmen and Juni discover the identity of their parents and embark on a dangerous adventure to rescue them. Following this first episode, *Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams* moves the action to a mysterious island where Carmen and Juni, who have already become spies for the OSS (Organization of Super Spies), will save humanity from a dangerous mad scientist, Dr. Romero (Steve Buscemi). In the third and final episode of this trilogy, *Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over*, Carmen is about to begin what will be her most important mission: inserting herself into the virtual reality of a video game and try to capture the Toymaker (Sylvester Stallone), an evil craftsman who plans to control kids through different game levels.

Roger Moore described the love story between Gregorio and Ingrid Cortez from the very first scene of *Spy Kids* as "a slip of magical realism told like a bedtime story." Indeed, it is not difficult to distinguish some *magicorealist* elements in some of

Robert Rodriguez's earlier films such as *Bedhead*, a short about a pre-adolescent girl with magical powers, and his fragment of *Four Rooms* (1995). A considerable number of scholarly works have linked Rodriguez's cinema to magical realism, as in "Border Crossings: Magical Realism in *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*" and in Jeremy Ricketts's "Robert Rodriguez's Magical *Corridos*: The *El Mariachi* Series and Latinos on Film," although the works that gained the highest critical impact in terms of its magical realistic content are the *Spy Kids* trilogy.

In the trilogy, we find a character certainly parallel to Rebeca, the protagonist of one of Rodriguez's first short films, *Bedhead*: the leading spy girl Carmen Cortez. Her extrasensory abilities, recently acquired upon entering the OSS, make Carmen an agent deserving of the highest honours in the organization, even going so far as to take over the direction of the children's section at the end of *Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams*. Throughout the trilogy we observe how she ascends socially by surrounding herself with such relevant characters in American culture as the governor of the state of Texas or the president of the nation. However, Carmen will fight not only to move up socially thanks to her "magical powers" but to do so without losing her Hispanic roots, a mission in which her parents Gregorio and Ingrid will be fully involved.

In the fictional world of *Spy Kids*, we find two domains of fantasy. On the one hand, we observe the fantasy world inhabited by villains, which is the children's sphere and the closest to any family-style production. On the other hand, we discover the world in which the Cortez family lives, which moves between the parameters of the real and the magical. As is typical of magical realism, strange and inexplicable events occur that are considered common and ordinary, so it is not surprising that the *Spy Kids* trilogy offers no explanation for their magical habitat or the sudden irruption of the protagonists in that fantasy world. As Alison Crawford illustrates, magical events in magical realism "are dealt with in a matter-of-fact way, grounded in a realist narrative, which is a hallmark of this type of fiction" (53).

The task of classifying magical realistic elements in a text is intricate and heterogeneous. However, there are some seminal characteristics that identify the magical realist mode, which can serve to guide us in the search for these elements in the *Spy Kids* saga and adapt them to the crosscultural trend that runs through contemporary Chicano and Latinx studies. Among these we find the irreducible element of magic contained in the given texts, the descriptions of magical events grounded in a phenomenal world, the difficulty of the readers/viewers reconciling the conflicting understanding of the events, the various settings or dimensions affecting the narrative, and the alteration of the accepted beliefs about time, space, and identity (Faris).

The irreducible element of magic, or phenomena that are somehow unexplainable within magical realist texts, reveals circumstances that cannot be explained according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated by Western empirical discourse. The explanation often involves detailed descriptions of phenomena that are not articulated in as much detail or are not fully integrated into the everyday

reality of traditions from other narratives such as the mythical, the religious, or the folkloric. What is key in this matter is that the element of magic is accepted as normal, even as routine. This fact facilitates the assimilation of extraordinary incidents to the structure of the realistic text and, consequently, encourages the reader/spectator to follow and accept what seems magical. For example, the characters usually act with anger or displeasure rather than showing surprise or amazement about the events that occur in these works.

In the case of Rodriguez's trilogy, we witness how the "magical" elements coming from the Hispanic culture intermingle with the Anglo-American environment that permeates the daily reality of the Cortez family. In *Spy Kids*, the fantastic elements highlighted by most of the film scholars have focused almost exclusively on the world of Floop (Alan Cummings), the villain. Nonetheless, magical elements do not come from this evil character but from the family environment where the Cortez family live. The family house, revealed in the very first scene, is built on a gigantic cliff, far from civilization and presents a pre-Columbian architectural style, with clear pre-Hispanic evocations. This environment changes radically in the following episodes of the trilogy. In the second film, the main characters move to Austin, Texas, a clearly urban and Anglo environment. Still, the house is the same as in the first episode. Hence, we can affirm that the original location of the Cortez dwelling is imaginary, or magical. Similarly, in *Spy Kids 2*, as Carmen and Juni travel to a mysterious island, they are amazed by how "wonderful" the place is, not by the various magical creatures that live there. In the third episode, on the other hand, the protagonists assimilate the physical transformation of their disabled grandfather into a superhero with mighty powers as a technological advance in the service of justice and not as a supernatural event. Therefore, we observe in *Spy Kids* magical elements that are not explained empirically throughout the trilogy and that do not arouse the amazement of the protagonists, since for them that magic is part of their daily lives.

The descriptions of the events given by postmodern magical realist texts also detail the strong presence of the phenomenal world. This particular feature values the place that "the real" occupies in magical realism, distinguishing it from fantasy or allegory. If traditional magical realism moved away from surrealism, it also did so from the genre of fantasy literature. The latter focuses on the hybridization of the supernatural and reality, emphasizing certain historical moments to problematize present dilemmas. On the other hand, the fantasy genre formulates a disruption of the established order, an invasion of the unacceptable within the parameters of everyday reality. However, in the texts in which we find doses of magical realism, the disruptions of the established order are intermittent, interspersed with the return to the world of social reality.

One significant aspect in the second part of the trilogy, for example, is the geospatial inclusion of a Mayan pyramid on the mysterious island, a fact that immediately places the viewer in a certain real place; in this case, in the ancient pre-Hispanic civilization set in current Mexico. On the other hand, we observe "magical" details that

arise from reality, such as the characterization of the environment of Uncle Machete, which in a quasi-"fantastic" way eats animal guts, intestines, and pig's hands. What could seem absolutely fantastic to Anglo viewers is not so unreal for Hispanic cultures, accustomed to cooking these types of foods. The film also inserts several sociopolitical comments in the virtual scenes of *Spy Kids 3-D*, which highlights the difficulty of entering and residing in the United States for the Latinx community. For example, one of the participants in the *Game Over* competition enters the game with a "gamer visa" to lift his family out of poverty, in a clear illusion to the Hispanic illegal immigrants in the United States. In this way, magical elements are textually grounded in a traditionally realistic way, sharing fictional space with concrete historical and cultural elements. Therefore, the inclusion of social issues such as immigration, gender issues, or the presence of Chicano myths like Gregorio Cortez distance the Cortez family from exclusively fantastic narratives.

By interrogating how the reader/spectator may constitute the magical realist texts in terms of critical reception, we find several difficulties confronting the many contradictions of the events that occur in the texts. The questioning of beliefs is central both in magical realist texts and cinematic works, as the viewer's "doubt" frequently emerges from the implicit clash of cultural systems within the narrative. In the case of the *Spy Kids* trilogy, this struggle stems from the correspondence between the Hispanic and the Anglo-American cultural system. In *Spy Kids*, the narrative shifts towards the belief in extrasensory phenomena that point to a Hispanic, or even pre-Hispanic, model of thought. Paradoxically, *magicorealist* events will be narrated from a Western perspective, specifically, under the visual aesthetic parameters of Hollywood cinema, a mode of narrating that traditionally excludes the Hispanic cultural mode in their cinematic works. Hence, the *Spy Kids* trilogy blurs the line that separates realism and fantasy in such a subtle way that it is often difficult to establish the boundaries between both aspects, thus confusing the viewer as to the phenomena that are occurring. For example, when Carmen and Juni escape from the shelter, the film takes us to a futuristic city. This city, whose urban characteristics bring it closer to the city of Austin, presents a striking peculiarity as all of its posters and labels are in Spanish. This fact, unnoticed by the protagonists, shows a "parallel" and transcultural reality of the real world in which Texas is increasingly being dominated by the Hispanic presence, showing not a clash of cultures but its full transculturalization. On the other hand, *Spy Kids 2* inserts some hybrid animals in its narrative, suggesting the "Latin American wonder" described by García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a characterization of the magical elements inherent in (pre-)Hispanic culture that, however, in this film is embodied through the science of Dr. Romero (Steve Buscemi). In this way, the film implies how Anglo culture welcomes and adopts the "magic" elements inherent in Hispanic culture.

It is also worth noting how magical realist texts refer to what is experienced with the proximity and incorporation of two dimensions: two divergent worlds, an "in-between" space, like the Chicano space, that creates uncertainty and doubt. The

protagonists are constantly caught between two worlds: the "real" and Floop's fantasy place in the first film, the mysterious island in the second, and the virtual world in the third episode. Therefore, alternative dimensions are never detached from the *Spy Kids* trilogy. However, it is difficult to discern which of the two realities is the Hispanic dimension and which is the Anglo one, since both dimensions remain constantly intertwined throughout the trilogy, either through its setting (the house of the Cortez family), the characters (Grandfather Valentin or Carmen Cortez) or audiovisual details such as the use of colours , musical hybridity, or the use of Spanish occasionally written in labels. Perhaps the third episode is the most representative in terms of this characteristic of the double dimension, since the protagonists do not physically move to any other place, as they did in the first two episodes. Conversely, in *Spy Kids 3-D*, Carmen and Juni maintain their physical selves in the real world while their mental selves navigate the Toymaker's dimension in the game. Therefore, we observe how both Carmen and Juni exemplify a journey through separated dimensional spheres that characterizes all magical-realist works.

The logical notions of identity, space, and time are also altered in magical realist texts. Nevertheless, magical realism reorients not only our time-space beliefs but also our perception of identity, something closely linked to Chicano culture. The multilayered nature of the narrative and the cultural hybridization that characterizes magical realism extends to the protagonists of the trilogy, who tend toward radical multiplicity. Thus, identity changes are a constant throughout Rodriguez's three episodes. Uncle Félix (Cheech Marin) is not the uncle of Carmen and Juni, but a secret agent who is in charge of safeguarding the safety of the family. His "real" identity, though, will eventually be questioned when he agrees to be part of the Cortez family. Surprisingly enough, Uncle Machete, who is the true uncle of the protagonists, hides his identity to avoid at all costs that his nephews find their parents and thus have to face their family problems. Following this line, Gregorio Cortez (Antonio Banderas) changes his personality at the beginning of each mission after donning a tiny mustache, which parodies the typical characterizations of the Latin Lover from the early days of cinema. His father-in-law, Abuelo Valentín (Ricardo Montalbán), goes from being physically disabled to becoming the superhero of the last episode, constantly changing his own identity as a human/machine.

Cause-and-effect illusions are further altered in the *Spy Kids* series. The union between the scenes and the actions that take place in them does not need to be explicitly explained to the viewers for us to attribute causal connections. In other words, the narratives do not depend on our ability to relate cause and effect, but they also "train" us to unite them, predisposing the viewer in advance (Kim 25). Hence, Rodriguez's films play with the viewers' expectations of cause and effect to offer alternative relationships. Kim states that "despite the flawed logic of the plots of many of the children's films, [adults] are interested in identifying the causes for the antagonist's evildoing" (26), unlike children, who in most cases only notice the fantasy worlds that Rodriguez presents in the trilogy. Floop in *Spy Kids* just wants to make a

truly innovative and original children's program; Gary and Gerti Giggles in *Spy Kids 2* seek to claim the attention and approval of their father; and the Toymaker in *Spy Kids 3-D* claims the forgiveness of adults and children after capturing and locking up multitudes of kids against their will inside a videogame. Therefore, this trilogy demonstrates that Rodriguez effectively combines a narrative concerned with the "real" events that affect the adult population and another "fantastic" or "magical" parallel narrative that addresses the youngest spectators. This is a notable trend in animation nowadays, as is seen in numerous Pixar and DreamWorks films. However, what makes this trilogy different from other kid-oriented cinematic works is the insertion of Latinx and Chicano sociopolitical references that directly affect this community.

Two fundamental elements of magical realism—the use of science in magical realist narratives, and transculturality—are present in Rodriguez's trilogy. In the first place, and conceived as one of the antonyms of magical reality, science has a privileged place in the work of Gabriel García Márquez, for example. For all these reasons, and although the review of science in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has not received as exhaustive critical attention as that linked to other issues, the figure of José Arcadio Buendía and his search for scientific knowledge has attracted the attention of scholars such as Michael Boccia, who argues that

> there is magic in the simple technology of the inexplicable. So the magic of technology may range from an ice-making machine to a flying carpet. Even a simple magnet may serve to demonstrate the fine line between magic and technology [...] Magic and science are both explanations of some unknown natural phenomenon. And we should not forget that the history of science is little more than each generation disproving the scientific truths of the past. (qtd. in Schroeder 29)

In the case of Rodriguez's trilogy, we observe notable features of scientificity, which is absent from most magical realist cinematic works. For example, in *Spy Kids* the main narrative plot delves into a scientific experiment carried out by Gregorio Cortez: the making of a tiny brain that globally allows the user to control the minds of all children on Earth. In the next episode, *Spy Kids 2: Island of Lost Dreams*, science is even more obvious, if possible, with the presence of the scientist Romero, a "Dr. Moreau"-esque figure who experiments with genetic hybridization between different animals. Finally, in *Spy Kids 3D: Game Over*, science is transformed into a technological and three-dimensional experience that inserts the protagonists into a video game. All of these examples bring Rodriguez's work closer to its postmodern and innovative conception of cinema.

Concerning the transcultural aspects that underpin magical realism, it is undeniable that the blending of cultures is one of its most prototypical features, both in its literal and historical sense. For example, the alternative worlds in works such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* serve to counteract the views imposed by the imperialists on the colonies. Among those points of view, we find some western dichotomies that were introduced by European settlers, such as the idea that culture is separate from nature (Minkin 7). For centuries, gods and mythological monsters centered the

understanding of, and our place in, the universe. In our days, however, technology has reached the point at which it competes with our myths to have the greatest power over our knowledge and finally, our reality. *Magicorealist* texts in the postmodern era, therefore, are capable of simultaneously distancing themselves and accepting pre-scientific and technological points of view simultaneously, as witnessed in the case of the *Spy Kids* trilogy. Technology, therefore, is not only present in the films, but is also a substantial part of the lives of the protagonists.

In *Spy Kids* both adults and children live surrounded by technological devices, "gadgets" that are used in each of their various missions. Uncle Machete is a renowned expert and inventor of technological gadgets, and Carmen and Juni's grandfather, Valentín, uses the latest cybernetic advances to regain his mobility. For all this, we can see that the magical realism motifs of the *Spy Kids* trilogy combine and endorse the pre-scientific point of view (the Hispanic) at the same time that the work is permeated with technological elements (the Anglo-American).

Chicanismo as a concept, part of the premise of hybridization between Mexican and Anglo-American cultures, for which, in a way, it shows a concomitance with magical realism, the result of Indigenous-European transculturalism. As noted above, magical realism tried to create "new realities" that would unify those two "Americas" and, as we observe in Rodriguez's cinema, this is what *Chicanismo* and Latinx studies in general currently seek within American popular culture in their transnational ambition. In this way, magical realism gives Rodriguez's cinema the unequivocal possibility to the "other" of being the subject, initiating a dialogical game between the Hispanic and the Anglo-American within the coordinates of family-oriented cinema. Likewise, the fact that a movement that emerged in the 1940s is so relevant in this era of globalization and transnationalism and its union with Chicano cinema leads us to ask ourselves the following questions. First of all, magical realism, like contemporary *Chicanismo*, does not evade social elements; rather, it allows the integration of other voices so that the true identity arises from the hybridization. Within the (post-)magical realism trend, in a similar way to what is placed in Rodriguez's trilogy, a battle takes place between two opposites with rules that are "incompatible" with each other that finally end up intertwining.

On the other hand, both magical realism (post-capitalism, unreality) and the *Spy Kids* trilogy (visual strategies such as 3-D or virtual reality) appropriate the techniques of the dominant discourse, discarding both mimesis and nostalgic primitivism, giving rise to a syncretic and crosscultural discourse. For this, *magicorealism* uses some elements that we glimpse in Rodriguez's trilogy, such as the description of phenomena considered "magical" far from the Western empirical conception, the insertion of the phenomenological world into that "fantastic" world, the contradiction of events—in this case at a cultural level, the incorporation of two cultural dimensions or a "dual" dimension, and finally, the alteration of identity coordinates. Thus, it can be affirmed that in the "magical" world of the *Spy Kids* trilogy, the Chicano (transcultural) identity of its protagonists, the Cortez family, is distinguished by its

insertion into magicorealist postulates.

Conclusion

Since its first manifestation in Latin American literature, the artistic movement known as "magical realism" has not ceased to provoke debates about its penetration into contemporary culture. Summoning both detractors and defenders in the effort to define and establish the scope of its magnitude, in recent decades its globalizing and crosscultural orientation has made it evolve towards a more integrative trend, uniting antagonistic concepts such as the indigenous and the universal, the telluric and cosmopolitan, among others. This makes (post-)magical realism and other variants more focused on ethnicity such as *magicorealism*, an appropriate framework for analyzing Chicano works such as Robert Rodriguez's *Spy Kids* trilogy, in which Mexican and Anglo-American cinematic traits maintain a heterogeneous correlation, anchoring social issues that attach both cultures to the *magicorealist* spectrum . The *Spy Kids* trilogy elaborates a political fable in which the interpretation of magical realism is oriented toward a self-conscious appropriation of fantasy, family-oriented film codes. Apart from gathering most of these generic conventions, *Spy Kids* enhances the presence of (post-)magical realism by conferring the films a pre-Hispanic, Latin American aesthetic associated with the Cortez family and the locations that surround the main characters. The cultural legacy that constitutes the magical realist milestones in the trilogy emerges as a symbolic counternarrative that intends to expand the transnational extent of Robert Rodriguez's films.

Note

1. See the evident correspondence with the Chicano folklore hero Gregorio Cortez, the leader of one of the cornerstones of Chicano literature, in *Americo Paredes's With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958) and Robert M. Young's film *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1982).

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