



Magic(al) realism

Maggie Ann Bowers.

THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

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MAGIC(AL) REALISM

Maggie Ann Bowers

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2004 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX 14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge

270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

Transferred to Digital Printing 2005

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Typeset in Adobe Garamond and Scala Sans by
Keystroke, Jacaranda Lodge, Wolverhampton

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Bowers, Maggie Ann.

Magic(al) realism / Maggie Ann Bowers.— 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Magic realism (Art) 2. Arts, Modern—20th century. I. Title.

NX456.5.M3B68 2004

700'.41163—dc22

2004004475

ISBN 0-415-26853-2 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-26854-0 (pbk)

To the memory of D. W. Jefferson

CONTENTS

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE	viii
PREFACE	ix
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	x
Introduction	1
1 Origins of Magic(al) Realism	8
2 Delimiting the Terms	20
3 Locations of Magic(al) Realism	32
4 Transgressive Variants of Magical Realism	66
5 Cross-cultural Variants of Magical Realism	83
6 Magic(al) Realism and Cultural Production	103
7 The Future of Magic(al) Realism	121
GLOSSARY	129
BIBLIOGRAPHY	134
INDEX	143

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary structures.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

PREFACE

The writing of this book was motivated by the lack of an accessible English language guide to the confusing and often confused terms associated with magic(al) realism. The aim of this study is to guide the non-expert through the minefield of terms, to identify the origins of the terms and concepts in art, literature and film and to introduce readers to a range of innovative and engaging fiction. It differentiates the concept from other terms and genres, gives an overview of the geographical and cultural range of the fiction and explains the variants that have been identified by critics. Finally, it considers the future of the term in relation to postcolonial criticism and provides a useful bibliography and glossary.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In completing this book, I wish to thank the editors John Drakakis and Liz Thompson for their comments and encouragement. Thanks are also due for the expert advice of Monica Kendall, Katrien Vloeberghs, Rita de Maeseneer and Wendy Faris. As ever, I am grateful for the years of support and invaluable advice from Lyn Innes and Joris Duytschaever. Thanks also to my colleagues in the Postcolonial Research Group and the Department of Germanic Literature and Languages of the University of Antwerp for their friendship and support. The author gratefully acknowledges support from the University of Antwerp NOI research fund, Antwerpen 2000. I am forever indebted to my loving and patient family whose interest in the book kept me motivated even through piles of nappies and long sleepless nights.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, the terms 'magic realism', 'magical realism' and 'marvellous realism' have become both highly fashionable and highly derided. On the face of it, they are oxymorons describing the forced relationship of irreconcilable terms. It is in fact the inherent inclusion of contradictory elements that has made and sustained the usefulness and popularity of the concepts to which the terms refer. In recent years the term 'magical realism' has become the most popularly used one of the three terms, referring to a particular narrative mode. What the narrative mode offers is a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of Western philosophy, expressed in many postcolonial and non-Western works of contemporary fiction by, most famously, writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie. It is this aspect that has made it most pertinent to late twentieth-century literature. However, the widespread use of the term among critics has brought with it its own problems. The popularity of such writing with the reading public has never been higher, but writers and critics are concerned that the terms are being reduced to vague clichés. Writers have been distancing themselves from the term whilst their publishers have increasingly used the terms to describe their works for marketing purposes. This book aims to provide a means to understand the origins of these terms, their differing usages, and

provides a way for the reader to gain an understanding of the reasons behind the variety of strong reactions both for and against their use.

The one thing that the majority of critical works about the related terms 'magic realism', 'magical realism' and 'marvellous realism' agree upon is that these terms are notoriously difficult to define. This book offers a path through the critical minefield surrounding the terms as they are applicable to art, literature, film and television. It follows their history from the 1920s to the present day: from early twentieth-century German Art criticism to international contemporary literary criticism.

One of the main sources of confusion surrounding the terms is the lack of accuracy of their application. Each variation of the term has developed in specific and different contexts and yet they have become mistakenly interchangeable in critical usage. They have also gone through many variations of translation: the terms originated from the German *Magischer Realismus* which travelled and was translated into the Dutch *magisch-realisme*, the English 'magic realism' and eventually the Spanish *realismo mágico*. After its introduction, the term *lo real maravilloso* was translated from Spanish into both the terms 'marvellous realism' and 'marvellous reality'. Later again, the Spanish term *realismo mágico* was translated also to 'magical realism' and occasionally 'magico realism'. With each translation the connections between the terms and their origins become blurred and confused. However, it is possible to trace these origins and this is the subject of Chapter 1. The first of the terms, *Magischer Realismus* or magic realism, was coined in Germany in the 1920s in relation to the painting of the Weimar Republic that tried to capture the mystery of life behind the surface reality. The second of the terms, *lo real maravilloso* or marvellous realism, was introduced in Latin America during the 1940s as an expression of the mixture of realist and magical views of life in the context of the differing cultures of Latin America expressed through its art and literature. The third term, *realismo mágico* or magical realism was introduced in the 1950s in relation to Latin American fiction, but has since been adopted as the main term used to refer to all narrative fiction that includes magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative, whereby, 'the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter; and everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism' (Zamora and Faris 1995: 3).

'Magic realism' or 'magical realism' are terms which many people have heard and yet very few readers have a clear idea of what they may include and imply. Much of the confusion concerning their meaning has occurred due to the conflation of criticism on 'magic realist' art and literature and that of 'magical realist' fiction. Although they have many features in common, the two terms refer to subtly different characteristics and influences. What follows aims to distinguish and disentangle these critical terms so that their meaning is clarified and their usage is meaningful. This book will distinguish between 'magic realism' as the concept of the 'mystery [that] does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it' (Roh 1995: 15) and 'magical realism' that is understood, in Salman Rushdie's words, as the 'commingling of the improbable and the mundane' (1982: 9).

For the purposes of discussing these works of art and literature where they have features in common the terms will be conflated in this book under the catch-all term of 'magic(al) realism'. The terms 'magic realism', 'magical realism' and 'marvellous realism' will also be used specifically to discuss their separate critical histories.

Critics still debate whether the terms refer to modes, genres or forms of writing, or simply cultural concepts. In fact, they are discussed most frequently in their widest senses as concepts of reality. Since the introduction in the 1950s of the terms 'marvellous realism' and 'magical realism' in relation to literature, critics have attempted to identify those aspects that define this type of fiction. Due to the variety of applications of these terms and their changing meanings, critics have found that it is difficult to consider them in terms of one unifying genre, but rather that they constitute particular narrative modes. The distinguishing feature of 'marvellous realism', for instance, is that its fiction brings together the seemingly opposed perspectives of a pragmatic, practical and tangible approach to reality and an acceptance of magic and superstition into the context of the same novel.

'Magical realism', which of all the terms has had the most critical consideration, relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings. For this reason it is often considered to be related to, or even a version of literary realism.

Its distinguishing feature from literary realism is that it fuses the two opposing aspects of the oxymoron (the magical and the realist) together

to form one new perspective. Because it breaks down the distinction between the usually opposing terms of the magical and the realist, magical realism is often considered to be a disruptive narrative mode. For this reason it is considered that 'magical realism is a mode suited to exploring . . . and transgressing . . . boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic' (Zamora and Faris 1995: 5). The magical realist narrative mode is also considered by contemporary magical realist critics such as Amaryll Chanady to be a tolerant and accepting type of fiction. As Chanady explains, this narrative point of view relies upon an 'absence of obvious judgements about the veracity of the events and the authenticity of the world view expressed by characters in the text' (1985: 30). One of the unique features of magical realism is its reliance upon the reader to follow the example of the narrator in accepting both realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level. It relies upon the full acceptance of the veracity of the fiction during the reading experience, no matter how different this perspective may be to the reader's non-reading opinions and judgements.

Magical realism has become a popular narrative mode because it offers to the writer wishing to write against totalitarian regimes a means to attack the definitions and assumptions which support such systems (e.g. colonialism) by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely. As the postcolonial critic Brenda Cooper notes, 'Magical realism at its best opposes fundamentalism and purity; it is at odds with racism, ethnicity and the quest for tap roots, origins and homogeneity' (1998: 22). This is the key to its recent popularity as a mode of fiction, particularly in Latin America and the postcolonial English-speaking world.

Rather than being a recent phenomenon that most people associate with the emergence of Latin American literature, the history of magic(al) realism stretches back to the early 1920s. Although the terms have gone through many and often radical changes of meaning, the resilience of the terms lies in their usefulness to describe a particular attitude to non-scientific and non-pragmatic beliefs in a world which is universally influenced by science and pragmatism. However, varying attitudes to the concept of magic produce a wide variety of magical realist and magic realist works. Magic and the magical are constructs created in particular cultural contexts. It follows that magic realism and magical realism have

as many forms of magic and the magical in them as the number of cultural contexts in which these works are produced throughout the world. In magic realist and magical realist works of art 'magic' can be a synonym for mystery, an extraordinary happening, or the supernatural and can be influenced by European Christianity as much as by, for instance, Native American indigenous beliefs.

It is typical for books and essays on magic(al) realism to begin by stating that the concept and its history are too complex to be able to provide a definition. Most critics settle for a working definition outlined by a list of properties which, when included in a text, may be covered by the umbrella of the term. The purpose of this book is to provide an understanding of how these various working definitions are related, what the origins of the terms were and what does and does not constitute magic realism and magical realism. The aim of this analysis will be to produce a wider definition of the concept with which to understand the subtler differences of these variations of the concept it has come to encompass.

Chapter 1 is a guide to the origins and development of the terms from the Weimar Republic of Germany of the 1920s, to the 1940s and 1950s in Latin America and finally to the last three decades of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world. By following the developments of the terms chronologically, this chapter provides a way to understand their often confusingly different applications and nuances in relation to each other. Chapter 2 untangles the confusions surrounding the terms further by distinguishing other literary and artistic movements such as realism, surrealism, the fantastic and science fiction from magic(al) realism.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 provide a guide to the variations of magical realist writing and the locations and circumstances in which they developed. These chapters will make particular reference to and analysis of important magical realist novels by writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Günter Grass and Toni Morrison. Chapter 3 identifies and explains the development of magical realist writing in its various locations throughout the world including descriptions of their political, historical and artistic contexts. The chapter is divided into three sections dedicated to the locations of Latin America, the English-speaking world and mainland Europe. Chapters 4 and 5 continue the analysis of differing types of magical realist fiction and their relationship to various

contemporary approaches of literary criticism. These chapters identify the importance of concepts such as transgression and the carnivalesque, postcolonialism, cross-culturalism, postmodernism and ontology to magical realism and the manner in which these concepts interrelate in magical realist writing. They continue the analysis from Chapter 3 of the works of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Isabel Allende and Toni Morrison. Chapter 6 outlines the occurrence of magic realism and magical realism in other art forms such as painting, children's culture and film. It provides a detailed analysis of magic realism in the painting of the Weimar Republic and how this form of painting has been associated with hyper-realist painters in North America in the second half of the twentieth century, such as Alex Colville and Edward Hopper. The painting of Frida Kahlo will also be examined as an example of cross-over art between European magic realism and the marvellous and magical realism of mid-twentieth century Latin America. This chapter will also consider the close relationship of magic and reality in children's culture and its similarities in attitudes to magical realist writing and film. In this chapter the magical realism of films such as Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* (1987) and Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999) will also be examined as a separate category from magical realist fiction in recognition of its relationship to both narrative fiction and pictorial art.

The final chapter brings together debates about the future and the appropriateness of magical realism in relation to postcolonialism and the cultural contexts in which these fictions are created. This chapter focuses on the problem that many readers of magical realism do not come from the same cultural context as that of the writer or of the text and therefore have a different understanding of what constitutes reality and the magical. In this chapter questions will be asked such as whether readers can really suspend their own judgements whilst reading a magical realist novel from another culture, and whether a Western reader can read and accept the opposing assumptions of a non-Western novel without reverting to assumptions about the superiority of their own Western and possibly colonialist perspective. Ultimately, this chapter will consider the future of magical realism and will attempt to assess the usefulness of the terms in relation to contemporary cultural production.

This book has been written in order to provide a guide to the range of ideas concerning magic(al) realism and to explain their relationship to each other, rather than to provide a limiting definition of the term. It also points to the ways in which magic(al) realism can be a highly appropriate and significant concept for cultural production created in the context of increasing heterogeneity and cross-culturalism at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

1

ORIGINS OF MAGIC(AL) REALISM

The history of magic(al) realism, that is, of the related terms of magic realism, magical realism and marvellous realism, is a complicated story spanning eight decades with three principal turning points and many characters. The first period is set in Germany in the 1920s, the second period in Central America in the 1940s and the third period, beginning in 1955 in Latin America, continues internationally to this day. All these periods are linked by literary and artistic figures whose works spread the influence of magic(al) realism around Europe, from Europe to Latin America, and from Latin America to the rest of the world. The key figures in the development of the term are the German art critic Franz Roh best known for his work in the 1920s, the mid-twentieth-century Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, the Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli from the 1920s and 1930s, the mid-twentieth-century Latin American literary critic Angel Flores and the late twentieth-century Latin American novelist Gabriel García Márquez.

Many people have been associated with the development of magic(al) realism in its recognized forms of post-expressionist painting from 1920s Germany and modernist and postmodernist modes of writing from Europe in the early twentieth century, and Latin America and the

English-speaking world in the second half of the twentieth century. Although it is now most famously associated with Latin America, many of its influences can be traced to European literature, particularly of the modernist period at the beginning of the twentieth century. Magic realist painting shares with modernism an attempt to find a new way of expressing a deeper understanding of reality witnessed by the artist and writer through experimentation with painting and narrative techniques. It, for instance, rejected previous styles to create a clarity and smoothness of the picture that was an amalgamation of the influences of photography and Renaissance art. Magic(al) realist writing, moreover, has become associated with the modernist techniques of the disruption of linear narrative time and the questioning of the notion of history.

Magic(al) realism is a contested term primarily because the majority of critics increase the confusion surrounding its history by basing their consideration of the term on one of its explanations rather than acknowledging the full complexity of its origins. For this reason the critic Roberto González Echevarría finds it difficult to validate a 'true history' of the concept (1977: 112). The American critic Seymour Menton is one of the few who do attempt to unravel its past. The Appendix to his book *Historia verdadera del realismo mágico* (The True History of Magic Realism) is a chronology of the term, and its sub-title reveals the irony of the book's title: Menton heads the Appendix with a series of queried dates that have all been claimed to be the original date of the coining of the term: '1925, 1924, 1923, 1922?' (1998: 209).

The consensus amongst the majority of contemporary critics, such as Amaryll Chanady, Seymour Menton, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris, is that the German art critic Franz Roh (1890–1965) introduced the term to refer to a new form of post-expressionist painting during the Weimar Republic. In his 1925 book *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Post-expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Most Recent European Painting) he coined the term that is translated as 'magic realism' to define a form of painting that differs greatly from its predecessor (expressionist art) in its attention to accurate detail, a smooth photograph-like clarity of picture and the representation of the mystical non-material aspects of reality. Roh identified more than fifteen painters active in Germany at his time of writing to exemplify the form, including Otto Dix, Max Ernst,

Alexander Kanoldt, George Grosz and Georg Schrimpf. Their paintings differ greatly from each other. Some magic realist paintings, such as those by Otto Dix and George Grosz, verge on grotesque caricature. The bodies of the subjects of their paintings are disproportionately small in comparison to their emphasized faces. In Otto Dix's *Match Seller I* (1920) an amputee with a face the size of his body and words written from his mouth cartoon-style sits on a pavement and is urinated on by a dog. George Grosz's *Gray Day* (1921) shows an impossibly round-headed businessman with crossed eyes traversing an industrial landscape in the opposite direction to a hunch-backed soldier with a large head and hands. Both painters show a disregard for traditional and realistic perspective. In *The Match Seller I* the passers-by appear to be falling over due to the strange angle at which their legs are painted while the soldier in *Gray Day* appears to be walking in mid-air due to the lack of perspective of the background walls and buildings. Other magic realist paintings, such as the calm, realistic still-lives by Alexander Kanoldt, are less obviously 'magical'. They focus on traditional still-life subjects such as, for instance, a potted-palm tree on a side table next to a bottle and small tray in *Still Life II* (1926). All the objects are given equal importance in the composition. The focus of attention is drawn as much to the heavy backcloth as it is to the palm since both are depicted with similar depth of shading. The clarity of the objects in the picture and the lack of emphasis of any one object provide the distinctive 'magical' aspect of this painting. Yet to Roh the magical aspect of this art was not of a religious nor of the 'witch and wizard' kind but was the 'magic of being' which celebrated the 'world's rational organization' (Guenther 1995: 35). The art historian Irene Guenther succinctly notes: 'The juxtaposition of "magic" and "realism" reflected . . . the monstrous and marvellous *Unheimlichkeit* [uncanniness] within human beings and inherent in their modern technological surroundings' (1995: 36). This form of magic was partly influenced by the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud and by the earlier paintings of Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) of the Italian '*arte metafisica*' movement who shared with the German magic realists the severe representation of objects from unfamiliar angles (ibid.: 38). There are also claims by critics such as Jean Pierre Durix that the director of the Museum of Art in Mannheim in the early 1920s, G. F. Hartlaub, coined the term in relation to an exhibition of paintings by Max Beckmann that he

organized in 1923 (1998: 103). However, as Hartlaub abandoned the term 'magic realism' in preference to '*neue Sachlichkeit*' (new objectivity) before an exhibition in 1926 of the same artists whom Roh identified as magic realists, the development of the term, if not the coining of it, appears to rest with Roh. Roh also abandoned the term several years later when he recognized that Hartlaub's term 'new objectivity' had endured longer and had more currency amongst the artistic community (Crockett 1999: 3). All things considered, despite the need felt by some critics to identify a specific originator of the term, the fact that the term was coined around the early 1920s in relation to a particular group of painters based in Germany, sharing a similar vision, is adequate to provide the necessary understanding of the context of its creation.

The historical context in which magic realist painting developed was that of the unstable German Weimar Republic during the period 1919–23. This era followed the German defeat in the First World War and the abdication and flight into exile of the Kaiser in 1918. It was a period of political fragility when the vacuum of power that was created following the abdication of the Kaiser was fought over by right-wing and left-wing revolutionary groups, including the National Socialist German Worker's Party of Adolf Hitler, founded in 1920. It was an era of political violence (the Minister for Reconstruction was assassinated in 1922) and extreme economic difficulty due to the destruction of the economy of Germany by the war and the demands for reparation by their victors (Davies 1996: 941–2). High inflation and separatist and revolutionary activity created national anxiety that was little tempered by the rule of a weak coalition government (Michalski 1994: 7). Democratically distanced from the rest of Europe and caught between the demolition of their old world and the uncertainty of the future, a desire for '*Sachlichkeit*' (matter-of-factness) was the growing focus of the nation (ibid.: 8). The art historian Sergiusz Michalski summarizes the mood of the time and its influence on magic realist painting in his thorough study of art in the Weimar Republic, stating: 'Ultimately, it was a reflection of German society at that time, torn between a desire for and simultaneous fear of unconditional modernity, between sober, objective rationality and residues of Expressionist and rationalist irrationalities' (ibid.: 13). The premise behind Roh's analytical and theoretical work on magic realism, with which he attempted to define the predominant art movement in the

Weimar Republic, was the need to identify one characteristic different from those of the influential movements of expressionism, such as the painting of Vincent Van Gogh, and surrealism, such as the painting of Salvador Dalí. In fact, he constructed a list of twenty-two characteristics that differentiated magic realism from expressionism in his 1925 book. These included the expressionist warmth of the colours and rough, thick texture of the paint surface, the emphasis of the painting process and the spontaneous effect of the expressionists as opposed to the smooth, carefully constructed, cool photographic quality of magic realist painting. Roh considered magic realism to be related to, but distinctive from, surrealism due to magic realism's focus on the material object and the actual existence of things in the world, as opposed to the more cerebral and psychological reality explored by the surrealists. These distinctions will be examined further in the following chapter in which magic realism is distinguished from other art movements and genres.

For Roh, the most important aspect of magic realist painting was that the mystery of the concrete object needed to be caught through painting realistically: 'the thing, the object, must be formed anew' (1995: 113). By doing so, Roh hoped to encourage the artist to take the psychoanalytical influences of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung from surrealism and to combine them with an endeavour to represent the object clearly with all its 'wondrous meaning'. The surrealists had been greatly influenced by the revolutionary explorations of the human mind by Freud and Jung. Their explanations of the subconscious and unconscious mind's influence over the actions, thoughts and particularly the dreams of people had led the surrealists to consider the inadequacy of art that attempted to realistically present the exterior and material world without expressing the influence of the inner-life on it. Freud's work on the interpretation of dreams, published at the turn of the century, had a particularly strong influence on the surrealists. In his study of surrealism Wallace Fowlie explains that, following the influence of Freud and Jung on them, the surrealists considered that 'conscious states of man's being are not sufficient to explain him to himself and others' (1960: 16). For Roh, magic realist painting needed to incorporate these ideas about the interior life of humans into painting whilst expressing it through depictions of the material world. Roh considered the mystery of life and the complexities of the inner-life of humans to be perceivable through the close observation

of objects. He called on artists to act upon his discovery that 'For the new art, it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, *the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world*' (Roh 1995: 24).

Much of the confusion concerning magic realism arises from the fact that it was contemporary with surrealism. Surrealist manifestos were written in 1924 and 1930, and some claim it is a branch of this art movement. There are similarities between the two movements, and it is important to note that at a later date magic(al) realist writers, particularly Alejo Carpentier, were influenced by both Roh and the surrealists. The similarities are significant, not least the surrealists' desire to draw out the hidden psychic aspects of life into art, their desire for newness following war, and their attempts to harmonize contradictions and paradoxes. These will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However, the theorists of both surrealism and Roh's magic realism emphasized the differences of their artistic movements in an attempt to define them as distinct.

This initial form of magic realist painting was not confined to Germany: its influence spread so that similar images could be seen in France, Holland and Italy. Later still, following the influence of an exhibition of art by German magic realist painters in New York in 1931, an exhibition called 'American Realists and Magic Realists' (1943) even identified the hyper-realist American painter Edward Hopper (1882–1967) who is famous for his smooth and photographic style and quiet, city-scapes, as an exponent of magic realist art (Menton 1998: 219–220).

The influence of Roh's term 'magic realism' and its theoretical implications had even greater influence than that of the painting, with two particularly notable consequences. First, the Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli (1878–1960), influenced initially by surrealism and then by German magic realism at the time of Mussolini's fascist rule in Italy, founded the bilingual magazine *900.Novecento* in 1926. It was written in French and Italian and published magic realist writing and criticism (Menton 1998: 212). His idea of magic realism coincided for the most part with that of Roh; Robert Dombroski in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* notes that Bontempelli sought to present 'the mysterious and fantastic quality of reality' (1996: 522). He differed from Roh in that he applied these thoughts to writing and not to pictorial art. Also, Bontempelli was influenced by fascism and wanted magic realist writing

to provide means to inspire the Italian nation and to make Italian culture more international in outlook. As Dombroski notes, he defined the function of literature as a means to create a collective consciousness by 'opening new mythical and magical perspectives on reality' (1996: 522). His writing was sometimes more fantastical than magic(al) realist and was often close to the surreal, but he has been cited as the first magic realist creative writer, and the fact that his magazine was bilingual meant that its influence was Europe-wide. For instance, his work influenced the Flemish writers Johan Daisne and Hubert Lampo in post-Second World War Flanders during the 1940s and 1950s to adopt the magic realist mode (Lampo 1993: 33).

The second significant influence of the term is the most widely recognized development in magic(al) realism; the influence of Roh's work in Latin America. In 1927, the chapters specifically concerning magic realism from Franz Roh's *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus* were translated into Spanish by Fernando Vela and published in Madrid by *Revista de Occidente* under the title *Realismo mágico. Post-expresionismo: Problemas de la pintura europea mas reciente*. The publications of *Revista de Occidente* were widely circulated amongst writers in Latin America such as Miguel Angel Asturias and Jorge Luis Borges and have been acknowledged to have had a far-reaching influence, particularly as they provided many first translations of important European texts for the Latin American readership (Menton 1998: 214).

As well as Roh's influence, another important thread in the development of magic(al) realism can be traced from post-expressionist and surrealist Europe to Latin America. Two diplomats and writers, a French-Russian Cuban, Alejo Carpentier (1904–80), and Venezuelan Arturo Uslar-Pietri (1906–2001), were strongly influenced by European artistic movements while living in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. It is Carpentier who, having immersed himself in European art and literature in the 1920s, has become most widely acknowledged as the originator of Latin American magic(al) realism. After returning from Europe to Cuba and having travelled in Haiti, he instigated a distinctly Latin American form of magic realism, coining the phrase '*lo realismo maravilloso*' (marvellous realism) (Echevarría 1977: 97). Having been witness to European surrealism, he recognized a need for art to express the non-material aspects of life but also recognized the differences between his European and

his Latin American contexts. He used the term 'marvellous realism' to describe a concept that could represent for him the mixture of differing cultural systems and the variety of experiences that create an extraordinary atmosphere, alternative attitude and differing appreciation of reality in Latin America.

The idea of the unique and extraordinary reality of Latin America was not a new concept. The Spanish 'conqueror' of Mexico, Hernando Cortés, in the sixteenth century reported being unable to describe in familiar European terms what he saw on the American continents. However, Carpentier saw the unique aspects of Latin America in its racial and cultural mixture rather than in the flora and fauna. He first considered these ideas in an essay he wrote for the widely read Venezuelan publication *El Nacional* and more famously expanded his theory of Latin American reality in the prologue to his 1949 novel *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*). In this prologue, while disassociating himself and his writing from Roh's magic realism on the grounds of its cold artificiality and 'tiresome pretension' (Carpentier 1995a: 84), he proposed marvellous reality to be 'the heritage of all of America' (ibid.: 87). In the introduction to his prologue, translated into English and reproduced in their book *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris explain that in Carpentier's terms, as opposed to the surrealists, 'improbable juxtapositions and marvellous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America's varied history, geography, demography, and politics, not by manifesto' (75).

Arturo Uslar-Pietri, who influenced fellow Venezuelan writers with his magic realist short stories during the 1930s and 1940s, was most closely associated with Franz Roh's form of post-expressionist 'magic realism' and had known Bontempelli in Paris (Guenther 1995: 61). His writing emphasized the mystery of human living amongst the reality of life rather than following Carpentier's newly developing versions of marvellous American reality. He considered magic realism to be a continuation of the '*vanguardia*' modernist experimental writings of Latin America. Because of his close association with modernism and the original ideas of Franz Roh, some critics such as Maria Elena Angulo stress Uslar-Pietri's role in bringing magic realism to Latin America before Alejo Carpentier (1995: 1). However, the majority of critics recognize the fiction of Carpentier to

be amongst the most influential magic(al) realist writing while Uslar-Pietri's work remains largely unknown outside Spanish-speaking Latin America. Ultimately, it has been Carpentier and not Uslar-Pietri who is predominantly remembered for bringing magic realism to the continent, for producing the specifically Latin American form of marvellous realism. It is his work that has been cited as an influence on the writing of such important magical realists as Gabriel García Márquez, whose work has come to epitomize Latin American writing in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The return of Carpentier and Uslar-Pietri to Latin America coincided with a large migration of Europeans, particularly from Spain, looking for a new start following the Second World War and the fall of the Spanish Republic. The 1940s also became a time of maturation for many Latin American countries and consequently they sought to create and express a consciousness distinct from that of Europe (Echevarría 1977: 99). In Cuba, Carpentier was at the forefront of such a movement and was commissioned to write books such as a history of Cuban music (ibid.: 101). As Echevarría notes, 'Carpentier's artistic enterprise in the forties became a search for origins, the recovery of history and tradition, the foundation of an autonomous American consciousness serving as the basis for a literature faithful to the New World' (ibid.: 107).

While both magic realism and marvellous realism refer to distinct and different versions of magic(al) realism, a new term 'magical realism' has emerged in criticism following the 1955 essay 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction' by the critic Angel Flores. This term can be used to refer to the versions of magic(al) realism that have aspects of both magic realism and marvellous realism. Later chapters will consider the differences whereby magic realism is related to art forms reaching for a new clarity of reality, and marvellous realism refers to a concept representing the mixture of differing world views and approaches to what constitutes reality. Naming Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) as the first magical realist, Flores recounts both European modernist and specifically Spanish influences for this version of magic(al) realism. Controversially, he does not acknowledge either Uslar-Pietri or Carpentier for bringing Roh's magic realism to Latin America and instead argues that magical realism is a continuation of the romantic realist tradition of Spanish language literature and its European counterparts. For this purpose, Flores

created a new history of influences on the production of Latin American magical realism that could be traced back to the sixteenth century Spanish writer Miguel de Saavedra Cervantes, the turn of the twentieth century Czech-Austrian writer Franz Kafka and also (sharing some influences with Roh) European modernists such as the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico (1995: 112). Although written over three hundred years earlier, Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote* is often thought of as a precursor to magical realism. *The Dictionary of the Literature of the Iberian Peninsula* explains the dynamic in the novel that makes it compatible with the idea of magical realism: 'The opposition between the mad, book-inspired, idealistic knight and his sane, pragmatic, materialistic squire appears to be absolutized at the beginning of their relationship' (Bleiberg *et al.* 1993: 383). Most famously, the knight Don Quixote battles with windmills believing them to be knights he must fight. For his version of magical realism, Flores drew on the interpretation that Don Quixote's belief in what he perceives is absolute but can be seen by his companion, the squire Sancho Panza, and the reader differently. Flores was inspired by Kafka's most famous tale 'Metamorphosis', a realist story of a man who wakes up to find that he has become an insect and continues to live with his family, adjusting his life to his new circumstances as if it were an unalterable part of reality. The painter Giorgio de Chirico was considered by Flores to be the precursor to the magic realist painters of Germany, who were influenced by his cold, smooth style depicting empty and immense man-made industrial landscapes.

Jorge Luis Borges himself is often thought of as the father of modern Latin American writing and a precursor to magical realism. He is only considered to be a true magical realist by Angel Flores who emphasizes the influence of Borges to the extent of claiming that his 1935 collection of short fiction *Historia universal de la infamia* (*A Universal History of Infamy*) was the first example of Latin American magical realist writing (Flores 1995: 113). Borges was the perfect example of Flores' theory that magical realism was influenced by European literature. Borges had previously written a manifesto introducing modernist literary techniques to Argentina in 1921 (Verani 1996: 122). While living in Spain, he had been influenced by the '*Ultrismo*' movement, which was the main form of modernist experimentalism in Spain. The movement adopted minimalist poetic techniques to create poetry that was stripped down to almost

unconnected metaphors lacking in ornamentation and sentimentality and Borges wanted to introduce such techniques to Latin America (Lindstrom 1994: 65). He had been strongly influenced additionally by the writer Kafka, whose realist writing which verged on surrealism he had anthologized and translated into Spanish (Flores 1995: 113). Despite the lack of a direct acknowledgement by Borges of Roh's influence on his work, it is considered probable that Borges had knowledge of Roh's ideas when he wrote his influential essay '*El arte narrativo y la magia*' (Narrative Art and Magic) in 1932. For these reasons, he is often seen as the predecessor of current-day magical realists, gleaned influences from both European and Latin American cultural movements. The mixture of cultural influences has remained a key aspect of magical realist writing.

Following the publication of Flores' essay there was renewed interest in Latin America in Carpentier and his form of marvellous realism. The combination of these influences led to the second wave of magic(al) realist writing which is best known as 'magical realism' but which is not directly associated with the definition of the term as outlined by Angel Flores except that it does combine elements of both marvellous realism and magic realism. It is most notable for its matter-of-fact depiction of magical happenings. It developed into one of the most recognizable types of Latin American literature today having emerged following the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959. With a sense of euphoria and the search for new beginnings for Latin America, there was a cultural wave of creativity and in particular a 'boom' of writing that sought to produce modern and specifically Latin American fiction (Pope 1996: 226). Many writers set their work in Latin America whilst importing European modernist literary techniques. For instance, whilst writing recognizably Latin American fiction, García Márquez lists Kafka and James Joyce amongst his other influences (Connell 1998: 98).

The international recognition of Latin American magic(al) realists such as Carpentier and most particularly García Márquez has led to a misconceived assumption that magic(al) realism is specifically Latin American. This ignores both the Latin American connections of early twentieth-century European art and literature and the very different related German art movement known as 'magic realism' with its influences within Europe. Yet, the fame of Latin American magical realism has propelled the rapid adoption of this form of writing globally. Magical

realist writers have become recognized in India, Canada, Africa, the United States and across the world. Most famously, Salman Rushdie has been influenced by both the magical realism of García Márquez and the German magic realism of Günter Grass. The traces of these influences indicate the complexity and inter-relatedness of the various off-shoots of magic(al) realism. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

All magic(al) realist writers have their own influences, some from contemporary writers, some stretching back to the origins of the term and some from before the term was coined. Whatever the influences, it is rare for a writer to be concerned with questions such as the origin of the critical term. However, whilst discussing the term in critical practice it is important to understand the context of the developments of the term and the varieties covered by it. This chapter has sketched the development of the related terms, and the following chapter will consider how to differentiate these terms from each other, from their influences and from other apparently similar forms.

2

DELIMITING THE TERMS

Magic realism, magical realism and marvellous realism are highly disputed terms, not only due to their complicated history but also because they encompass many variants. Their wide scope means that they often appear to encroach on other genres and terms. Therefore, one of the best ways of reaching some form of definition is to establish to what they are related, and to what they are not related. In this chapter I will be delimiting the terms magic and magical realism (sometimes encapsulating both in the term magic(al) realism) by examining their relationships to other genres and terms such as realism, surrealism, allegory and the fantastic. As these terms and the critics referred to in this chapter are literary, I will consider magical realism solely in relation to narrative fiction. As there is also a need to delimit magic realist painting from other artistic movements, there is a study of magic realist art in Chapter 6.

It follows that a definition of magic(al) realism relies upon the prior understanding of what is meant by 'magic' and what is meant by 'realism'. 'Magic' is the less theorized term of the two, and contributes to the variety of definitions of magic(al) realism. In fact, each of the versions of magic(al) realism have differing meanings for the term 'magic'; in magic realism 'magic' refers to the mystery of life; in marvellous and magical realism 'magic' refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science. The variety of

magical occurrences in magic(al) realist writing includes ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents and strange atmospheres but does not include the magic as it is found in a magic show. Conjuring 'magic' is brought about by tricks that give the illusion that something extraordinary has happened, whereas in magic(al) realism it is assumed that something extraordinary really has happened.

When referring to magical realism as a narrative mode, it is essential to consider the relationship of 'magical' to 'realism' as it is understood in literary terms. 'Realism' is a much contested term, and none more so than when used in attempting to define magical realism. The term itself came into being through philosophical discussion in the mid-eighteenth century but is related to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle's concept of mimesis. Realism as a term in relation to art and literature only came into common use in the mid-nineteenth century but has since become widely recognized. The critic Ian Watt explains the philosophical notion that 'Modern realism ... begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his sense: it has origins in Descartes and Locke' (1992: 89). By accepting that there is a reliable link between our senses and the world in which we live, realism assumes that 'the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it' (Watt 1992: 89). The idea of portraying real actions in art was first discussed by Aristotle who claimed that the act of imitating life, or mimesis, is a natural instinct of humans. Aristotle explains the ancient Greek belief that witnessing art is an essential way to learn about the universal truths of life. For this the art itself must appear to be real to the reader or viewer in depicting something that exists, has existed or could or should exist. In fact, Aristotle paved the way for what we now understand of the realism of fictional narratives. He claimed that it is better to convince the reader of the realism of something impossible rather than to be unconvincing about something that is true (Aristotle 1920: 91).

Realism is most often associated with the tradition of the novel as its expansive form, in contrast to shorter fiction, allows the writer to present many details that contribute to a realistic impression. The tradition of the novel has developed as a predominantly realistic form with notable deviations (such as the romance, the modernist or the magical realist novel). Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists such as Henry James wrote essays discussing this relationship between the novel

and reality. James claimed 'The only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life' ([1934] 1992: 43). His advice on novel writing was to create as realistic a version of recognizable life as possible in order to engage the interest and sympathy of the reader: 'The characters, the situation, which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most' (James 1992: 43). Catherine Belsey, calling this 'Classical Realism' notes that in the late nineteenth century the novel was expected to 'show' rather than 'tell' the reader an interpretation of reality (1980: 68).

However, twentieth century theories of realism in literature, including those by Henry James, emphasize the involvement of the imaginative process in literature so that, as David Grant explains, 'Here realism is achieved not by imitation, but by creation; a creation which, working with the raw materials of life, absolves these by the intercession of the imagination from mere factuality and translates them to a higher order' (1970: 15). In this understanding of realism it is the reader who constructs the sense of reality from the narrative rather than the text revealing the author's interpretation of reality to the reader. Importantly, as Watt notes, this form of realism emphasizes the importance of the narrative: 'the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it' (1992: 89). In this sense, as Catherine Belsey notes, the way in which the narrative is constructed is a key element to the construction of twentieth-century realism. She explains that: 'Realism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar' (1980: 47). This approach to literary realism is the most relevant to magical realism, as magical realism relies upon the presentation of real, imagined or magical elements as if they were real. The key to understanding how magical realism works is to understand the way in which the narrative is constructed in order to provide a realistic context for the magical events of the fiction. Magical realism therefore relies upon realism but only so that it can stretch what is acceptable as real to its limits. It is therefore related to realism but is a narrative mode distinct from it.

Surrealism is another genre that is related to realism, as is indicated in its name, and it is often confused with magic(al) realism. In the previous chapter, I noted the historical connection of Franz Roh's notion of magic realism to surrealism, and the resulting influence on Alejo Carpentier's

Latin American marvellous realism. However, it is imperative in understanding the variants of magic(al) realism to be able to distinguish early magic realism and its close relationship with surrealism from the contemporary narrative mode of magical realism which has no connection with surrealism.

Whilst both magic realism and surrealism in their most limited definitions are movements of literature and art that developed in the first half of the twentieth century, both terms have life beyond this period as more generally applied notions. It is as common to hear someone say 'How surreal!' as it is to see a book described as magic realist on its dust cover. Both surrealist and magic(al) realist writing and art could be called revolutionary in their attitudes since surrealists attempted to write against realist literature that reflected and reinforced what they considered to be bourgeois society's idea of itself, and magic(al) realism holds immense political possibilities in its disruption of categories. Although there are debates about what surrealism means, it is often confused with magical realism as it explores the non-pragmatic, non-realist aspects of human existence. Consider, for instance, Salvador Dalí's painting *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). This painting is surrealist because it attempts to portray an aspect of life, memory, that is psychological yet attempts to do so through pictorial and therefore physical means. The setting of the painting that portrays Dalí's famous 'soft watches' is a landscape that has familiar elements but that is unreal in its overall composition. The watches are very clearly depicted and yet are extraordinary in that they have insects on them and are malformed. They appear to be paradoxically made from metal and yet are as flexible as fabric. Typical of surrealism, all of the elements of the painting are familiar in themselves and yet are distorted or placed out of context in order to express a non-physical aspect of life. This painting exemplifies those aspects of surrealism that appear to be similar to magical realism, such as the reliance of surrealism on contradiction and the unifying of paradoxes. It could be said that the premise of magical realism – to bring together the aspects of the real and the magical – is in accordance with this aspect of surrealism, as magical realism is such a paradox that is unified by the creation of a narrative in which magic is incorporated seamlessly into reality. However, Dalí's painting also reveals the relationship of surrealism with the psychological and the unreal that distinguishes it from magical realism.