

Reviews

UNCERTAIN MIRRORS: MAGICAL REALISMS IN US ETHNIC LITERATURES

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This volume shows the precise scholarly work carried out by its authors in their sustained effort to revise updated views concerning contemporary literature and recent critical theory. *Uncertain Mirrors* is, in brief, a book that combines a historical approach to the uncertain grounds of magical realism with an analysis of current post-postmodernist theories on the role of fiction in our present globalized condition. The history of recent criticism, narrative, ethnicity, minorities, excluded middles, ethics, ecocriticism, and physics are among the most important key ideas addressed in the volume, whose tightly woven chapters dissect the notion of magical realism and its manifestation in the fiction written by authors who belong to minority ethnic groups. While it is true that this narrative mode has been addressed in quite a few books in recent years—including some very valuable ones such as Bowers' *Magic(al) Realism*—magical realism continues to elude all attempts at a final definition and it has hardly been addressed in its historical dimension—a dimension that ranges from Aristotle's *Poetics* to Adorno's "negative dialectics". Conscious of this fact, the three authors of *Uncertain Mirrors* move toward the narrative mode from different perspectives before closing the volume in what, in their self-awareness, they denominate "dialectical instability".

The book is divided into an introductory chapter on the oxymoronic nature of magical realism, six additional chapters dealing with the different interconnections between magical realism and a variety of *-isms* (namely, postmodernism,

postcolonialism, ecocriticism, as well as Levinasian philosophy), and then some final “dialectical” remarks about the mode from the perspective provided by Theodor Adorno’s concept of negative dialectics. Before that happens, Ana María Manzanás was in charge of writing the first two chapters, Jesús Benito of the next two, and Begoña Simal of Chapters 5 and 6.

In Chapter 1, “Mimesis, Realism and Counter-realism”, Manzanás starts by challenging traditional assumptions on the concept of mimesis, a word whose meanings are always unstable and conflicting because, she argues, “as a deliberate performance of sameness”, mimesis “is always going to alter the original” (9). Then, she offers a historical revision of the concept, departing from Aristotle’s definition in his *Poetics* and showing how along the years mimesis has been “interpreted as the literal copy of reality”, an interpretation that Manzanás systematically dismantles in the following pages by scrutinizing the different but related meanings that the notion had in different historical moments, especially in the 19th century, where it became the basic pillar to support traditional realism. Interestingly, as Manzanás perceptively points out, by then “the alleged mimeticism of the realists actually reversed Aristotle’s formulations, for whereas Aristotle had widened the limits of the real to incorporate the possible, the realists inverted Aristotle’s priorities to value the historian over the poet, that is to say, what happened over what may happen” (23). Part III of this first chapter evaluates whether mimesis can be a sufficient requirement for the writing of narrative and problematizes the alleged distinction between the actual and the fictional by revising their limits in the light of contemporary theories defended by critics like Thomas Pavel or Lubomír Doležel.

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Entitled “Romance, the Imaginary, and Magical Realism”, Chapter 2 offers a historical revision of the idealistic and the realistic modes, because, as Manzanás argues, “it comes as no surprise that the romance survived realism through the creation of the inner reality of experience, and permeated the novel in various ways” (35), ways that she gradually discloses in the following pages, where she describes and analyzes different uses of the fantastic mode by resorting to well-established critics like Frye, Fluck, or Durand before proceeding to mark out the uncertain territory of magical realism. The wide range of terms that critics have used in later years to mark such textual territory occupies the second part of the chapter; classifications such as “postmodern realism”, “the marvelous real”, “psychic realism”, “magicorealism”, or “postmodern fantastic” add to the many difficulties in defining the mode and Manzanás reviews an ample bibliography on these terms in her intellectual quest for a satisfactory approach to magical realism. In my opinion, if there is a reference missing in her bibliographic survey, it is probably to Rosemary Jackson’s seminal study *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion* (1981),

one of the first books to evaluate the fantastic mode from poststructuralist and psychoanalytical premises and one that still offers very interesting theories about both our attraction to the uncanny elements of life and the rise of the gothic mode. After a clarifying summary of some of the most relevant antecedents of the mode, Manzanas addresses the existence of the different levels of representation that characterize magical realism and partakes of Sangari's view of "the simultaneity of the heterogeneous" (48) to explain the mode's overlapping of levels. The next section in Chapter 2 is dedicated to the connections existing between magical realism and postcolonial writing, a link already pointed out by Elleke Boehmer in 1995 but extended by Manzanas to the space of US fiction, where, as happened earlier in Latin America, "the correspondence between the word and the real is now traversed and transformed by heterogeneity and mediated by the magic, the imaginary, and the possible" (55), terms which she analyzes in the next section in the chapter. The meanings of the word *magic* and its relation to the category of the possible take Manzanas to finally evaluate what "real" may mean in the mode of magical realism, a particular way of writing that, she affirms, is still anchored in reality, while being politically and historically "conscious" and an "important element of dehierarchization that brings a vision from the fringes into conversation with the center" (58). Manzanas finally reminds her readers that in the analyses of the limits of the real vs. the unreal critics should also do well to consider the discoveries in quantum analysis, that demand a new interpretation of reality quite separate from our traditional Newtonian understanding of it.

Chapter 3 is titled "The Crisis of Representation: Post-realism, Postmodernism, Magical Realism" and in its pages Benito becomes deeply involved in the clarification of a number of terms abundantly used in contemporary criticism and theory. The implication that classic realism is the appropriate mode to narrate the credible and represent the external aspects of the real has been amply contested throughout the 20th century by an extensive number of experimental—metafictional or not—practices and Benito offers a very interesting and precise summary of those practices from its first relevant expression in Modernism to the most recent type of experimental fiction. Contemporary narrative, he asserts, is politically divided in different forms and modes and in the relation between magical realism and postmodernism they constitute one of the most confusing terminological issues. However, pages 69 to 74 considerably illuminate such uncertain concepts. Especially relevant in his adscription of magical realism to the field of socially committed literature is his realization that such a mode is also affecting some white writers in the United States, even if they do not fall within the scope of the book. Of course, being "non-ethnic" authors, the analysis of the use of magical realism by these white writers is not pursued in *Uncertain Mirrors*

although it may offer Manzanas, Benito and Simal the opportunity, I hope, to elaborate their views on the issue in their future publications. It should also be noted that there are some moments in Chapter 3 in which the presentation in general terms of postmodernist experimentation seems to be almost devoid of any possible social commitment, whereas at other times—especially when dealing with “historiographic-metafictional” texts— some of the experimental postmodernist writers cited (Doctorow, Vonnegut, Pynchon...) cannot be devoid of such political orientation as Linda Hutcheon, among others, has variously proposed; clear borders, as suggested throughout the book, are not to be found between the postmodern and the magical realist (in “the postmodern world, magic and reality are not opposites”, 90). Politically oriented texts written in the mode of magical realism are exemplified in this chapter by Yamasita’s *Tropic of Orange* and Vizenor’s *Bearheart*. Both textual analyses efficiently confirm the implications previously defended by Benito in the theoretical part of the chapter.

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Chapter 4, “Juxtaposed Realities: Magical Realism and/as Colonial Experience”, is a sustained attempt to build a bridge between the literary mode under discussion in the volume and Postcolonial fiction writing. By approaching modernist surrealism and Carpentier’s seminal ideas about the “marvelous real”, Benito extends the debate to encompass an understanding of magical realism as a way of championing the indigenous and postcolonial cultural perception, although I have some reservations when the author affirms again that both *lo real maravilloso* and magical realism show “their rejection of the playful literary experimentation associated with the West” (106), an association that I do not find to be so clear unless many postmodern writers are disregarded and only modernist experimentation and the works of a few, now mostly forgotten American metafictional writers from the 1960s and early 1970s (Gass, Sorrentino, Barth...) are considered. However, Benito perceptively argues that magical realism has come to be finally acknowledged “as the postcolonial mode par excellence” (107), a bold statement that he convincingly clarifies in the remaining pages of the chapter when he analyzes the juxtaposition between mythological beliefs and the rational scientific outlook and suggests various bridges between the two. He understands the juxtaposition to be the most relevant feature of the mode and also a constant in postcolonial fiction (107-108). After exploring the unstable presence of magical realism in postcolonial (including US ethnic) literature, the chapter concludes with convincing analyses of two well-known North American novels that had rarely been associated with magical realism: Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* and Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*.

Simal is in charge of Chapter 5, “From Identity to Alter-entity: Trans-selving the Self in Magical Realist Narrative”, an essay that offers an illuminating comparison

between the different conceptions of self and identity that appear in magical realist texts and some of the most striking notions defended by Emmanuel Levinas, one of the most controversial philosophers in recent years, especially since the Turn to Ethics. Simal focuses on the transgression of traditional ontologies and antinomies, especially on the binary subject vs. object, which she associates with the multiple and fluid identities that frequently appear in the magical realist mode. Within the context of the present questioning of a traditional stable self, she chooses Levinas' intellectual approach to resolve the typical Cartesian dichotomy, a solution that demands either death or the recognition of the face of the other. It is in this second and only possible choice, that Levinas reconsiders identity in terms of responsibility for the other, a move that is effected by a deconstruction of identity that Simal associates with the process of "substitution" found in some magical realist texts. Testing her views on actual fiction, Simal carries out subsequent analyses of Erdrich's *Tracks* (Substitution or Possession?), Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (from Reincarnation to Substitution), and Keller's *Comfort Woman* (Substitution as Survival). She convincingly argues that magical realist narratives of this kind successfully illustrate the workings of alterity within identity, and that consequently the mode of magical realism "seems to be especially useful for authors who need to convey their liminal and/or traumatic experiences" (188).

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The last of the six chapters that constitute the book's core, "Of a Magical Nature: The Environmental Unconscious", is also written by Simal and draws some links between magical realism and ecocriticism. The author shows her clear views on the issue from the beginning of the chapter: "Environmentality is also 'encoded' in magical realism through both literal and metaphorical renditions of the frictions between the capitalist notion of progress and the survival of the earth as we know it, the spiritual wasteland resulting from the literal wasteland, human greed as the originator of devastation, and other environmental issues" (194). In her analytical scope there is also place for the issue of ethnicity and its connections with magical realism and ecology. This chapter is innovative precisely in the sense that Simal addresses such connections drawing her corpus from non-mimetic fiction. Silko's *Ceremony* and Yamasita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* offer her the opportunity to test her theory and, as she writes, "unearth the environmental unconscious" across the pages of a chapter where terms of recent coinage like "biotic community", "Eco-responsibility", or "Ecoapocalypse" coexist with more traditional terms to bring to critical awareness new aspects in our understanding of magical realism.

Benito's concluding remarks are based, as I pointed out earlier, on Adorno's notion of negative dialectics because, as the author says, insomuch "as it obstinately incorporates realism while questioning or directly negating the very assumptions

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that sustain realist narratives, magical realism can be understood as a form of ‘negative realism’” (239-240). Breaking down the power of Aristotle’s terrifying Law of the Excluded Middle, magical realism means the restoration of the literary middle and its liminal grounds. Although complex at times, its theoretical complexity pays off and *Uncertain Mirrors* is an illuminating book that scholars and teachers of US literature should read, and in which senior undergraduates and postgraduate students will find the necessary assistance to clarify the many doubts that arise when facing those strange, non-linear, experimental narratives that have been labeled as “magical realism”.

Works cited

BOWERS, Maggie Ann. 2004. *Magic(al) Realism*. JACKSON, Rosemary. 1981. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Routledge. London: Methuen.

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