Magical realism is a genre of art, literature, and film that incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction. The term is often associated with Latin American literature, specifically works by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who wrote the genre's most well-known book, One Hundred Years of Solitude. Magical realism also pertains to a style of painting that involves a meticulously realistic style of imaginary or fantastic scenes or images. The genre has been used in numerous films.

Overview: Origins and Development

The term magical realism was first used by German art critic Franz Roh in a 1925 essay, "Magical Realism: Post Expressionism." The essay focuses on the demise of Expressionism, an early twentieth century abstract art movement that uses distortion and exaggeration to express emotions. Roh praised this return to realistic representation, which contains a much more subtle mystery than the fantastical depictions of Expressionists. Roh also distinguishes the movement from Surrealism, which despite incorporating symbolic mystical elements, is solely dedicated to the unreal. The term was not widely circulated until the 1950s, however.

Literary critic Angel Flores defined and popularized the genre in his 1955 essay "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction." Flores argues that Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, influenced by authors such as Franz Kafka, provided the foundation for modern magical realism, which thrived in Latin American literature in the 1940s and 1950s. According to Flores, the magical realist transformed the common and everyday into the awesome and unreal. Magical realism differs from fairy tales and myths because it remains in the real world, exposing the magic found in this world rather than that of created worlds.

Some of Flores' claims are disputed in Luis Leal's 1967 critical essay "El realismo magico en la literatura hispanoamericana" (Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature). Leal agrees with the basics of
Flores' argument, but credits Roh with providing the map for magical realism and recognizes Alejo Carpentier as the primary propagator of literary magical realism in Latin America. Carpentier's essay "On the Marvelous Real in America" analyzed mystical revelations within reality in literature. The essay prefaces his novel *The Kingdom of This World*, which is considered an important predecessor to magical realism. Many scholars agree that the writings of Roh and Carpentier were significantly influential in shaping the magical realism genre despite their differing perspectives. Roh spoke of visual expression, whereas Carpentier examined cultural and geographical identity. Both believed in a revision of exhausted forms of expression.

Magical Realism in Literature

Though the concept of magical realism can be applied to many art forms, most people identify it with literature. The modern definition of magical realism as applied to literature took shape during the Latin American boom period of the 1960s and 1970s. During these decades, Latin American prose became internationally renowned for its innovative style. Magical realism played a key role in this resurgence. Authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez popularized the genre, which is characterized by the straightforward inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into realistic fiction. Marquez's 1967 masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is considered the seminal novel of magical realism. The novel follows seven generations of the Buendia family in a fictional version of Colombia. Marquez incorporates historical events and people into his narrative as a series of fantastical events plague the family over many years. He employs mythical elements to examine themes of cultural displacement in a post-colonial setting, a common theme of magical realism. Other Latin American boom writers who addressed similar issues include Carlos Fuentes and Julio Cortazar.

Marquez was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982, sparking renewed interest in the genre and invigorating a new generation of magical realists. At this time, magical realism had extended beyond Latin America to Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Some popular modern English-speaking writers who have employed magical realism include Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, and Rudolfo Anaya. Rushdie's best-selling 1981 novel *Midnight's Children* shed additional spotlight on the genre.

Magical Realism in Visual Arts

Franz Roh's description of the artistic era after Expressionism applied to early post-expressionist artists such as Antonio Donghi and Anton Räderscheidt. Roh also counted George Schrimpf, George Grosz, and Otto Dix among those employing the technique. He described the art form as a reaction between the commonplace and the fantastic.

Painters strove to give the recognizable world greater meaning by incorporating strange and magical features. The trend continued through the late twentieth century and can be seen in the works of artists such as Otto Dix, Jared French, Paul Cadmus, George Tooker, Andrew Wyeth, Alex Colville, and Robert Vickrey.

Elements of magical realism have also been used by several filmmakers, notably Woody Allen. Some of Allen's most famous films include dreamlike scenarios rooted in reality that act as a launch point for greater themes. Some of these films include *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Midnight in Paris*. In the latter, Allen's main character has a mystical experience that allows him to travel from the 2010s to 1920s Paris, where he encounters a number of famous authors and artists and realizes that romanticizing the past only leads to distraction from the present. Other films that incorporate magical realism include *Amélie*, *The Green Mile*, and the critically acclaimed animated films of Hayao Miyazaki. *Como agua para chocolate* (Like Water for Chocolate), a 1992 film, was based on the novel by the same name by Mexican screenwriter and author
Laura Esquivel. Her story about family life incorporates magical elements to pointedly address social and political issues.

Bibliography


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