

Magical Realism and Surrealism: A Dialogue

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Abstract Magical Realism sprouted as a response to Realism. Magical Realism as a narrative technique was taken as a challenge by the Latin American Writers to express Realism of Latin America. The writers of Magical Realism called themselves exclusive in their employment of magical realism as no other writers belonging to any other nationality may not share the same emotions as they felt. In the same way, Surrealism, as a way of expressing reality was used by European writers. They called Surrealism as the highest way of expressing reality. This paper attempts to show the differences between Surrealism and Magical Realism and how they get expression in the paintings of 20th C.

Keywords — *Magical Realism, Surrealism, Paranoiac Act, real, unreal, conscious, unconscious.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Magic realism, is a mode of narration that blends fantasy and myth into mundane life. In the realm of magical realism, the ordinary and the magical become extraordinary and commonplace respectively. Magical Realism or marvelous realism or fantastic realism is not a writing style or a literary genre but a mode of narration that is employed in the enquiry of reality. The term is not only connected to literature but also is related with realistic and figurative works of art like paintings, drawings, sculpture that have veiled connotations. Surrealism was an artistic and a literary movement which was at once an intellectual movement that burgeoned reason and individualism. It aimed at tapping the exotic qualities of the irrational and unconscious mind. The main objective of Surrealism was to offer freedom of expression through painting and writing and to liberate human experiences from the repressive precincts of rationalism.

II. MAGICAL REALISM AND SURREALISM: A DISCUSSION.

The term magical realism was coined around 1924 or 1925 by a German art critic Franz Roh. He meant the term to criticize paintings where real is incorporated in a way that it seemed distant to everyday reality. Franz Roh called magical realism as Post-Expressionist painting that was in vogue in Germany while he was an art critic.

Surrealism was an artistic movement which flourished in Europe as an outcome of World War I and was chiefly influenced by Dada. This movement is greatly for its visual artworks like paintings, drawings and sculpture. It dealt with the apposition of distant realities to activate the unconscious mind through the imagery. Surrealism intended to transform human experience,

rebuffing a rational idea of life in opposed to the idea that valued unconscious and dream-like existence. The surrealist artists instituted magic and marvellous in the most weird and unpredicted things that are usually disregarded and considered as unconventional. The manifesto of Surrealism was to unite conscious and the unconscious realms entirely so that the realm of dream and fantasy would be mingled to the everyday life which they called 'Absolute Reality' of 'Surreality'. Surrealism was aimed at awaking the unconscious mind to exhibit creativity. Surrealistic art is characterized by dream-like visuals, symbolism, and collage images. Notable artists who belong to this movement are André Masson, René Magritte, Salvador Dali, and Max Ernst. The surrealist paintings are realistically painted images which are removed from their regular settings and are relocated amidst an ambiguous, contradictory, or an appalling framework.

If Surrealism has to be treated synonymously with Magical Realism, Surrealism would be in want of reality as it is detached from reality and operated in the unconscious and dream like planes. Whereas, magical realism obtains its exclusivity in the seamless blending of magical and real at a normal plane; the blending takes place not in the unconscious but in the daily routine plane. The magical realism which the Latin American writers defend is claimed as their own. It is encountered in its raw state, hidden and all-pervasive in all that is Latin American.

The metamorphosis or transformation in magical realism occurs as the mundane into magical and the magical into real. It is largely an art of wonders. Time exists in fluidity and the unreal seamlessly permeates reality. Magical Realist writers encounter reality and attempt to unravel the mysterious things that are present in human experience –

the relationship between the mysterious and the human conditions. There is no logical or psychological explanation available in the environment of magical realism.

Magical realism is explicitly a narrative mode employed to write literary works than a distinguished genre itself. It focuses to capture the paradoxes that exist in the mingling of opposites such as time and timelessness, dichotomy as in life and death, dream and reality and the pre-colonial and the post-industrialist present. It is ascribed by two opposing perspectives. While accepting the rational view of reality, it also considers the supernatural as a part of reality. The locale in a magical realist text is a mundane, everyday setting- as Gregor Samsa's bedroom in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, or an ordinary Columbian village by the seaside as in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Very Oldman with Enormous Wings* - with realistic human characters. It is a narrative mode that realizes the natural in the supernatural and the supernatural in the natural; extraordinary in the ordinary and the ordinary in the extraordinary. It is the interweaving of magical and the mundane.

Owing to the thin line that separates magical realism and fantasy, realism and surrealism, which is so vague and unsure, critics like Angel Flores questioned the authenticity of magical realism and magical realists' argument and hypotheses. Critics like Howard M. Fraser at the University of North Carolina have argued that the works of Alejo Carpentier can be better classified as a mere fantasy and not necessarily magical realist. The only debatable idea that forms the fulcrum of this enquiry is whether or not a text should be realized as literature or just a mere piece of entertainment. The argument has been well answered by the close reading of magical realist texts. Unlike fantasy and commercial fiction, magical realism is considered literary fiction instead of genre fiction, making it more reputable in the academic landscape, and more likely to win awards. In the case of Alejo Carpentier, because he wrote before the rise of magical realism, his work does not neatly fit into the genre.

Magical realism is often viewed as a local movement, limited to the Latin American writers who propagated it as a literary form. When throwing light on magical realism as an art – or painting, the term owes credit to Franz Roh a German Art Critic, who used the term Magic Realism to refer to the post- expressionistic painting that existed during the Weimer Republic in Germany during the 20th C. This kind of painting also forged the real and the unreal to realize the aftermath of World War II. In his book *Post-expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Most Recent European Painting*, Franz Roh coined the term that is translated as 'magic realism' to define a form of painting

that differs greatly from its prototype in its consideration to accurate detail, a smooth photograph-like clarity of picture and the representation of the mystical non-material aspects of reality. He later termed this form of painting as New Objectivity.

Notable Magic Realist paintings, of Otto Dix and George Grosz, are modelled on grotesque caricature. Their paintings depict the bodies of their characters as inexplicably small when compared to their emphasized faces. Their highlighted faces became the object of attention and importance than their bodies which stress the idea that the precise emotions and details of the faces were very faithfully brought out in these paintings.



Fig.. [1] Gray Day George Grosz (1920)

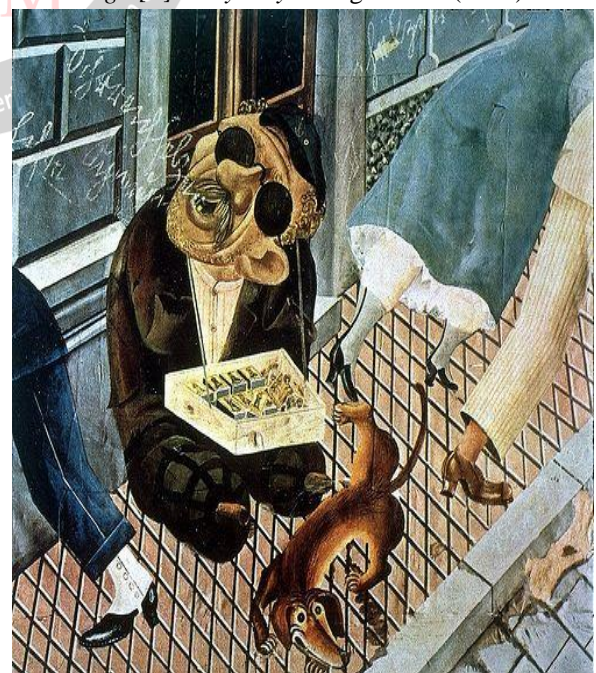


Fig. [2] Match Seller by Otto Dix Etching, 1920

Gray Day shows an unbelievably round-headed

businessman with traversed eyes crossing an industrial landscape in the opposite direction to a hunch-backed soldier with a large head and hands. Thus, the magical realist painters never abhor painting the realities of the war though grotesque and weird. Both Otto Dix and George Grosz painters exhibit contempt for traditional and realistic perspective. The two key artists associated with Neue Sachlichkeit i.e., New Objectivity are Otto Dix and George Grosz. They share the greatness of being the renowned magical realist painters of the 20thC. Their paintings and drawings vibrantly portrayed and attacked the corruption, desperately hedonistic and general disillusionment of Germany following its conquest in the World War I, and the ineffectual Weimar Republic which ruled until the arrival in power of the Nazi Party in 1933. Their works also constituted a more widespread, fierce satire on the plight of the humans. Though the term magic realism is today commonly associated with the literature of Latin America, it was originally adopted to label a shift from the Expressionistic Art to an unemotional exactness and disturbing imagery.



Fig [3]. Magic realism art in Weimar Germany 1919 - 33

by Otto Dix



Fig [4] André Masson Wave of the Future, 1976

The period in which the Magical Realist painting flourished was during the precarious rule of Weimar which scaled between 1919 and 23. This phase of uncanny was succeeded by the German Conquest in World War I and the magic realist painting developed was that of the

unstable German Weimer Republic during the period 1919-23. This era followed the German defeat in the First World War and renunciation and flight into banishment of the Kaiser in 1918. The mood of the time and its influence on magic realist painting in Weimar Republic was 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. As an art critic, Roh attempted to distinguish between magic realist painting and Expressionist paintings. The expressionists' usage of warm colours on a coarse and thick painting canvas, the significance of the painting process and its natural effect was opposed to that of the magical realist painters who painted on smooth, carefully fabricated canvas with an unbeatable photographic quality. Roh also argued that magic realism to be different from surrealism due to magic realism's focus on the material object and the actual existence of things in the world, as divergent to the more rational and emotional reality expressed by surrealists.

Magic realism and Surrealism are movements related to literature and art which thrived well during the first half of the twentieth century. Both these terms have lived through and outlived their period as mostly applied notions. The two terms though they are associated with written art and expressive art, are by themselves revolutionary in their approach. Surrealists endeavoured to write against the existing realist writings and reinstated that Realism was a common man's idea of itself, whereas Magical realism embraces political inclinations. It is to be accepted that Surrealism is a debated topic to understand its complexity is often misunderstood as Magical realism -which is not so because it explores the non-pragmatic and non-realist aspects of human existence. Surrealist artists—like Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso, or Michael Cheval pursued to traverse through the uncanny of the unconscious mind, and stimulating it as a way of creating art, resulting in fantastic, sometimes weird imagery across endless avenues. The fundamental idea of Surrealism is to emphasise on revealing the mind's deepest thoughts spontaneously when they surface. For instance, Salvador Dali's painting Fig [5] *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) is surrealist because it attempts to portray an aspect of life. Though the concept of time is abstract and memory is psychological, they are portrayed through pictures and therefore the abstract and psychological are made tangible and physical.



Fig [5]. Salvador Dali. *The Persistence of Memory* (1931).

In the locale of the painting Fig [5] *The Persistence of Memory*, Dali represents his famous ‘soft watches’ that are juxtaposed in a landscape that has familiar elements in them but the overall art looks unreal. The watch portrayed in the painting is explicitly clear but they are distorted in their making because of the presence of a few insects inside it. Though the watches are depicted to be made of metal, they are paradoxically stretchy and flexible – thus they are ‘soft watches’. This becomes a typical example of surrealist painting because all the elements such as watches are very familiar objects in themselves but yet they look bizarre and weird and are placed in a setting to make it appear abstract.

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, Dali’s painting also reveals the relationship of surrealism with the psychological and the unreal that distinguishes it from magical realism. He has explained about his painting *Sleep* (1937) that Surrealism is a paranoiac act which happens between the moment before sleep and the moment after waking up. It is mostly eerie and intangible. *Swans Reflecting Elephants* (1937) is a famous double image by Dali which once again follows the paranoia critical method.



Fig [6]. *Sleep* (1937) by Dali

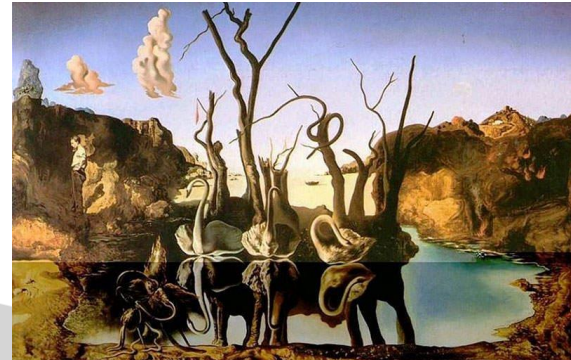


Fig [7]. *Swans Reflecting Elephants* (1937) by Dali

III. CONCLUSION

Surrealism is different from magical realism since the characteristics that it explores are related not with material reality but with the imagination and the mind, and in particular, it attempts to express the inner life and psychology of humans through art. Critics explain that the surrealists considered that the conscious state of man’s existences is not adequate to explain him to himself and others. Therefore, Surrealism resorted to express it through the sub conscious and the unconscious which is not real and tangible.

The unreal in magical realism is never depicted in the form of a dream or in the unconscious level of human experience. If done so, it takes the perceptible reality and makes it a less understood form of imagination. The organization of magic realism lies in the accepted and undisputed state in concrete and tangible reality.

When Magical realism underwent a metamorphosis from an ordinary word in Europe to a literary genre in South and Central America, it has also undergone transition from a visually receptive genre to a politically and literarily charged term. Many Latin American writers including Alejo Carpentier argued that magical realism was theirs and it was a natural fit to depict the complexities of Americas because of their divers indigenous people. Because, for them, the dichotomy between what is real and unreal, natural and supernatural, time and timelessness, past and present, life and death etc. do not exist. These two

dichotomous spheres intermingled naturally and effortlessly. That is why Gabriel Garcia Marquez commented that Surrealism came from the reality of Latin America.

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