

# Magic Realism in Cinema

An analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

We often see magic in the arts: the impossible, supernatural and fantastic. In cinema there are various genres that provide us with a certain amount of magic, like science-fiction and fantasy. Another category that presents us a certain amount of magic is the magic realism movie, which is a far less known category. The juxtaposition of the two words magic and realism sounds quite contradictory. Magic realism is however used to designate various works of art, literature and, more recently, film.

The term magic realism presents an oxymoron, a combination of two words that are not usually combined. It is a combination of realism and fantasy. This appears on several platforms in art. In visual art the tendency emerged in the 1920s. It was first mentioned as a successor of German Expressionism in *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* by Franz Roh. He states that the Post-expressionist paintings of the 1920s return to a renewed delight in real objects even as it integrates the formal innovations and spiritual thrust of Expressionism, which had shown an exaggerated preference for fantastic objects.<sup>1</sup> It is however best known as a literary genre that has its roots in Latin America, with famous writers as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Alejo Carpentier. Since the '80s and on critics have used 'magic realism' to categorize works of literature as well as film, not only from Latin America, but also for works produced worldwide.

What is magic realism? What is it in cinema? Does it have a connection with the literary style? Can we define it as a genre or merely as a trend? These are the questions that are being considered in this paper. In the first chapters I will investigate the phenomenon of magic realism in literature and pictorial art: its origins and its characterizations. In the third and fourth chapter I will move on to the case of magic realism in cinema, and explore the theory and practice around it. The purpose of my investigation is to state what kind of tendency magic realism in cinema is.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from the English translation 'Magical Realism: Post Expressionism' by Roh, F. in *Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community*, pp. 15-31

## CHAPTER 1: ORIGINS OF MAGIC REALISM

To be able to investigate the phenomenon of magic realism in cinema, I will first look at where the terms come from, and what they actually mean. I'll try to give a brief history and a clear distinction of the phenomenon magic realism in art. In the next two chapters I will not present a complete overview of the discussion that has been and is still going on about magic realism. That would require a complete case study of its own. Instead I will give an outline of what is generally said about magic realism, its history and its trademarks.

As said before, the history of magic realism goes back into the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was introduced by art-critic and historian Franz Roh, who defined magic realism as an aesthetic category. In *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* Roh referred to magic realism as a way of reacting to reality and pictorially representing the mysteries inherent in it. Post expressionism/ magic realism embodies the 'calm admiration' of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces. It represents in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world.<sup>2</sup> Although the term has less fame in painting, a tendency of magic realism emerged after Roh's introduction in 1925 and revived after the Second World War<sup>3</sup> However there wasn't any strict definition of magic realism, Roh and later various other art critics clearly identified magic realism as a distinct tendency.<sup>4</sup>

Later, in the 1940s and '50s, magic realism came across in Latin America, as a means of expressing the authentic American mentality and developing an autonomous literature.<sup>5</sup> In 1955 Angel Flores introduced magical realism in a modern sense in his essay "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction". In this essay he presents a general trend in Latin American fiction, in which Jorge Luis Borges and Eduardo Mallea are the first authors. Flores terms this trend "Magical Real-

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<sup>2</sup> Cited from the English translation 'Magical Realism: Post Expressionism' in *Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community*, pp. 15-31

<sup>3</sup> The term magic realism in painting is very little known due to the popularity of another term marking the post-expressionist tendency: New Objectivity. Gustav Hartlaub used New Objectivity for the Same paintings and painters as Roh did with magic realism. Hartlaub arranged the Mannheim Exposition and New Objectivity became a fact. Seymour Menton discusses the emergence and re-emergence of magic realism in his book *Magical Realism Rediscovered*, chapter one: *Magical realism in the Arts: 1918 – 1981*.

<sup>4</sup> Seymour Menton. *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981*, (London: Art Alliance Press 1983) 15 - 19

<sup>5</sup> A. B. Chanady *Magical realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus unresolved Antinomy*. (New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1985) p. 17

ism".<sup>6</sup> In his essay he uses the year 1935 as a point of departure of magical realism as a new phase of Latin American literature.

"With Borges as pathfinder and moving spirit, a group of brilliant stylists developed around him. Although each evidenced a distinct personality and proceeded in his own way, the general direction was that of magical realism. [...] From then magical realism has grown in an exciting crescendo. Suffice it here to declare that the decade 1940-50 saw its most magnificent flowering. During these ten fruitful years Latin America produced prose fiction comparable to the best in contemporary Italy, France, or England."<sup>7</sup>

Ever since the term magic realism emerged in critical essays there has been a division between scholars and critics about the origin of magic realism. Some critics state that, even though the use of the term in meanings of art has broadened throughout the years, magic realism can only be applied to literary works of art from Latin America.<sup>8</sup> Others state that it has become more and more international, and can be used to distinct works from Europe and the U.S. as well, that magic realism is not a Latin American monopoly. Stephen Slemon was in 1988 the first to treat magic realism as a globalized, post-colonial phenomenon. In his article "Magic Realism as Post-colonial Discourse" that the locus for critical studies on magic realism has been broadened outward from Latin America and the Caribbean to include speculations on its place in the literatures of India, Nigeria, and English Canada.<sup>9</sup> Since Slemon there has been a boom in the literary research on magic realism that has expended all over the world. Magic realism becomes more of a cross-cultural phenomenon. As Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris state in 1995 in the introduction of their book *Magical Realism: Theory, History and Community*: "It is true that Latin Americanists have been prime movers in developing the critical concept of magical realism and are still primary voices in its discussion, but this collection considers magical realism as an international

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<sup>6</sup> A. Flores, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction" from *Hispania*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (May, 1955), p. 188

<sup>7</sup> Flores, "Magical Realism", p. 189 - 190

<sup>8</sup> Alejo Carpentier states in his essay "On the Marvelous Real in America" that in Latin America, the fantastic does not come forth by subverting or transcending reality with abstract forms and manufactured combinations of images. "The fantastic inheres in the natural and human realities of time and place, where improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America's varied history, geography, demography and politics." His articles are to be found in *Magical Realism: Theory, History and Community*, edited by Zamora and Faris.

<sup>9</sup> Slemon, Stephen. "Magic realism as postcolonial discourse." *Canadian literature* 116.1 (1988): p. 9

commodity [...] magical realism is especially alive and well in postcolonial contexts and is now achieving a compensatory extension of its market worldwide.”<sup>10</sup> And Zamora and Faris are not alone on this one. In 2005, scholar Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang write in the introduction “Globalization of Magical Realism: New Politics of aesthetics” to the book *A Companion to Magical Realism* that magical realism has been very successful in migrating to various cultural shores.<sup>11</sup> And while the term migrates across continents, it also has proven to be migrating across various art-forms, such as visual art, literature and audiovisual art.

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<sup>10</sup> Faris & Zamora, introduction to *Magical Realism: Theory, History and Community*, ed. L.P. Zamora and W. B. Faris. (London: Duke University Press, 1995), 2

<sup>11</sup> Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, introduction to *A Companion to Magical Realism*, ed. By Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang (Woodbrige: Tamesis, 2005)

## CHAPTER 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF MAGIC REALISM

The problem of defining magic realism (or magical realism or marvelous realism)<sup>12</sup> lies in the fact that there are so many different definitions, and that is being used in reference to so many works of art from various cultures and coming in various forms (visual arts, literature and audiovisual arts). This variety of theoretical formulations results in an even more unclear usage of the term. As scholar Jean- Pierre Durix states: “commentators have used that term ‘magic realism’ to refer to so many different works of art that the term has largely lost its value for making distinctions between genres.”<sup>13</sup> It is not surprising to see that many critics have abandoned the term all together. In this chapter I will try to get things straight.

With the emergence of magic realism in the works of Franz Roh, there has never been one to give the term a definition. Roh provided us subsequently in 1925 and 1958 with lists of characteristics in comparison to expressionism. Art critic Wieland Schmidt provided us with one as well in 1969 in his book *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland 1918 – 1933*. In his book *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981*, Seymour Menton presents a discussion of the most salient features of magic realism:

### 1. Ultra sharp focus

According to Menton, an ultra-sharp focus is the single most dominant feature of magic realist painting. However this technique originated in the fifteenth century, present-day heirs of the magic realists, the hyper, super or photo realists, also employ this ultra-sharp focus to invest their paintings with a magic quality.

### 2. Objectivity

For practitioners of magic realism, objectivity had two meanings: the opposite of subjectivity and an interest in objects or things. The magic realists portrayed people, landscapes and still lifes with an apparent objectivity that eliminated the presence of the artist. The other meaning subscribed to objectivity is the equal importance of animate and inanimate objects for painters and literati.

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<sup>12</sup> In the books that I've used for my research different names for the same phenomenon came across. magic realism, magical realism, marvelous realism or the marvelous real are in these one and the same thing. I've chosen to use only 'magic realism' in my essay.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Pierre Durix, *Mimesis, Genres and Post-Colonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism*. (New York: Macmillan St. Martin's Press, 1998) , 116

### 3. Coldness

Magic realist art and literature are calculated to appeal much more to the intellect than to the emotions.

### 4. Close and far view: Centripetal

As said before, the magic realist paintings provoke the intellectual response, by the viewers' attention being purposely divided. The spectator's eye is being moved all over the canvas, from one portion of the picture to another. This mosaic-type composition is also characteristic for some magic realist novels.

### 5. Effacement of the painting process: thin, smooth paint surface

Magic realists conceal their brush strokes and do not strive for special effects by using thick layers of paint. They try to create the illusion of a photograph. In literature, some writers also create magic effects by their skillful use of simple, everyday language.

### 6. Miniature, naïve

Evident in many magic realist canvasses is the creation of a toy like world. Also in literature this may be seen in a playful way in which actions and happenings are described.

### 7. Representational

Magic realism injects a touch of magic in reality. Fantastic realism portrays a fantastic world in a realistic way. Magic realism is based on the representation of what is possible but not probable.<sup>14</sup>

After the emergence of magic realism as a style in pictorial art, it was used in reference to literature more and more. However the concept of magic realism is also a troubled one, most critics generally agree about the bottom line. As scholar Edwin Williamson states:

“At the level of simple definition there can be little disagreement: magic realism is a narrative style which consistently blurs the traditional realist distinction between fantasy and reality. Beyond this,

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<sup>14</sup> 1 t/m 7 are all cited from Menton, Seymour. *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981*, (London: Art Alliance Press, 1983) 19 - 24



critical opinion is divided as to whether magical realism is entirely self-referring or whether it establishes a new kind of relationship between fiction and reality.”<sup>15</sup>

Even this simplistic kind of description is certainly open for debate, since a term like “blurs” is simply vague and very much open for interpretation. However the statement that magic realism in literature is a narrative style is a safe one. The trademarks of this style are being described by several scholars in several different ways. As said before, Flores is the first to describe magic realism as a literary style in his essay from 1955. Every writer he mentions in his essay, all have one binding stylistic factor that make them magic realists: “ Meticulous craftsmen all, one finds in them the same preoccupation with style and also the same transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal.”<sup>16</sup> He then offers us a detailed description of the specific literary style that the magic realist novelists practice. According to Flores:

“The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent "literature" from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms. The narrative proceeds in well-prepared, increasingly intense steps, which ultimately may lead to one great ambiguity or confusion, "Verwirrung innerhalb der Klarheit," to a confusion within clarity, to borrow a term used by the Austrian novelist Joseph Roth in a slightly different context.”<sup>17</sup>

Ever since Flores' article appeared in 1955, many works have been written that are now being called magic realist. In 1985, A. B. Chanady gave in her book *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* a general overview of what she considered to be the traits of magic realism on which most critics agreed. The first one she mentions is the occurrence of the “supernatural, or anything that is contrary to our conventional view of reality”.<sup>18</sup> However, this fictional world is not entirely divorced from reality. Chanady explains: “Magic realism is thus characterized first of all by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent perspectives, one based on an “enlightened” and rational view of reality, and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as

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15 Williamson, E. cited in Schannin Schroeder, *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas*, (Westport, Conn. : Praeger, 2004 )p. 5

16 A. Flores, “ Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction” from *Hispania*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (May, 1955), 187-192

17 Flores, “Magical Realism”, p. 191

18 Chanady, A.B. *Magical realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus unresolved Antinomy*. (New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1985), 18

a part of everyday reality."<sup>19</sup> The occurrence of the supernatural in a magic realism text is not presented as problematic. Next to that the supernatural also not perceived by the reader as such. According to Chanady, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, because it is antinomious. The reader and the characters in the text are therefore not trying to find a natural explanation for it.<sup>20</sup> The second trait that Chanady mentions is that magic realism doesn't create an entirely different fictional world, nor does it stick to reality. The narrator of a magic realism text transforms reality by creating a world we cannot integrate within our normal codes of perception.<sup>21</sup>

These traits are being repeated in several other works on magic realism in literature, such as Durix: "according to our most restrictive definition of the term, the magic realist aims at a basis of mimetic illusion while destroying it regularly with a strange treatment of time, space characters or what many people take as the basic rules of the physical world." Also scholar Angulo states in her book on magic realism in literature that magic realism is a narrative discourse, that attempts to "create new realities or to treat the existing ones with a different perspective that that of social realism from the 1930s."<sup>22</sup> Novels are listed as 'magic realist' because they express in fiction the multifaceted and complex aspects of Latin American reality. This mode has become a new way of writing, transcending the limits of the fantastic by entering the social realm.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Chanady, A.B. *Magical realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus unresolved Antinomy*. (New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1985) 21-22

<sup>20</sup> Chanady, *Magical Realism*, 23-24

<sup>21</sup> Chanady, *Magical Realism*, 27

<sup>22</sup> Angulo, M. E. *Magical Realism, social context and discourse* Garland Publishing Inc. New York, London, 1995,

p. xi

<sup>23</sup> Angulo, *Magical Realism*, p. 106

### CHAPTER 3: MAGIC REALISM IN CINEMA, THEORY

According to scholar Maggie Ann Bowers, “Film is not often considered as magic(al) realist in criticism and neither magic realism nor magical realism are recognized categories of film. However, it is possible to recognize features of both magic realism and magical realism in many films”.<sup>24</sup> There have not been many scholars to investigate this subject. Taking the limited amount of research around, it is best to start with Frederic Jameson's essay *On Magic Realism in Film*, published in 1986.

Jameson’s theories about magic realism in film are very complicated, and cannot be applied to modern films at all, but they are often used as source when it comes to magic realism in cinema. Also, for many decades, Jameson’s essay was the only source you would find on magic realism in film. A brief overview of his theory might help to clarify the matter. Jameson starts with explaining the purpose of his essay, which is trying to explore further that magic realism is to be grasped as a “possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary post-modernism.”<sup>25</sup> According to Jameson, magical realism in cinema has three shared features:

“these are all historical films; the very different color of each constitutes a unique supplement and the source of a peculiar pleasure, or fascination, or jouissance, in its own right; in each, finally, the dynamic of narrative has somehow been reduced, concentrated, and simplified, by the attention to violence (and, to a lesser degree, sexuality).”<sup>26</sup>

These three features strike him as constitutive of magic realism. In cinema, magical realism embodies an anthropological view of literary magic realism. Magic realism comes forth as: “not a realism to be transfigured by the “supplement” of a magical perspective but a reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic.”<sup>27</sup> Jameson sees magic realism as a new kind of relationship with history. In his essay he tries to capture the magic realist experience in film. Jameson’s critical approach explores the images of film by using the same techniques used by visual art critics. He analyses several Latin American films produced during the 1980s which use the same cold, de-

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<sup>24</sup> Bowers, M. A. *Magic(al) Realism*. (New York: Routledge, 2004) , 104

<sup>25</sup> Jameson, Frederic. “On Magic Realism in Film” in *Critical Inquiry* , Vol. 12, No. 2 (Winter, 1986), p. 202

<sup>26</sup> Jameson, “On Magic Realism in Film, 303

<sup>27</sup> Jameson, “On Magic Realism in Film, 311

tailed, close focus approach of magic realist painting as outlined by Franz Roh, to portray the shocking reality of gratuitous violence.<sup>28</sup>

Almost two decades later, scholar Maggie Ann Bowers devotes a chapter in the book *Magic(al) Realism* to magic realism in cinema. She starts with investigating the adaptations from magic realism novels to films. According to her, the analysis of film adaptations of magical realist novels from the page to the screen provides a means to consider how the visual elements affect the narrative magical realism.<sup>29</sup> In this chapter she takes an analytical approach to several film adaptations, but considers also another film that had not been derived from a book: *Being John Malkovich* (1999). All the films that she considers in her chapter have magic realist features, mainly in the fact that there is the “real” world, with some magical features in it that everyone seems to accept. For example, in *Being John Malkovich* (1999):

“This film is set in a world recognizable to the viewer but with one unusual element. The protagonist of the film, a young clerk, finds himself working on ‘the seventh-and-a-half floor’, which has half the ceiling height of any other floor. The unusual quality of the floor is accepted without question by the other workers. Both the protagonist and the viewer also become accustomed to the unusual setting of the story and this prepares both to accept the absurd discovery of a magical portal behind a cupboard into the brain of the actor John Malkovich. [...] The magical realism of the film is made clear by the unsurprised acceptance of the magic by the majority of the characters. This is supported by highly realistic details of the set.”<sup>30</sup>

To conclude, she states that all these film have a common aspect: the magic realist element of the film acts as a means of initiating questions concerning philosophical issues such as the existence of God, the role of fate, and the idea of the self that extend beyond the film’s capacity to divert and entertain.<sup>31</sup>

In 2005, the book *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* by Robert Stam took theory on magic realism in cinema a little further. In this book Stam devotes the last chapter to magic realism in literature and cinema, and the adaptation of it. In his introduction

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<sup>28</sup> Jameson, Frederic. *On Magic Realism in Film* cited in Bowers, M. A. *Magic(al) Realism*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 104

<sup>29</sup> Bowers, M. A. *Magic(al) Realism*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 105

<sup>30</sup> Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, p. 109

<sup>31</sup> Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, p. 109

he states that cinema, as a technology of representation, is ideally equipped to magically multiply times and spaces. When it comes to narrative, the magic realist approach interrogates realism by spinning out a delirious fusion of improbable tales.<sup>32</sup> Stam presents in his book an analysis of filmic adaptations of magic realist writers Gabriel Garcia Màrquez and Alejo Carpentier. He provides less information on magic realist movies that are not deprived from books. What about those? Who is calling them magic realist and why?

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<sup>32</sup> Introduction to Stam, Robert. *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*, (Maiden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005)

## CHAPTER 4: MAGIC REALISM CINEMA: PRACTICE

Magic realism in cinema is a subject that has not been up for investigation that much. There is little information from academic research available. There are however many films that people say to be magic realist. While searching for the terms 'magic realism' on the popular website IMDB.com, the website presents a list of 516 movies, starting with Federico Fellini's 'La Strada'. IMDB uses the words 'magic realism' not to point out a genre, but as keywords that have a connection to the list of movies presented. Wikipedia.org does the same, but presents only 16 films. Is magic realism being misused and misunderstood? Are film critics and producers too willing to tag films as magic realist?

There is a great variety of professional and non-professional sources when it comes to magic realism in cinema. The website [tvtropes.org](http://tvtropes.org) states that:

“One of the easiest ways to distinguish magical realism from other genres is the use given to the omniscient/omnipresent narrator device which can be used one way or another. Should the story be told from a first person perspective, then the work in question tends to side more with other genres. Another feature is that the magic which affects reality comes either from a plurality of sources, such as god, black magic, spirits, all at the same time; or from no source at all, being like the weather instead. It might be worthwhile to point that usually there is a strong correlation between magical realism and surrealism.”<sup>33</sup>

The arguments and explanations in this article make it pretty believable although it is an amateur-made text. This does not count for every text made by an amateur. While looking on the internet I stumbled across various listings of “magic realist” movies, made by mostly amateur critics. There are some Top 10 lists that actually make good sense, with a description and some argumentation added to it. For example, Fantasy Magazine's Top Ten Magical Realist film, written by Genevieve Valentine who is a columnist and a writer, has clearly checked her sources, using information from

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<sup>33</sup> “Magic Realism” on [tvtropes.org](http://tvtropes.org), cited on 8-01-2013, url: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MagicRealism>

literary research by scholars.<sup>34</sup> The maker of Hollywood's Magical Realism list on *listal.com* clearly has not, taking the broad definition of "reality mixed with fantasy" as a guideline. The list varies from films like *George of the Jungle (1997)* to *Sucker Punch (2011)*.<sup>35</sup> Without description or argumentation. Others even state that magic realism in cinema is a subgenre of fantasy<sup>36</sup>. Often they don't present a list of sources with these claims, which makes it even more difficult to determine reliability and correctness.

There are also professional art- and film critics who give their vision on magic realism in cinema. This happens mostly in film reviews, handling only one film and examining it closely. Earlier in 2012, magic realism in cinema emerged in public debate on the internet with the film *Beats of the Southern Wild (2012)*, directed by Ben Zeitlin. Tom Shone, former film critic of the *Sunday Times* and the author of "Blockbuster" said some magic-related things about this film:

"On the outskirts of the swamp sits a city belching pollution—a grey Oz. There are melting icecaps, and a flood, and finally monsters, but none of it amounts to a plot, any more than the wanderings of Odysseus did, thousands of years ago. Instead, Zeitlin tunes into the lyrical voodoo of childhood with a liquid feel for sequence and consequence: to Hushpuppy, a blow to her father's chest arrives like a thunderclap. A missing mother sounds her Siren call. This has to have been the movie playing in Spike Jonze's head when he made "Where the Wild Things Are": a howl-at-the-heavens ode to being child king, feet planted in the mud and mess of America, head filled with myth and magic. [...] Maybe that's how America should look on screen right now, I thought as I left the cinema. Maybe that's the American genre now: magic realism. It used to be realism, at the movies as much as on the page, but the role of national chronicler has largely fallen to television these days."<sup>37</sup>

The transmission from realism to magic realism in American films has been noticed by more film critics. Phil Hoad from British newspaper *The Guardian* discusses in his article "Beasts of the Southern Wild: America's new magical realism" a possibly cinematic reflection of America as a

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<sup>34</sup> Valentine, Genevieve "Top Ten Magical Realism Films" on *fantasy-magazine.com*, June 2010. Url: <http://www.fantasy-magazine.com/non-fiction/top-ten-magical-realism-films/>

<sup>35</sup> "Hollywoods Magical Realism" on *listal.com*, 10 october 2008, url: <http://www.fantasy-magazine.com/non-fiction/top-ten-magical-realism-films/>

<sup>36</sup> "The Shadowy Realistic Types of Fantasy: Magical Realism, Mythic Fiction, and Mythpunk" on *fantasy-faction.com*, Sunday, February 26, 2012. url: <http://fantasy-faction.com/2012/the-shadowy-realistic-types-of-fantasy-magical-realism-mythic-fiction-and-mythpunk>

<sup>37</sup> Shone, Tom "Amercian Exotic" in *Intelligent Life*, september/oktober 2012, cited on 24-01-2013. URL: <http://moreintelligentlife.com/content/arts/american-exotic>

nation. The question he poses is: as the nation's global power diminishes, are US movies retreating into the imagination, celebrating and grieving a culture washed away?<sup>38</sup> Hoad talks in this about several films from the past few years, such as *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), *Seeking A Friend For The End Of The World* (2012) and *Winters Bone*. Hoad wonders: "But is Shone right? Could Southern Wild's thundering auroch hooves, the echoes of cataclysm in the mind of its six-year-old heroine, Hushpuppy, be beating a new path forward for US cinema towards magical realism?"<sup>39</sup> However not every film different from realism can be marked as magic realism, Hoad has noticed a shift in American story making, one from doing to thinking. Imagination has grown heavy to the point of overflowing. Films like *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) are a result from this. Hoad: "Beasts of the Southern Wild could be where these forces stampede into a full-blown magical realist movement: the film has had a lively critical whirling, and stands as good a chance of being an aesthetic game-changer as any."<sup>40</sup>

In short, if we ask ourselves the question: who is saying that there is such a thing as magic realism in cinema, we can state that there is a vast majority that doesn't know the phenomenon at all. Very few professional or amateur film critics make an attempt to explore the subject (and I don't mean just making a list, but treating the subject with a little bit of academic curiosity, whether you are a film student or scholar or not). It appears that producers, on the other hand, do not (yet) want to get involved in this matter. The only films that are categorized as magic realist by them are adaptations of books categorized as magic realism novels (like *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (1992)). Because of the established literary genre and the adaptation of a 'true' magic realist story to the screen, this is a rather safe categorization.<sup>41</sup>

Films like the ones I mentioned before are not being merchandised as magic realist. This can be explained by the function and the use of the genre concept *an sich*. The practice of classifying works of art into genres has various functions. First of all it is a guideline, which helps us to determine which film we want to watch today. Next to that a genre is a categorization that helps

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<sup>38</sup> Hoad, Paul. "Beasts of the Southern Wild: America's new magical realism" *The Guardian Online*, Tuesday 16 October 2012, cited on 24-01-2013 URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2012/oct/16/beasts-southern-wild-hollywood-magical-realism>

<sup>39</sup> Hoad, "Beasts of the Southern Wild: America's new magical realism"

<sup>40</sup> Hoad, "Beasts of the Southern Wild: America's new magical realism"

<sup>41</sup> However there is also a debate about what adaptation from literature to screen actually does to the genre. Is it really the same or not? Check Stam, Robert. *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* or Bowers, M. A. *Magic(al) Realism*.



to write film history. Thirdly, there is an economic motive to classify films into genres: it is seen as a rational system for producing and exploiting images.<sup>42</sup> In the book *Cinema Genre* Moine, Radner and Fox dive further in the concept of genre in cinema, describing what it is, where it is used and what for. According to these authors a genre only exists if it is recognized as such by a community. “A genre comes in to being when it organizes a set of semantic features into a stable syntax – that is, when a filmic formula is put in place that is recognizable to a public audience, and to which film attach themselves through different levels of generity.”<sup>43</sup> According to Moine et al. this is the case when filmmakers (producers, screenwriters, directors etc.) are able to conceive it as relating to a genre, while viewers are able to respond to the film as such.<sup>44</sup> A genre must be recognizable in a film. So because the phenomenon of magic realism in cinema is not clear for the audience, producers won’t dare to make statements about it and categorize films as such. On the other hand, there is much disagreement on the way which films should attach them to magic realism. Magic realism is not (yet) a cinema genre. It is safer to state that some films that are being categorized by people as magic realist, share the same stylistic or narrative components. However, the differences between these films are still too big to be calling them all together part of a genre. The features these films share remain too shallow.

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<sup>42</sup> Introduction to Raphaëlle Moine; Hilary Radner; Alistair Fox, *Cinema Genre* (Malden, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)

<sup>43</sup> Raphaëlle Moine; Hilary Radner; Alistair Fox, *Cinema Genre* (Malden, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 62

<sup>44</sup> Moine et al. *Cinema Genre*, 62

## CONCLUSION

In this inquiry I have tried to explain the phenomenon of magic realism as cross-cultural and cross-art phenomenon. I focused especially on the latest development around magic realism, and the use of the term in reference to cinema. In the first chapter I gave a short overview of magic realism throughout history and various art forms. In the second chapter I have presented the general characteristics assigned to magic realism in painting, literature and post-colonial literature. I have devoted the third chapter to magic realism and cinema, its characteristics according to scholars but also the practical use of it. The last chapter concerns the use of magic realism in relation to cinema.

The questions I have posed in my introduction have been answered in this research project. Magic realism has appeared to have roots in various art forms, starting with visual arts and, later, literature. Magic realism appeared to be a phenomenon that shifted cross-cultural and cross-art form. But as Durix stated (Chapter 2) “commentators have used that term ‘magic realism’ to refer to so many different works of art that the term has largely lost its value for making distinctions between genres.”<sup>45</sup> I wouldn’t say that the term magic realism has lost its value, but the use of it across time made a secure definition pretty hard to make, especially when it moved on to cinema. When the only magic realism films were book adaptations, the direct connection between the forms of magic realism was clear. After that, magic realism was used in cinema in a continually broader sense. When it comes to magic realism in cinema, professional academic sources are scarce. However some do try to grasp the concept, magic realism in cinema can’t be listed as an established genre, a clear category to list films in. Although maybe the filmic genre is still in emergence, I am not sure if there will ever be a clear ‘magic realism’ genre in cinema. The use of it should then be narrowed and people should come into agreement about the stylistic features. Maybe it is best to just sit back, and let your mind go along with the imagination and the magic. After all, the medium of film loans itself for this perfectly.

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<sup>45</sup> Jean-Pierre Durix, *Mimesis, Genres and Post-Colonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism*. (New York: Macmillan St. Martin’s Press, 1998) , 116

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