

THE ALLOHISTORIES OF MAGIC REALISM FRANZ ROH AND THE MAGIC REALIST MODE¹

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Abstract:

History as narrative, turning away from the material universe and folding in upon itself in an act of language, is further understood as a matter of tropes by Hayden White (Metahistory, 1975) and of determinism by Ferguson, but not a determinism of causes and effects in the progress of mankind through time; this determinism is actually the set of rules and constraints governing the making of stories:” the teleology of the traditional narrative form” (Ferguson 1997: 65). Yet can we say that the fiction falling under the headings of historiographic metafiction or magical realism, where there is a historicist view of history as succession of styles rather than as organic development from one age to another, is characterized by a teleological design? The answer is no. The oxymoronic names suggest an uneasy blending of opposites. What was realistic and what was magic in the early twentieth century when Franz Roh, photographer, collagist and art historian coined the phrase?

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Magic realism-a kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the 'reliable' tone of objective realistic report. Designating a tendency of the modern novel to reach beyond the confines of realism and draw upon the energies of fable, folk tale, and myth while maintaining a strong contemporary social relevance. The fantastic attributes given to characters in such novels-levitation, flight, telepathy, telekinesis-are among the means that magic realism adopts in order to encompass the often phantasmagoric political realities of the 20th century (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms).

Magic realism [is characterized by] the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, bizarre and skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealist description, arcane erudition, the elements of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable (A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory). Magic realism-the frame or surface of the work may be conventionally realistic, but contrasting elements-such as supernatural myth, dream fantasy-invade the realism and change the whole basis of the art (Handbook to Literature, Harmon ed.).

Lo real maravilloso-for the practice of Latin American writers who mix everyday realities with imaginative extravaganzas drawn from the rich interplay of European and native cultures.[Writers] enlarge a reader's ordinary sense of the real to include magic, myth, hallucination and miracles (Handbook to Literature, Harper ed.).

Magic realism-the capacity to enrich our idea of what is 'real' by incorporating all dimensions of the imagination, particularly as expressed in magic, myth and religion (Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia).

Keywords: magic realism; modern fiction; juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic; expressionistic, surrealist description.

Franz Roh and the magic realist mode

The idea of determinism seems to be cycling through history. Theocratic history (based upon the assumption that the history of mankind is embedded within the Biblical narrative from the Genesis to The Last Judgement) was teleological. The original sin was to be washed away through Christ and Christ himself was to be the judge (The Lamb) in eschatological perspective.

Teleological are also the rival philosophies of the nineteenth century: Hegelianism (affirming the presence of the World Spirit in the phenomenal world), and Marxism, whose teleological design was to be accomplished by the proletariat.

History as narrative, turning away from the material universe and folding in upon itself in an act of language, is further understood as a matter of tropes by Hayden White (*Metahistory*, 1975) and of determinism by Ferguson, but not a determinism of causes and effects in the progress of mankind through time; this determinism is actually the set of rules and constraints governing the making of stories:” the teleology of the traditional narrative form”. (Ferguson, 1997, p. 65) Yet can we say that the fiction falling under the headings of historiographic metafiction or magical realism, where there is a historicist view of history as succession of styles rather than as organic development from one age to another, is characterized by a teleological design? The answer is no. The oxymoronic names suggest an uneasy blending of opposites. What was realistic and what was magic in the early twentieth century when Franz Roh, photographer, collagist and art historian coined the phrase?

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miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the elements of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable. (Cuddon, 2013, pp. 416-417)

The word that best defines magical realism is hybridity, which results from the transgression of all boundaries. There is no gap anymore, between one ontological order and the other, but they are no longer felt as distinct. In other words, we do not experience a crisis of representation, the strange overlap is to be taken as a valid one, the only one.

Its hybrid time is the confluence of different calendric measurements. History measured according to the Hegira time is running in parallel to the one including events such as the French Revolution in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*. Political rivalry leading to assassinations brings Robespierre and Danton, Raza Hyder and Iskander Harapa (alias Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq) together. The two calendars are thus placed in relation through similar events. In comparison to classical history as progress through time, historicism was the effect of the cyclic view of history, which means the end of history. Nietzsche speaks of the existence of an immobile structure that cycles back through time in *The Second Untimely Meditation*. It was this view of history that nourished the historicist view of history as a matter of styles, with correspondences between different layers:

Its hybrid space is the intersection of the world out there and the one of the imagination, which, as the narrator of *Shame* says, runs obliquely to the former. As Roh embraces his worldly outlook on spirituality in order to define the new art, he resorts to Wölfflin's recurrent history of artistic currents and philosophies. In Roh's

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opinion, artistic evolution inexplicably blends the past and present together:

It is the phenomenon of rebirths or reinsertions, in other words, of those secret or conscious relationships which are established between two spans of evolution when a new spirituality invoked an older spirituality which corresponds to it. (Roh, as cited in Gee, 2013, p. 95)

As far as photography is concerned, it is obvious that the blending of images typical of avant-garde experimentation – be they translucent images in photograms or simply the juxtaposition of some isolated images in photomontage – indicates to Roh an interweaving of realities which intersect or converge in a spatial universe controlled by the artist aided by light and the devices. (Gee, 2013, p. 95).

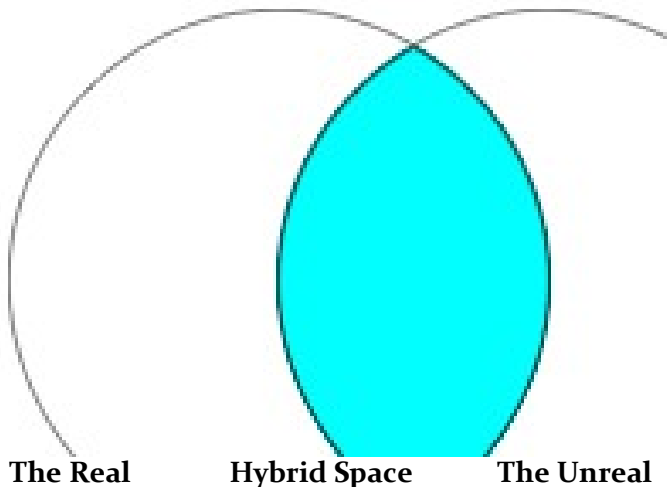


Fig. 1: Hybrid Space of Magic Realism

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The language of magic realism is also mixed, a generic hybrid, authors being often both writers and artists:

As a hybrid mode of the plastic and the textual, magic realism is constantly evolving, appropriating 'new' media to examine the exterior world from unexpected angles, what Roh refers to as a metamorphosis in perception. The extraordinary and strange is juxtaposed with the mundane in experimental, self-referential art in which photography, collage, film, and written word overlap. (Gee, 2013, p. 3)

It was in 1986 that Fredric Jameson dubbed the hybridity and inconclusiveness of magic realism as 'seductive', authoring his first full-length survey of cinematic magic realism, considering the term as a substitute to what he calls 'nostalgia' or 'generation' films. Gee further contends that:

Tracing magic realism from its emergence as a European modernist mode, through its developments in Latin America, it becomes evident that it has particular value as an ontological framework with which to express and examine points of socio-historical crisis." (Gee, 2013, p. 3)

In the passage above, the magic realist mode is defined in its totality. Within the picture, one can distinguish between formal features (photography, collage, etc.) and what Frederic Jameson calls "geopolitical aesthetics." We are actually speaking about two traditions. European magic realism evolved out of surrealist experiments in the earlier twentieth century as well as a movement claiming objectivity and precision – *Die neue*

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Sichlichkeit (*The New Objectivity*) – whereas the “Marvelous Real in America” (the title of Carpentier’s 1949 essay, a manifesto) fed on the many local mythologies of the races brought together by colonialism. The Latin American version is closer to politics and to mythology, Marquez, for instance, claiming to narrate the way his grandmother used to. That allohistories circulated in those archaic communities, infused with elements of folklore, superstitions, were running in parallel to official history.

Origins

Franz Roh is considered the art historian and artist who coined the phrase, magic realism, and who defined the new style as the encounter of the real and the unreal, as a return to reality, but one that very reality had something in it which made it look strange, unfamiliar, *unheimlich* (Freud’s term in *Das Unheimliche*, 1919) for that which ought to be familiar, heimlich, yet is perceived as strange by the sick, psychotic mind. It was only that the artists of the early twentieth century, living in the contexts of political turmoil, economic crisis, preparations for a world conflagration, in the devastated postwar society, disputed between extremists of the right and of the left claimed that reality was indeed abnormal filling everybody with anxiety:

We recognize the world, although now-not only because we have emerged from a dream-we look on it with new eyes. We are offered a new style that is thoroughly of this world that celebrates the mundane. This new world of objects is still alien to the current idea of Realism. It employs various techniques that endow all things with a deeper meaning and reveal mysteries that always threaten the secure tranquility of simple and ingenuous things. This [art offers a] calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery

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that things already have their own faces, [this] means that the ground in which the most diverse ideas in the world can take root has been reconquered--albeit in new ways. 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, 1925, pp. 15-32.)

The art works of the period breathe forth a sense of mysterious threats and danger, of the excessive presence of state control and policing, of corruption and beastliness, of doubtful destination of man's plight in the world.

When Roh adopts his secular vision of spirituality to define the new art, he employs Wölfflin's cyclical history of art movements and philosophies. Roh's vision of artistic evolution layers the past and present mysteriously together: "It is the phenomenon of rebirths or reinsertions, in other words, of those secret or conscious relationships which are established between two spans of evolution when a new spirituality invoked an older spirituality which corresponds to it." With regard to photography, it is evident that the layering of images characteristic of avant-garde experimentation – whether the translucent images in the photograms or the juxtaposition of several separate images in photomontage – suggests to Roh a weaving of realities that intersect or converge in a spatial realm manipulated by the artist with the help of light and the apparatus. (Gee 2013: 95) (our emphasis)

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Fig. 2 Franz Roh: "Peace-Time Murder Victim" (from the album *Photo-Eye*, 1929 published together with Jan Tschichold

Peace-Time Murder Victim (Fig. 2) is the photo of a murder file of the police, but the camera is used in a way which allows of a sinister interpretation. The first image is that of the victim lying on a platform in the underground or in a railway station. The second photo superimposes the image of the victim and that of a man in a military uniform, making him appear to be the murderer. The suggestion of the brutality of the Nazi officer is reinforced by the caption: the man in uniform is probably the perpetrator of behind the murder, and the only difference is that between crimes of war and in peace time perpetrated by him.

Alfred Kubin, who evolved from symbolism to expressionism, published a novel with fifty-two drawings which is significantly entitled *Die andere Seite* (*The Other Side*). The plot shuttles between reality and dream, an Asian Dreamland forming a Janus figure with the visible world. The imagined land is a dystopic one, abounding in

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cruelty, evil and corruption. The author's need to merge text and image together is suggestive of the importance of the visual element which cannot be translated into the common language of reasonable argument but institutes a distinct plane of mixed ontologies.

Kubin's drawings play on the grotesque and morbidity, with time frozen in the hour of death (Fig.3), and with a monster's mouth as the ultimate destination of generations. (Fig. 4), with supposed saviors (policeman, doctor) turned criminals (Fig. 5)

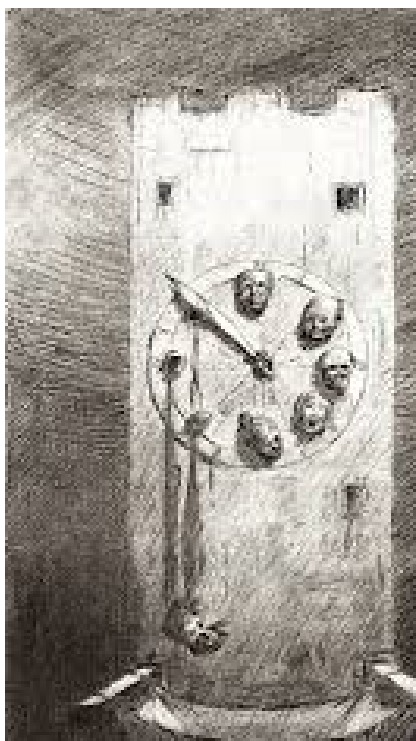


Fig. 3 Alfred Kubin, *Die Todesstunde*, 1903

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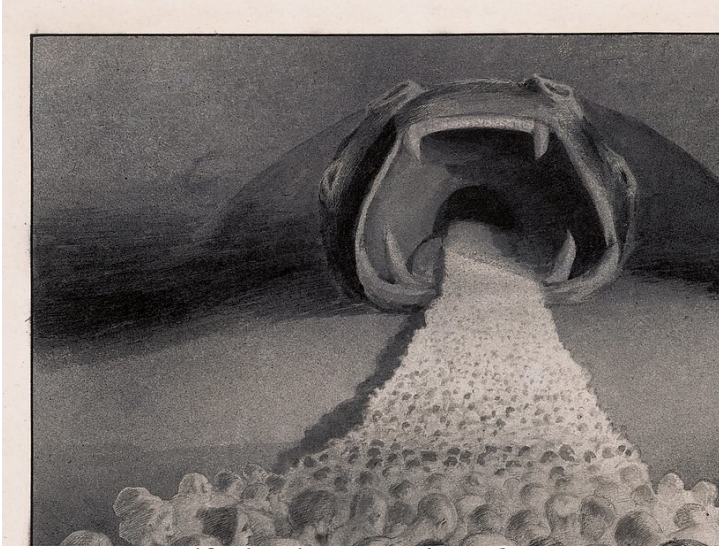


Fig. 4: Alfred Kubin, *Into the Unknown* 1900-01

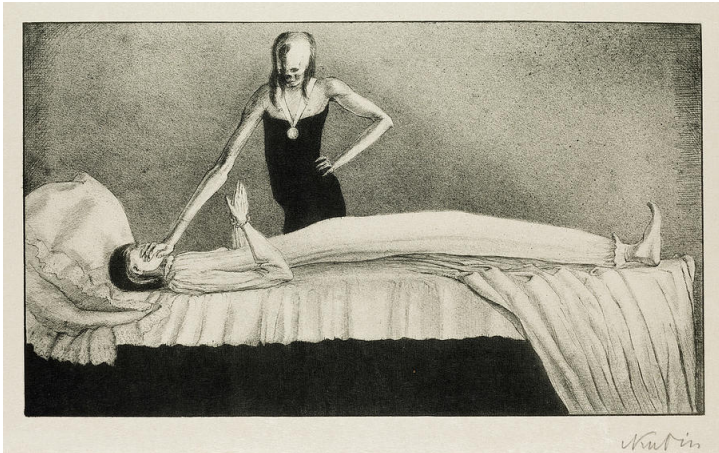


Fig. 5: Alfred Kubin, *The Best Physician*, 1903

Kubin's political drawings are targeting the state machinery – insensitive, totalitarian, betraying its mission: the equipment for harvesting crops is harvesting lives, that is, it has become an infernal war machinery. (Fig. 6)

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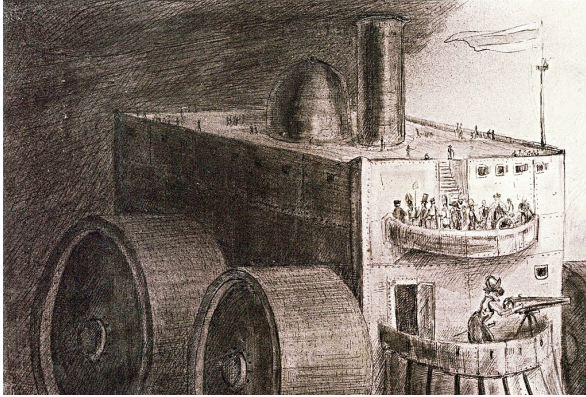


Fig. 6. Alfred Kubin, *The State 1899-1900*

The effeminate 'last king' in Kubin's 1902 drawing (Fig. 7) speaks of the crisis affecting European dynasties, generating political tensions of the kind that took Dostoevsky in front of the firing squad. The hooded heads and the torch associate the king with a medieval host of monks or crusaders – the panoply of the Ancient Regime.

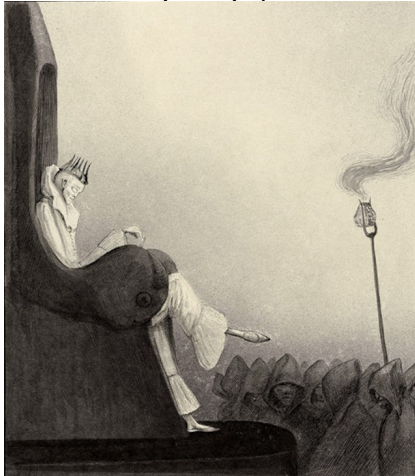


Fig. 7: Alfred Kubin, *The Last King*, 1902

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De Chirico's metaphysical art was actually meant to recover the true sense of reality, which, as he says in an essay, had been desecrated (*Desecrated Reality*) in the name of the abusive regimes which were in power in Europe at that moment and which threatened to ruin the continent. De Chirico discovered in reality, as he writes in his diary, “a host of strange, unknown and solitary things that can be translated into painting” (De Chirico, 2013, p. 259).

His paintings which marked the beginning of the 1st World War – *The Sailors' Barracks*, *The General's Illness* and *The Evil Genius of a King* – suggest through the coexistence of heterogeneous objects, mathematical or mysterious, unknown, the disorder of the continent, the chaos out of which the war broke out.

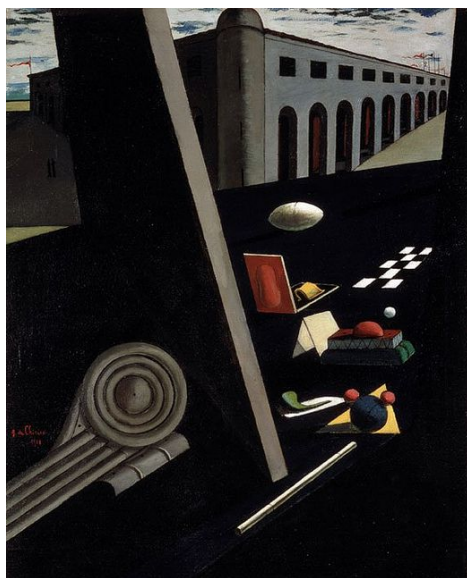


Fig. 8: Giorgio de Chirico: *The Sailors' Barracks*

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Fig. 9: De Chirico: *The General's Illness*, 1914



Fig. 10: Giorgio de Chirico: *The Evil Genius of a King*, 1915

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The objects can in general be identified with some precision, even if distorted, but they are placed on impossible planes, in unstable positions, and the whole combination looks maddening:

The *Evil Genius of a King* is far stronger and brighter in color than the still lifes and architectural scenes of 1913 and early 1914; it is in fact more brilliant in tone than many of the paintings de Chirico was to complete at Ferrara in 1916 and 1917. Quite likely the picture was completed very late in 1914 or early in 1915. Indeed, its title and those of *The General's Illness* and *The Sailors' Barracks* suggest that all three works were painted after the outbreak of war in August 1914. De Chirico speaks in his autobiography of his shock and horror at the advent of war, and the ironic titles of the three still lifes may allude, however indirectly, to the events at hand. (Soby, 1955, p. 101)

Magic realism is another name for historiographic metafiction. We have analyzed the dramatic, foreboding context of its emergence in the early twentieth century when it replaced expressionism, its hybrid generic constitution, its alliance with other arts and emphatic reliance upon the visual element. We have distinguished between the two main traditions of magic realism, the European one, which is closer to surrealism and a matter of formal experiments, and the Latin-American one, which is intimately connected with the local folklore, beliefs, superstitions, and which is also more involved in politics, especially as a protest against totalitarianism.

Hybridity is one of the buzz words of postmodernity, but if it applies to genre, the process goes back a long time, the change yielding sometimes the very

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opposite of the prototype, for instance the comic rewriting of the epic tradition in *Satyricon*. Two aspects of this issue seem to be more consequential when it concerns the condition of fantasy nowadays. The first is whether hybridity is truly characteristic of the chronotopes sustaining the fictional worlds or rather of the critical and theoretical discourses about them, and secondly, if generic hybridity is still a symptom of a fragmented culture or on the contrary, a tendency towards a holistic understanding of the world. Philip Wegner's *Shockwaves of Possibilities*, 2014, for instance, unites science fiction and utopia under the sign of a historical process – globalization. Science fiction is being retooled so as to be responsive to emerging realities of globalization. Apparently, as globalization affects all spheres of activity – social cultural political, economic – one important change would be the necessity for the new aesthetics of the genre to think the whole world system as such. It has also been suggested that a special language be devised to describe the worlds built along all-inclusive lines, like the monographs of the seventeenth century or the explorer's reports on the communities of newfound lands in the early modernity. Between them and us there is however all the difference.

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