Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism

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Certain contemporary theorists tend to consider Jean Baudrillard’s term *hyperreality* (*Simulacra and Simulation*) not as an object and medium of the traumatic imagination—of the literary consciousness engaged in coping with and reconstructing the real—but as an elusive rhetorical chimera. Nevertheless, should anyone wish to look for such hybrid images, magical realist writing offers plenty of them. Typically, readers of magical realist fiction must look beyond the realistic detail and accept the dual ontological structure of the text, in which the natural and the supernatural, the explainable and the miraculous, coexist side by side in a kaleidoscopic reality, whose apparently random angles are deliberately left to the audience’s discretion. However, magical realist simulacra do not share the shallowness of Baudrillard’s hyperreality—a world in which the distinctions between signified and signifier have all but disappeared through successive reproductions of previous reproductions of reality; the magical realist image stands apart, first because it is the result of an aporetic attitude toward reality, and second because it recreates the real—the limit events that resist representation—as an immediate, *felt* reality.

Felt reality is not the same as “felt history,” a term that John Burt Foster, Jr. uses in relation to nineteenth-century realism for the “eloquent gestures and images with which a character or lyric persona registers the direct pressure of events, whether enlarging and buoyant or limiting and
harsh” (273). For one thing, the felt reality recreated by the magical realist image comes to be “registered” belatedly by characters, narrators, and readers because the “pressure” of the initial event blocked its complete registration and further narrativization. Felt reality is thus the artistic reality produced by magical realist writing in its attempt to reconstruct violent events. More often than not, magical realist images attempt to recreate traumatic events by simulating the overwhelming affects that prevented their narrativization in the first place. For example, the images of massacre in Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) and Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1980), although rich in sensory details, conspicuously lack any specific words denoting physical violence, but rely instead on metaphors suggesting the pain and horror of the events as experienced by individual characters. Through the authors’ and the readers’ traumatic imagination, traumatic memories are turned into narrative memory.

Any attempt to understand the modus operandi of the traumatic imagination in magical realist writing needs to start with an analytical survey of the neighboring literary genres—fantasy, the fantastic, the marvelous, and the uncanny, all of which inform the most essential traits of magical realism and of the postmodern context in which magical realism first appeared and has developed since the mid-1930s. The thematic core of the magical realist writing mode at any of its stages concerns representation: the writing of the real. Magical realist authors turn to illusion and magic as a matter of survival in a civilization priding itself on scientific accomplishments, positivist thinking, and the metaphysical banishment of death. Yet it is curious that fantastic re-presentation (imaginative reconstitution) works where realistic representation (descriptive mimesis) has apparently failed. What does postmodernist fiction in general, and magical realist writing in particular, re-present: reality, its non-referential substitutes, or mere simulacra? By virtue of its subversive character, magical realism foregrounds, somewhat paradoxically, the falsehood of its fantastic imagery exactly in order to expose the falsehood—and the traumatic absence—of the reality that it endeavors to re-present. As Robert Scholes would say, “Fabulation lives.”

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In 1967, Guy Debord, author of *The Society of Spectacle*, remarked that representations of reality through images had gradually led to a dissimulation of reality—and implicitly, to society’s alienation from it. Debord warned about the onset of a new model of social life based solely on representation for the sake of disguise and manipulation, that is, on an intentionally deceptive spectacle: “[The spectacle] is not something added to the real world—not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society’s real unreality. In all its specific manifestations—news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment—the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life” (13). Spectacle is more than just a collection of images: the spectacle not only penetrates the very fabric of social relationships, it is a “social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (12). No longer understood as “show” or “entertainment,” spectacle is not only a way of organizing our reality, but dangerously close to becoming our only way of coping with it and, ultimately, our only way of perceiving ourselves in relation to it. In the context of trauma both as a historical and as a cultural condition, Debord’s social analysis acquires a special significance; it comes to underscore a general crisis in remembering our past as well as in representing our very perception of time: “The spectacle, being the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time, is in effect a false consciousness of time” (114, emphasis original). Images confine us to an eternal present, where the past exists exclusively as a “packaged” text, the fabricated memory of an inexistent memory, and the future is reduced to an extension of the here and now: planned, outlined, predicted, pre-diagnosed, perfect, and eternal—purged of even the remotest hint of death, but, at the same time, and because of that very sterility, lifeless.

Fourteen years after Debord, Jacques Ellul further critiques the primacy of images in contemporary representations of reality, which, in his opinion, has led to the present “humiliation of the word.” Ellul also points to the paralyzing effect that images have on our perception of objects: “The image is present. It is only a presence. It bears witness to something ‘already there’: the object I see was there before I opened my eyes. The image exists in the present and conveys to me only a present. . . . The image conveys to me objects that do not change—truly unchanging objects” (9). Such a perception not only empties objects of one of their most essential
dimensions—time (Debord’s “paralyzed history”)—but also, through the same process, circumvents human thought. Meaning—and, by extension, the truth that it is supposed to convey—is thus confined to what one sees. Ellul’s rhetoric, like Debord’s, is openly political: his underlying message is that, by marginalizing the word and its intrinsic thought-provoking capacity, images have turned from mere reproductions of reality into instruments of power. However, Ellul’s rhetoric, unlike Debord’s, also bristles with sarcasm: “The word would only increase my anxiety and uncertainty. It would make me more conscious of my emptiness, my impotence, and the insignificance of my situation. With images, however, everything unpleasant is erased and my drab existence decorated by their charm and sparkle” (128). Although Ellul assigns to the image and the spectacle about the same meaning as Debord does (false representation, disguise of reality), Ellul’s spectacle additionally connotes show, facile entertainment, a deliberate distraction from “real” reality: it efficiently finalizes the victory of sight over the word.

Visual imagery turns out to be more than just a representation of reality: it ends up as its appropriation by complete identification with it. The image, just like reality, cannot be questioned: it is the ultimate evidence of its existence. The image is reality. “This happens,” Ellul explains, “because images become more real than reality itself. The representation comes to serve as our mental framework; we think we are reflecting on facts, but they are only representations. We think we are acting, when we only flounder around in a stew composed of representations of reality that come from a profusion of images, all of which are synthetic” (115–16, emphasis added). This bewildering overlap of two kinds of representation—the visual (the image perceived by sight) and the rational (the image constructed by the mind)—seals the ultimate triumph of the spectacle.

Interestingly enough, Ellul’s trope—the “stew” of realistic representations—finds an uncanny echo in Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981): “[T]here is not only an implosion of the message in the medium, there is, in the same movement, the implosion of the medium itself in the real, the implosion of the medium and of the real in a sort of hyperreal nebula, in which even the definition and distinct action of the medium can no longer be determined” (82, emphasis original). Ellul’s “stew” and Baudrillard’s “nebula” have moved beyond their distinctive status and original function as reproductions of reality to become the only reality available to
our perception. The medium is now not that of reality, but its own messenger: a nebula of representations without a referent—a hyperreality. Thus, Baudrillard points to a quite different society, in which the medium and the message have become indistinguishable from each other because, in the absence of an original referent, the medium has gradually turned into its own referent. Once everything has succumbed to the all-encompassing process of simulation, there is no longer anything to be represented. “[T]he era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials,” remarks Baudrillard, “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (2). Before it becomes simulation, the image-reality relationship follows four, more or less distinct, stages: in the first, the image still reflects reality; in the second, it disguises reality; in the third, it masks the absence of reality; and in the last, it loses all connection with reality and becomes its own simulacrum (6). The image ultimately loses its old functionality as a representation of reality to become a model—a “real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1).

Baudrillard’s hyperbolic language—“liquidation of all referentials,” “the murder of the Real,” “the Perfect Crime,” etc.—has, not surprisingly, rendered his arguments vulnerable to doubt, criticism, or even derision. However, if one plays by the rules of his idiosyncratic language games, there is in fact no question of a disappearance of the real, but, on the contrary, an over-production of reality. As Baudrillard himself deems it necessary to explain, “It is the excess of reality that puts an end to reality, just as the excess of information puts an end to information, or the excess of communication puts an end to communication” (Vital Illusion 65–66). The breakdown in the deterministic cause-and-effect mode of signification (signified-signifier-sign-message) has gradually led to an “implosion of meaning,” the starting point of simulation (Simulacra 31). Caught in the web of a myriad of images, people no longer tell or listen to stories—the traditional carriers of meaning—nor seem to distinguish between reliable and unreliable media. Information conveyed through images is surrounded by an aura of plausibility that stories (particularly in written form) cannot match. The latter require not only the reception (by sensory perception) of their content, but also, more importantly, the processing of them through thought and, desirably, the filtering of them through an ethical system. Yet, the former, a prepackaged bundle of signs ready for consumption, empties
itself of meaning in the process of “staging” communication.\(^5\) Communication by images seldom, if ever, leaves room for doubt because their truthfulness is taken for granted: images are reality.

As early as the first half of the last century, and at least five decades before the advent of cable TV, Walter Benjamin remarked that “if the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs” (15). The plausibility of information is by no means to be assigned to its depth or capacity to stimulate thinking; provoking thought belongs to the “spirit” of storytelling. The shallowness of information and the meaningfulness of the story is a dichotomy based on the different relations of each to time. Information cannot “survive the moment in which it was new,” whereas a story “preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (16). The test of time may well confirm the psychological fact that memories are formed and given consistency only through the working of imagination. Unlike narration, information does not necessarily require an act of imagination—more often than not, it is even incompatible with one—so it is unlikely that it would live on in or as memory.

If storytelling, particularly in its written form, has gradually lost its primacy within the general framework of human communication, it is not just because of its intrinsic instability as a carrier of meaning, but also because of what Jacques Lacan refers to as “the ‘precarious’ status of reality” itself, or what Slavoj Žižek calls the “fantasy-frame of reality” (Tar-rying 89). As Žižek notes,

although “reality” is determined by “reality-testing,” reality’s frame is structured by the left-overs of hallucinatory fantasy: the ultimate guarantee of our “sense of reality” turns on how what we experience as “reality” conforms to the fantasy-frame. (The ultimate proof of it is the experience of the “loss of reality”: “our world falls apart” when we encounter something which, due to its traumatic character, cannot be integrated into our symbolic universe.) (89, emphasis original)

It then follows that the triumph of information over storytelling is in fact due to nothing else but an overestimation of the former’s truthfulness to
reality. By the same logic, what makes storytelling plausible would be our willingness to apply to the made-up reality of a story the same “fantasy-frame” that we use in “real” reality-testing. However, we are apparently less and less willing to do so, particularly when confronted with extreme events (which usually occur outside the fantasy-frame). Instead, we compulsively try to recapture the Real—reality stripped of the fantasy-frame—through media which paradoxically only conceal the reality of the image (or the simulacrum of an extreme event): “If the passion for the Real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular effect of the Real, then, in an exact inversion, the ‘postmodern’ passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real” (Žižek, Desert 9–10, emphasis original). In extreme cases of trauma, when the use of the fantasy-frame becomes insufficient for grounding a more or less stable sense of reality, people resort to inflicting bodily harm on themselves, as if to make sure that their bodies are real.6

Pinpointing fictional elements in reality (applications of the fantasy-frame) might prove much more difficult than finding semblances of reality in fiction. The question is, of course, whether the former are worth pursuing at all. The “passion for the Real” that has overcome post-industrial societies in the last decades of the twentieth century, leading to the (still ongoing) proliferation of “reality-TV” shows, may have actually been a “fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real” (Žižek, Desert 24; emphasis original). Baudrillard likewise warns of a “scenario of power” replacing the ideology of power. If once it was difficult, if possible, to recognize the truth behind the signs of a deformed reality, now recognizing the truth beneath the simulacrum has become more or less superfluous because the simulacrum does not hide any reality anymore, only models of it—signs of other signs.7 Paradoxically, the “murder of the Real” (Baudrillard’s phrase) does not occur in a world of imagination, illusion, and magic, but in a world devoid of them. Therefore, although creative processes in their own right, simulation (the repetitive reproduction of reality to be found at the core of the hyperreal) and aesthetic semblance (the imaginative recreation of reality to be found at the core of the artistic image) must be treated as two distinct phenomena.

Roland Barthes’ understanding of “aesthetic semblance” has less to do with representation than with signification of reality: “The writer’s lan-
language is not expected to represent reality, but to signify it” (“Death” 137). Signification becomes particularly important when its object is the unrepresentable, a reality of extreme events which, by their traumatic nature, resist representation. Signification in such a case needs to be understood not as an imitation of reality (mimesis) but, rather, as its reconstruction, as its signification by imagination, or re-presentation. Admittedly illusory, the reality of literary images may not be a “real” reality, but compared to the irreality and sterility of information, it offers a more effective and authentically human medium by which we may access and make sense of the real. Images devoid of the power of imagination cannot inform our consciousness, let alone speak for it; we are who we are only by producing images of ourselves and our world through imagination.

Predictably, the “passion for the Real,” which has held mass audiences in its grip for at least three decades now, has at the same time accentuated the need for imagination. Thus, Robert Scholes’ call for a “cosmic imagination” in *Fabulation and Metafiction* also warns against the danger of our losing touch with the universe:

> We need to be able to perceive the cosmos itself as an intricate, symmetrical, cunningly contrived, imaginative entity in which we can be as much at home as a character in a work of fiction. We must see man as himself imagined and being re-imagined, and now able to play a role in the re-imagination of himself. It is now time for man to turn civilization in the direction of integration and away from alienation, to bring human life back into harmony with the universe. (217)

Although Scholes’ argot differs from that of Baudrillard or Žižek, his view of the “cosmos” as an “imaginative entity” and his view of the “work of fiction” as an ontology centered on imagination harkens to postmodernism and magical realism. Baudrillard also cautions against the modern dystopia of an “absolute reality,” against a world priding itself on having banned all illusion, evil, and even death. Ours is a society headed toward a virtual reality of operational models where real events cannot even take place anymore—which in Baudrillard’s language means that humankind is becoming less and less capable of discerning meaningful events from
“image-events,” continually bombarded as it is with already pre-processed facts, data, and information. R. G. Collingwood is said to have claimed that a “society which thinks . . . that it has outlived the need of magic, is either mistaken in that opinion, or else it is a dying society, perishing for lack of interest in its own maintenance” (qtd. in Irwin 3).

In Scholes’ “fabulation,” Baudrillard’s “illusion,” or Collingwood’s “magic,” we have the same vital ingredient that magical realist writing brings not only to literature in particular, but also to our reality-thirsty consciousness in general. It is an ingredient that reconstructs a “felt reality,” the often elusive reality of extreme events that fail to be grasped in their entirety when they first occur; it is a catalyst that neither negates reality nor creates a super- or parallel reality. Magical realism constitutes an attitude toward and a way of approaching reality—a reality that is rarely what it seems and is seldom perceived in the same way by subjects in different places or in different times. Franz Roh must have had this attitude in mind when he wrote: “Humanity seems destined to oscillate forever between devotion to the world of dreams and adherence to the world of reality. And really, if this breathing rhythm of history were to cease, it might signal the death of the spirit” (17). Indeed, such “oscillations” of the creative spirit are present in most texts which attempt to re-present and/or work through trauma. Far from being itself an illusion, a traumatic experience is nevertheless perceived and relived as one—hence the vital role played by illusion (magic, fabulation) in our representations of, and grasp on, reality.

Echoing Baudrillard, Žižek equates the gradual disappearance of illusion with the loss of reality itself. If reality-testing occurs through the application of the fantasy-frame onto the real in order to integrate it into our symbolic universe (an integration that trauma renders impossible), it follows that the very consistency of our reality cannot be sustained without fiction: “As soon as we renounce fiction and illusion, we lose reality itself; the moment we subtract fictions from reality, reality itself loses its discursive-logical consistency” (Tarrying 88, emphasis original). Illusion is what ultimately helps us organize seemingly impossible experiences into a more or less coherent system—the core paradox of magical realism. Magic is the indispensable element by which the traumatic imagination rearranges, reconstructs, and re-presents reality when mimetic reality-testing hits the wall of an unassimilated—and inassimilable—event. What Žižek
loosely calls “symbolic fictions” are in fact born from fantasy and the un-
canny, no less than in magical realism: “in one and the same move, they
bring about the ‘loss of reality’ and provide the only possible access to re-
ality: true, fictions are a semblance which occludes reality, but if we re-
nounce fictions, reality itself dissolves” (91). It was not postmodernism,
however, but modernism that first put into question the objectivity of real-
ism and the truthfulness of the mimetic mode of representation—Ferdi-
nand de Saussure’s 1916 Course in General Linguistics revealing the sys-
temic character of language, its arbitrariness, and, more importantly, the
dependency of signification on the intrinsic rules of the system. The roots
of these “symbolic fictions” can be traced not only to modernism, but to
modernity itself. According to Jean-François Lyotard, “Modernity, in
whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and
without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the in-
vention of other realities” (77). The only word in Lyotard’s statement
whose accuracy I feel inclined to contest is “invention,” for the simple rea-
son that magical realism, a postmodern phenomenon par excellence,
does not so much create new realities as re-create our own reality—often by
pushing its limits, true, but even more often by enhancing its black holes,
its inaccessible spaces.

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What best illustrates the anchoredness of magical realism in postmod-
ernist fiction is probably Ihab Hassan’s concept of silence and its inherent
negativity. I understand Hassan’s “silence” as the real, that hole in signi-
fication which language can only capture by changing its own rules and
re-constructing through imagination what otherwise cannot be perceived
and spoken of (and for) through direct observation and reporting. Silence
both empties and creates reality. “Silence de-realizes the world,” writes
Hassan, “It encourages the metamorphosis of appearance and reality, the
perpetual fusion and confusion of identities, till nothing—or so it seems—
remains” (13, emphasis original). Hassan’s remarks are probably the first
references to postmodern aporia, the recognition and the admission of the
reality of doubt (and the doubtfulness of reality), and, implicitly, of the
difficulty of naming the truth. Moreover, Hassan also seems to be alluding
to the muteness of trauma, caused by unspeakable extremities that have
taken hold of the psyche in shattering its reality-testing capacity: “Silence fills the extreme states of the mind—void, madness, outrage, ecstasy, mystic trance—when ordinary discourse ceases to carry the burden of meaning” (13). The language of silence is the language of trauma—the language that writes silence, gives it meaning, and converts it into history.

Although magical realist language makes extensive use of metaphor—which has given skeptics enough reason to include it in the realm of allegory—the magical realist metaphor cannot reveal its original referent, just as simulation can no longer point to any originals. The postmodernist metaphoric act, as defined by Fredric Jameson, has led me to the conclusion that magical realist representation and hyperreality are, in fact, mutually inclusive: “The metaphoric act constitutively involves the forgetting or repression of itself: concepts generated by metaphor at once conceal their origins and stage themselves as true or referential; they emit a claim to being literal language. The metaphoric and the literal are thus at one, at least insofar as they are the twin inevitable moments of the same process” (242). The magical realist metaphor seems, indeed, more real than the real, to use Baudrillard’s phrase here, because it is both medium and referent at the same time. Its oxymoronic constitution, including magic and reality, creates a special kind of dual signification: its meaning(s) can be read both literally and figuratively—depending on which ontological level, or on which side of the mirror, one happens to be. Such a metaphor is constantly fueled by the uncertainty and the hesitancy of the reader. For example, in Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, the main character and narrator, Saleem, recounts the mass killing of demonstrators in Amritsar, on April 13, 1919, by using his grandfather’s point of view: “There is a noise like teeth chattering in winter and someone falls on him [Aadam Aziz]. Red stuff stains his shirt. There are screams now and sobs and the strange chattering continues. More and more people seem to have stumbled and fallen on top of my grandfather” (34). None of the details refers directly to violence: only the repetition of “chattering” remotely suggests the unfolding horror (in connection with the screams and the sobs), while the use of a metaphor for blood (“red stuff”) accounts for the initial traumatic shock when any conceptualization is impossible. Likewise, in García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, one of the characters, José Arcadio Segundo, witnesses the eerie spectacle of the massacre of a large mass of striking workers: “[They] were penned in, swirling about in a gigantic
whirlwind that little by little was being reduced to its epicenter as the edges were systematically being cut off all around like an onion being peeled by the insatiable and methodical shears of the machine guns” (249). In this deliberately understated scene of violence, a “whirlwind” and an “onion” might be the most familiar and harmless images that language can produce given that the mind is unable to grasp the horror of the real; or maybe they are elements of the real, after all, only converted into a more easily transmissible (and therefore more easily accessible) form. A more factual imagery, as for example, “human bodies being ripped apart by high-caliber bullets,” might have been more shocking or, in terms of style, more “realistic,” but its impact on the readers’ minds would not have been as deep—nor as long lasting—as that of the magical realist image. The narrator’s deliberate choice of images that are conspicuously incongruous with a massacre (“gigantic whirlwind” and “an onion being peeled”) substitute a fictional, felt reality for an extremely real event. As Brian McHale remarks, “Postmodernist fiction . . . is above all illusion-breaking art, it systematically disturbs the air of reality by foregrounding the ontological structure of texts and of fictional worlds” (221). On such shaky grounds, history and “truth” become relativized and dependent, more than ever before, on the texts and the metaphors that reconstruct them.

If truth depends on fiction, it is not the kind of truth that Baudrillard must have in mind; Baudrillard is wary of truth as principle, that is, as a framing discourse that shuts out any alternative perspectives on events: “We must no longer assume any principle of truth, of causality, or any discursive norm,” he warns in The Vital Illusion (2000), “Instead, we must grant both the poetic singularity of events and the radical uncertainty of events” (68). The uncertainty of such events, of course, resides not in the events per se, but in the mind of the witnesses, and is more often than not caused by a caesura in perception. Hesitancy in accepting the reality of events is the very reaction that fantastic literature, including magical realism, induces in its readers, who always act as secondary witnesses of sorts. This response should not be understood so much as an unwillingness to acknowledge the “poetic singularity” of the event, but as a readiness to keep an open mind toward several—often even contradictory—ways of perceiving and understanding. Not questioning reality—or rejecting ab initio its most basic dialectics based on such antithetical pairs as true-false,
possible-impossible, natural-supernatural (or unnatural), good-evil, etc.—is what may ultimately lead to its demise.

Postmodernist fiction in general and magical realist fiction in particular create impressions of reality from what Baudrillard has called the hyperreal, or the reality of signs of other signs. Re-presenting postmodern hyperreality (the excess of reality provided by an omnipresent process of simulation and successive layers of simulacra) as fictional reality is what I call writing the vanishing real by a deliberate and rigorous, but also playful, use of imagination. Simulation lives on as fabulation: postmodernist fiction does not stop at only signifying other signs, but also engages in Frankensteinian experiments of creating new ones (sometimes even just as monstrous as Mary Shelley’s motley creature). García Márquez’s Macondo is not a Latin American village, but bears all the signs of one, just as Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County is not the American South, but hardly differs from late-nineteenth-century Mississippi. However, the similitude does not reside in the relationship between the referent (the real-life chronotope) and its fictional signified (the artistic chronotope), just as verisimilitude is not inherent in the recreated referent per se. Similitude and verisimilitude belong exclusively to the subjective perspective of the receiver (reader): both are results of the process of interpretation.

The postmodern understanding of the reader is far from that of an individual identity with a personal history and psychological makeup: unlike the author, the reader—or the “scriptor” in Barthes’ terminology—comes to life at the same time as the text being read. Barthes consistently emphasizes the performative aspect of fiction, which, according to him, functions as any other linguistic utterance because “there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now” (148–49, emphasis original). Thus, from the reader’s standpoint, the act of reading involves the instantaneous re-writing of the text and the completion of its signification. Both writing and reading (or re-writing) function as speech acts, consuming themselves in the same instant in which they occur. Writing “can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction,’” remarks Barthes; thus, writing is enunciation, a performative act of creating signification (148–49). While the author recedes in the background of his narrative, the narrator, the characters (or narratees), and the reader become one: ontological boundaries collapse as long as the process of reading/re-writing lasts.11 Any vicarious experi-
ence, but particularly the act of reading/rewriting of a fictional event, presents at least one essential advantage over its real-life counterpart: it can be ended by the subject (author or reader) at any time, whenever it is perceived (or felt) as too painfully “real.” It is this dual ontological makeup of fiction that justifies my referring to the traumatic imagination—which I see as permeating most postmodernist and particularly magical realist writing—as a consciousness of survival.

Even if an author (usually a primary or secondary witness of an extreme event) or readers (always limited to secondary witnessing) may live or re-live the anxiety, the pain, the suffering, or even the death inflicted by violent events, the traumatic imagination, however painful in itself, will always allow them to keep—or to create—a safe distance that can guarantee at least their immediate survival (immediate because there is always the sometimes lethal risk of a delayed re-traumatization). Nevertheless, I would not entirely concur with Brian McHale, who claims that, “insofar as postmodernist fiction foregrounds ontological themes and ontological structure, we might say that it is always about death” (231, emphasis original). It might, indeed, be about death most of the time, but not all of the time, simply because not “every ontological boundary is an analogue or metaphor of death,” as McHale would want us to believe (231, emphasis added). There also seems to be a fundamental logical flaw in his assertion that “foregrounding ontological boundaries is a means of foregrounding death, of making death, the unthinkable, available to the imagination, if only in a displaced way” (231). On the contrary, imagination—or more specifically, the traumatic imagination—is the human faculty that makes death, “the unthinkable,” available (and somewhat more palatable) to consciousness in the first place, by re-creating (simulating) it in fiction. For instance, the walking dead in Joseph Skibell’s A Blessing on the Moon (1997) do just that: they make death look like a walk in the countryside or a stay at a luxurious hotel; although the Jewish victims of an SS firing squad know that they could not have survived their executions, they still pretend to be alive and well—until they are executed for a second time. Also, in Maryse Condé’s I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem (1986), the main character, a Caribbean slave accused of witchcraft in the Salem witch trials, narrates her story by talking to readers from the realm of the dead: it is only in the last pages of the novel that readers finally learn they have actually been listening to a ghost’s voice. As a process of the traumatic imagi-
nation, magical realist writing keeps alive the illusion and the mystery inherent in phenomenal knowledge, particularly when the object of that knowledge is death or pain.

The relationship between imagination and pain reveals a complexity that one would normally not expect to find between the mental faculty of creating images and that of shutting down all psychological activity, including that of perceiving images. Unlike the products of imagination, pain can hardly be expressed in language because, as Elaine Scarry claims, it is “objectless, it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal. But it is also its objectlessness that may give rise to imagining” (161–62). If imagination compensates for the objectlessness of pain, it follows that postmodernist fiction, particularly its magical realist mode, succeed in simulating pain by turning it into objects (images) that literary language can convey more suitably (in regard to their unspeakable nature) and more effectively (in terms of their accessibility by both author and reader). These would be the same images that I have previously referred to as “felt reality”: history is “what we say once hurt,” as Linda Hutcheon remarks. The scenes of massacre in García Márquez and Rushdie, for instance, as well as the images of execution in Condé and Skibell, all reveal the power of the realistic detail when imbued with the understated suggestiveness of the magical realist language. The traumatic imagination uses the artistic power of that language in order to turn what resists representation (trauma) into an accessible reality. Scarry situates pain and imagination at opposite poles in terms of their relationship to objects: more specifically, “while pain is a state remarkable for being wholly without objects, the imagination is remarkable for being the only state that is wholly its objects” (162). However, Scarry seems to miss the active nature of imagination: “There is in imagining no activity, no ‘state,’ no experienceable condition or felt-occurrence separate from the objects: the only evidence that one is ‘imagining’ is that imaginary objects appear in the mind” (162). Objects do not just “appear” in the mind—or if they do, they are products of hallucination, not imagination. Imagination, and especially the traumatic imagination, is an activity by which the human consciousness translates an unspeakable state—pain—into a readable image. The traumatic imagination uses the sublimative power of language in order to turn that which resists representation into a new and more tangible reality. Scarry considers pain and imagining “the ‘framing events’ within whose bound-
aries all other perceptual, somatic, and emotional events occur,” and then concludes that “between the two extremes can be mapped the whole terrain of the human psyche” (164–65). I would add that between pain and imagination can be mapped the whole fictional strategy of magical realism, in which appearances are made more real than the real. However, unlike Baudrillard’s depthless simulacra, oversaturated with facts and information, magical realism creates a hyperreality that is an unexplained but felt reality.

* * *

The deceptive simplicity of magical realist images, their coherence, vividness, and emotional charge, enables readers to see and to feel—without necessarily understanding—the indescribable horrors of the past. Magical realism writes what I have called the vanishing Real by supplanting it with a hybrid reality of emotionally relevant constructs (corresponding roughly to the magical/creative part of the writing mode) and partially processed concepts (corresponding to its realistic/descriptive impetus). Norman Kreitman attributes our emotional reactions to the fictional image to preverbal knowledge (our construct systems) and previous experiences:

If the fictional report or image is (a) neither externally nor internally contradictory—is coherent, and (b) is presented with sufficient specificity—is vivid, and (c) relates to things which clearly concern us, then we will react on the basis of our prereflective knowledge, which is always emotionally charged. Under these conditions, the existential reality of that to which the representation refers is irrelevant; what matters is the reality of the constructs or attributes of the intentional object as given directly from prior experience. (“Fantasy and Feelings” 11, emphases added)

In this context, the massacre scenes from García Márquez and Rushdie also show that the magical realist metaphor recaptures the Real by bridging the gap between a missed event (“missed” because of its traumatic character) and its representation, specifically by creating associations between constructs with a certain affective charge and concepts from the characters’ and the readers’ prior experiences. Thus, the “methodical
shears of the machine guns” in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* align the concept of cutting, which in the characters’ and the readers’ minds already carries the connotation of physical wounding (a construct), with the concept of “machine gun,” which may or may not have been part of the characters’ and the readers’ real-life experiences. As a result, the association between the construct connoting physical wounding (suggested by the sign “shears” without actually meaning “shears”), the concept denoting a weapon (“machine gun”), and the mass of people being “peeled” like an onion creates the hybrid reality of a violent event without the explicit use of words like “massacre” or “killing.” Likewise, the “red stuff” and the noises like “teeth chattering” in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* make readers think of “blood” and “machine-gun fire” only by association with the concepts “brigadier” and “troops.” If taken out of context, neither the “red stuff” nor the “chattering” would normally denote blood being spilled by machine-gun fire; however, in Rushdie’s magical realist image, they come to connote an extremely violent event. Consequently, I believe that the primacy of the reality of constructs (the pre-linguistic organization of reality) in magical realist representations could apply particularly to cases when a conceptualization of the existential reality (the actual events) has become problematic because of its traumatic nature.

* * *

Magical realism appears right on the heels of the First World War, the first modern historical event that ushers in the era of technologized and highly efficient mass slaughter. The widespread use and persistence of magical realism throughout the last century are linked to the horrifying events that have marred history and have raised questions about our humanity. While the Second World War, followed by the looming danger of an atomic Armageddon, may account for the existentialist anguish that has imbued European letters and thinking in the second half of the twentieth century, magical realist writing—as an expression of the traumatic imagination—offers new opportunities to work through it. Magical realism also marks the extraordinary boom of Latin American literature in the middle of the twentieth century. Angel Flores suggests the year 1935 as its starting point, when Jorge Luis Borges publishes his collection *Historia*...
universal de la infamia [A Universal History of Infamy] in Buenos Aires (113): the connection came about most likely through Borges’ translation into Spanish of Franz Kafka’s short fiction, just a couple of years before the appearance of A Universal History of Infamy. Latin America’s colonial inheritance, brutal military regimes, failed revolutions, and economic disasters have unquestionably served to catapult magical realism into the literary realm and even well beyond in the literary productions of the region (to North America, Africa, and South-East Asia).

Magical realism has generally been defined as a literary trend. According to Weisgerber, for example,

> Magical realism is neither an avant-garde movement nor a school of thought but a simple literary trend which includes different authors and is part of the extended realism of the twentieth century. Magical realism attempts to grasp, by intellect, intuition, or imagination, the ontological background [of the worldly objects] (the metaphysical, the religious, the mythical), which underlies, informs, enriches or undermines, whichever the case, empirical reality. (27, my translation).\(^\text{13}\)

Even more important is the provision that Weisgerber adds to his definition: although one may rightly qualify magical realism as a literary trend, one should not attach to it the entirety of any given author’s works but only some of them, or even just some of their aspects.\(^\text{14}\) This consideration may well serve as a license to analyze magical realist writing in works by authors from the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, and South Asia, only a few of whom are generally referred to as magical realists.

As its name suggests, magical realism is not a deviation from realism but a correction, an amendment, of it: “[M]agical realism may be considered an extension of realism in its concern with the nature of reality and its representation, at the same time that it resists the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism” (Zamora and Faris 6). The resistance of magical realism to the narrative authority that Western literature assigned to realism in the nineteenth century has resulted in the questioning of the realistic mode of representation and in the experimentation with new forms of fiction. Magical realist writing aligns itself with the
general postmodern view that rejects the existence of only one reality and of only one truth, while constantly exposing its own failure to achieve a thorough and accurate representation of the world. The magical realist version of experienced reality could well be the narrative space of the ineffable in-between that Wendy Faris mentions: unlike realism, magical realism does not seek a logical representation of reality because its founding premise is that reality cannot be explained—or at least not in only one way. The multiplicity of fictional worlds is, after all, an implicit recognition of the variety of reality itself. Never before in the history of literature (or of representation in general) has the nature of the message (represented reality) come so close to the form of the medium (text); as do most forms of postmodernist fiction, magical realist writing makes of its metafictionality and self-reflectivity a pervasive *modus operandi*.

Another significant difference between realism and magical realism resides in the way that magical realism treats fictional illusion: while the former requires that readers suspend their disbelief in the act of reading (based on the premise that the fictional world is an accurate reflection of, and not too far away from, the real one), the latter expects readers to accept—as opposed to ignore—the illusion of the fictional world as if it were a part of their experienced reality. The complicity of the reader is a *sine qua non* condition of the magical realist effect. As Lois Parkinson Zamora notes, “Whereas conventional narrative realism constructs the illusion of a fictional world that is continuous with the reader’s (and whose ontological status is therefore naturalized, transparent), magical realism foregrounds the illusionary status of its fictional world by requiring that the reader follow its dislocations and permutations” (501). Consequently, the difference between magical realist authors and their realist predecessors consists mostly in the former’s honesty to admit—and to foreground—the failure of their own narratives to achieve total credibility. Aware of the impossibility of total signification, magical realists imbue the reality of their texts with imaginary objects, characters, and events as if to show that reality, even if it might not be explained, can still be experienced. The magical realist text (as offshoot of the fantastic genre) deliberately disorients readers exactly in order to make them more aware of their world and to strengthen their sense of belonging in it. One must understand the magical realist universe not as a flight from reality but as a flight
simulator, an artificial world within the real world, meant to prepare us for a better grasp of it.

Magical realism both informs the prevailing postmodern attitude toward reality (there is not just one reality, but a kaleidoscope of realities) and constitutes at the same time the most successful medium for its signification—hence my adherence to Theo D’haen’s statement, “The cutting edge of postmodernism is magic realism” (201). In the vein of most postmodernist fiction, magical realist writing is metafictional: “the texts provide commentaries on themselves, often complete with occasional mises-en-abyme—those miniature emblematic textual self-portraits” (Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children” 175). Moreover, and this would be another postmodernist trait of magical realism, the texts comment not only on themselves, but also on literature at large (through frequent intertextual elements), on the social establishment, and on the political canon. Many magical realist authors, such as Kundera and Rushdie, for instance, create what Faris calls a “poetics of subversion, of the non-co-optability of people, events, laughter, love, objects, even images” (179). As a poetics of subversion, the linguistic strategies of magical realism undermine the canon from the inside, masquerading normality in a paranormal context—very much in the manner of a carnivalistic ritual.15

What readers experience in magical realist texts is a linguistic spectacle, a fictional pageant that attempts with every image to conflate the signifier (the word) and the referent (the real). Faris describes this verbal magic as a “closing of the gap between words and world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of experience. This magic happens when a metaphor is made real” (176). In other words, when a metaphor is made real, signification seems to circumvent the signified (the concept): the signifier (the word) creates a reality (a referent) experienceable as such within the text only. The phenomenon of verbal magic, or the literalization of the metaphor, makes sense especially in the concrete case of an artistic shock chronotope: the violent time-space, which could not be conceptualized because of its traumatizing effect, is recreated, or re-presented, in the text and thus rendered directly accessible to the readers’ experience as felt reality—unreal but true. Making her case for the postmodern character of magical realist fiction, Faris states that “[l]inguistic magic celebrates the solidity of invention and takes us beyond representation conceived primarily as mimesis to re-presentation” (Ordinary Enchant-
ments 115). In magical realist texts, as in most postmodernist fiction, words create rather than reflect reality: the constructed reality, however, is never entirely new, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the one that we already know.

The uncanniness of the magical realist image is due to an aesthetic experience that privileges experience over knowledge. Consequently, its elusiveness notwithstanding, reality can be perceived, lived, and relived over and over again, in all its freshness, each time as if it were occurring for the first time. Its perception resembles a child’s awe and wonder at discovering the world around him: “The narrative appears to the late-twentieth-century adult readers to which it is addressed as fresh, childlike, even primitive. Wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way, accepted—presumably—as a child would accept them, without undue questioning or reflection” (Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children” 177).

The naïve tone of the writing is, of course, intentional; however, besides the author and/or narrator, the same tone is used by the characters in the narrative. Referring to the world of fantasy, John Timmerman states that “[t]he common character is naïve in the sense of not having become cynical, hard-bitten, or spoiled by the world about him. He retains the childlike trait of wonder, the willingness to engage adventure” (30). Indeed, many of the main characters or narrators of magical realist texts are children or immature adults; after all, it is they who can, better than anyone else, experience reality without letting reason get in the way.

Relying on characters and events deliberately meant to surprise readers, the magical realist text seems to appeal to us because it is important to us. In his analysis of fantasy, Kreitman points out that, “if the elements being construed are in any way connected with our wellbeing, they are emotionally charged” (“Fantasy and Feelings” 6). One does not need the presence of actual people or the experience of real events in order to feel empathy: images can quite efficiently induce it by themselves. In the case of limit events, magical realism, with its typically aporetic attitude toward reality, creates empathy through images that recreate the unrepresentable by simulating the extreme affects that must have blocked representation in the first place. Paradoxically, coping with trauma might thus involve creating a virtual opportunity to re-live the same experiences that have caused it.

By projecting chimeras in order to make those experiences erased by
trauma visible again, magical realism writes the hyperreal, the constantly vanishing real: a world void of original referents either because extreme events have rendered them inaccessible, or because they have become too familiar and too trite, blurred by the successive layers of simulacra that pervade all too much of contemporary discourse. However, unlike Baudrillard’s depthless hyperreal, over-loaded with facts and over-represented by images of other images, magical realist hyperreality is a missed, or a silenced, but at the same time a re-livable kind of reality. It might be the only reality in which one can remember in order to forget trauma.

Notes

1. Ellul restricts his use of the term “image” to what we perceive by sight, as opposed to verbal or mental images. The original 1981 title of Ellul’s work, La Parole humiliée, already suggests that the author considers the spoken word as the primary victim of the image.

2. Ellul’s concern with the hallucinogenic character of images may help to understand more recent texts by Jean Baudrillard, Slavoj Žižek, and Paul Virilio, among others, as well as such hugely successful pop-cultural phenomena as the Wachowski brothers’ film The Matrix.

3. Ellul emphasizes the drug-like thrills offered by the world of images, where the absence of truth unavoidably erases veritable reality: “Above all, I must not become aware of reality, so images create a substitute reality. The word obliges me to consider reality from the point of view of truth. Artificial images, passing themselves off for truth, obliterate and erase the reality of my life and my society. They allow me to enter an image-filled reality that is much more thrilling. Even television news, when it deals with catastrophes, disasters, and crises, takes the drama out of them by making them extraordinary and thrilling—by literally converting them into something metaphysical. The more terrible the spectacle, the calmer the hypnosis of the images makes me” (128).

4. Baudrillard does not understand “real” and “reality” in their Lacanian sense; he uses “the real” only as the noun form of the adjective “real” in order to designate the perceivable aspect of reality. The Lacanian “real,” spelled mostly with a capital initial (the Real), is that which escapes any kind of signification—what fails to become accessible through signification.
5. In an era dominated by an excess of information, the (over)production of meaning can only lead to a loss of authentic signification. According to Baudrillard, “Rather than creating communication, [information] exhausts itself in the act of staging communication. Rather than producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning. A gigantic process of simulation that is very familiar” (*Simulacra* 80, emphasis original).

6. As Žižek explains of the so-called “cutters” (individuals who experience an urge to mutilate themselves with razors or to injure themselves by some other physical means), “Far from being suicidal, far from indicating a desire for self-annihilation, cutting is a radical attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality, or to ground the ego firmly in bodily reality, against the unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as nonexistent” (*Desert* 10).

7. According to Baudrillard, “Ideology only corresponds to a corruption of reality through signs; simulation corresponds to a short circuit of reality and to its duplication through signs. It is always the goal of the ideological analysis to restore the objective process, it is always a false problem to wish to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 27).

8. Jean-François Lyotard thus remarks in *The Postmodern Condition* that “it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented” (81).

9. In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek draws on Kant’s ‘‘transcendental Ideas,’ whose status is merely regulative and not constitutive: Ideas do not simply add themselves to reality, they literally supplement it; our knowledge of objective reality can be made consistent and meaningful only by way of reference to Ideas. In short, Ideas are indispensable to the effective functioning of our reason; they are ‘a natural and inevitable illusion’: the illusion that Ideas refer to existing things beyond possible experience is ‘inseparable from human reason’” (88, emphasis original).

10. Hassan’s “language of silence” is the medium of expression of what I call the “traumatic imagination”: “The negative informs silence; and silence is my metaphor of a language that expresses, with harsh and subtle cadences, the stress in art, culture, and consciousness. The crisis is modern and postmodern, current and continuous, though discontinuity and apocalypse are also images of it. Thus the language of silence joins the need both of autodestruction and self-transcendence” (12).

11. A variation of Barthes’ reader/ascriptor concept is also present in Lyotard, albeit in a larger cultural context: “In a sense, the people are only that which actualizes the narratives: they do this not only by recounting them, but also by listening to them and re-
counting themselves through them; in other words, by putting them into ‘play’ in their institutions—thus by assigning themselves the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator” (23).

12. While considering magical realism as an alternative to the existentialist anguish of the post-World War II and Cold War period, Seymour Menton seems to formulate, *avant la lettre*, Baudrillard’s theory of the vital illusion: “In the past three decades magic realism has provided one alternative to the existentialist anguish caused by the cold war and the constant possibility of an atomic holocaust. Consciously or unconsciously, the practitioners of this tendency have been in tune with Carl Jung’s ideas about the modern human being’s need to rediscover the elements of magic that little by little had been lost through the centuries” (9–10). This line of thought also runs through statements by Roh, Leal, and Ellul, already mentioned above.

13. “Le réalisme magique n’est ni un mouvement d’avant-garde, ni même une école, mais un simple courant littéraire groupant des écrivains isolés et qui s’insère dans le réalisme élargi du XXe siècle. . . . De plus, il s’efforce d’appréhender par l’intellect, l’intuition ou l’imagination leur fond ontologique (métaphysique, religieux, mythique), lequel sous-tend, informe, enrichit ou sape, selon les cas, la réalité empirique” (Weisgerber 27).

14. According to Weisgerber, “One can justifiably qualify magical realism as a trend provided that one does not include in it all the works of a certain author but only some of them. Moreover, sometimes magical realism imbues only some of their aspects. [On peut raisonnablement qualifier le réalisme magique de courant, à condition de ne pas en faire dépendre la totalité des œuvres de tel ou tel auteur, mais uniquement certaines d’entre elles. Encore n’en imprègne-t-il parfois que des aspects.]” (215).

15. Just as in the ritual of pageantry, the split ontology of the magical realist text is more than just a flashy show. As Zamora and Faris also point out, “In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation” (3).

**Works Cited**


