

**MAGIC REALISM:  
TRANSFORMATIONS AND MIGRATIONS  
OF A DISPUTED CRITICAL CATEGORY**

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**Magic Realism:**  
**Transformations and Migrations**  
**of a Disputed Critical Category**

Abstract

Magic realism is a disputed critical category. Because of its migration across artistic and geographical contexts, the critical value of magic realism remains somewhat uncertain. The term, first applied to European pictorial art, is now most frequently applied to Latin American literary texts within the context of postcolonial thought. For many critics, magic realism should only be discussed in this context. Yet, the term is increasingly linked to other sorts of texts and different theoretical perspectives – though the usefulness of doing so remains largely unexplored. Uncertainty also surrounds the supposed formal qualities described by magic realism. Magic realism is most commonly linked to the fantastic and placed in opposition to realism. Some critics, however, cast doubts upon its usefulness when linked so closely to the fantastic while others call for its dismissal.

Central to this thesis is the argument that, despite the uncertainty associated with the term and calls for its abandonment, magic realism is an important and valuable critical term. I explore this value by applying the term to four key texts frequently referred to as magic realist works: Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1916), Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). These references, moreover, link magic realism to a number of different theoretical perspectives: psychoanalytical thought, historiography, feminism and postcolonialism. The usefulness of linking magic realism to such perspectives, with the exception of postcolonialism, remains unexamined.

This thesis, indeed, represents the only full-length and dedicated discussion of these novels and the theory associated with them in relation to magic realism. It argues that these four novels indicate that magic realism may be used productively, but that its full critical value lies in a more complex understanding of the category in terms of the formal qualities and relations it might describe and the theoretical perspectives it might be linked to.



## Introduction

Thousands of web sites, hundreds of articles and dozens of books point to the existence of a critical category termed “magic realism”. These sources comprise an enormous body of criticism with a history that can be traced back to the 1920s. The critical value of magic realism, however, remains somewhat uncertain. Fredric Jameson, for example, points to magic realism’s ‘terminological complexities – which might be grounds for abandoning the concept altogether’.<sup>1</sup> Some critics go so far as to describe magic realism as a ‘theoretical void’,<sup>2</sup> in danger of becoming a ‘cheap cliché’.<sup>3</sup> For opponents of the term such as Emir Rodriguez Monegal, magic realism is not only a term lacking precision, but is used by ‘lazy novelists and still lazier critics’.<sup>4</sup>

In this thesis, I argue that though there are certainly problems associated with the term, magic realism can be used productively as a critical category. I do so by applying the term to four key texts chosen for the frequency with which they are described as magic realist works: Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1916), Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* (1959), Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988). These novels present particularly interesting opportunities for an exploration of the critical value of the term magic realism. For, despite the numerous references to them as examples of magic realism, there are no full-length studies of them as such. References to these novels, moreover, place magic realism in relation to a number of different theoretical perspectives: psychoanalytical thought, historiography, feminism and postcolonialism. Yet, the usefulness of linking magic realism to such perspectives, with the exception of postcolonialism, is similarly unexamined. This

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘On Magic Realism in Film’, *Critical Inquiry*, 12.2 (1986), p. 302.

<sup>2</sup> This description was first applied to magic realism by Roberto González Echevarría, quoted in Amaryll Chanady, ‘The Origins and Development of Magic Realism in Latin American Fiction’, in *Magic Realism and Canadian Literature: Essays and Stories*, eds Peter Hinchcliff and Ed Jewinski (Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1986), p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Carey, quoted in Laura Moss, “‘Forget those damnfool realists!’ Salman Rushdie’s Self-Parody as the Magic Realist’s ‘Last Sigh’”, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 29.4 (1998), p. 121.

<sup>4</sup> Emir Rodriguez Monegal, ‘Surrealism, Magical Realism, Magical Fiction: A Study in Confusion’, in *Surrealismo/Surrealismos Latinoamerica y Espana*, eds Peter G. Earle and Germàn Gullón (Department of Romance Languages: University of Pennsylvania, 1980), p. 27.



thesis, indeed, represents the only full-length and dedicated discussion of these novels and the theory associated with them in relation to magic realism.

The central question addressed by this thesis is: is there any value in reading *Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Satanic Verses* as magic realist works in the light of the theory associated with them? The significance of this question lies in two related aspects of the uncertainty surrounding magic realism – those of context of use and of the proper formal understanding of the term.

“Magic realism” was first coined by the German art critic Franz Roh in his work *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (Post-Expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting).<sup>5</sup> In this work, Roh applies magic realism to the realm of European pictorial art of the inter-war years and to artists such as Otto Dix, Carl Grossberg, George Grosz, Christian Schad, Georg Schrimpf, Franz Radziwill and Adolf Ziegler. For critics such as Seymour Menton, the 1925 publication of Roh’s book serves to position magic realism in relation to a specific geographical, political and historical context. According to Menton, Roh’s study reveals a post-war ‘search for an alternative to the limitations of an overly rational and technological society.’<sup>6</sup> Magic realism, for Menton, represents a European response to the horror of the world’s first truly industrial war, and a specifically German response to the bitterness of defeat and the enormous political, social and economic turmoil resulting from the conditions of surrender.

The manner in which magic realist artists responded to this turmoil, however, varied enormously. During the inter-war years, magic realist works expressed different responses to the social and political context of their production ranging from the overtly political, through to conservative, even sentimental works of art. Artists such as Dix and Grosz represent two of the most politicised painters of magic realism during this period.

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<sup>5</sup> Franz Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1925), (my translation of title). For English translation with additions, see: Franz Roh, *German Art in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Juliene Roh (New York: Graphic Society, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Seymour Menton, *Magic Realism Rediscovered: 1918-1981* (London: Associated University Presses, 1983), p. 10.



Dix's images of post-war desolation and mutilation alongside bourgeois excess and decadence contained in 'Metropolis' (1927/28), and Grosz's depiction of the human suffering caused by capital accumulation in works such as 'Gray Day' (1921), for example, clearly point to their involvement in left wing political organisations. Artists such as Carl Grossberg, Franz Radziwill and Georg Schrimpf, however, adopted a more strictly conservative tone, depicting finely detailed, but nostalgic, urban and rural landscapes that revealed nothing of the German post-war experience.

Despite their obvious thematic differences, according to Roh such artists share qualities that go beyond the specific geographical and historical context of their production. Roh locates their works, and consequently the critical category of magic realism, within a larger cycle, or 'breathing rhythm' of art history best understood in terms of an historical struggle between representation and abstraction.<sup>7</sup> For Roh, the term magic realism describes a broad artistic movement, a general shift in emphasis, against what he considers the formal excesses of Expressionism and towards a more faithful rendering of the object of representation. Roh describes this shift in emphasis as a reintegration of 'reality into the heart of visibility'.<sup>8</sup> This is achieved, Roh argues, through use of sharp focus, objectivity (in the sense of not privileging a single view or perspective over another), coldness or soberness in the act of representation and the effacement of the painting process by avoiding the expressiveness of heavy brushstrokes. Yet, though such techniques are well suited to creating images that create the illusion of a photograph, Roh warns against what he terms 'simple external imitation'.<sup>9</sup> Such an attempt, he argues, would drain painting of its artistic significance – it would 'find itself trampled to death by those marvellous machines (photography and film) that imitate reality so incomparably well'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', trans. Wendy B. Faris, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', p. 25 (Roh's parentheses).



Roh's formulation of magic realism is designed to situate the term within formal debates. Magic realism is intended to designate, Roh suggests, a 'New Realism'.<sup>11</sup> For Roh, realism is a constantly evolving form and the critical category of magic realism is intended to signal a significant stage in that evolution.<sup>12</sup> Although it is supposed to describe an artistic movement towards a faithful rendering of the object of representation, Roh conceives magic realism as an 'intuitive' realism, one that represents 'before our eyes, in an intuitive way, *the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world*'.<sup>13</sup> It is, therefore, a term that might also be applied to works that present distorted versions of the real if that distortion ultimately leads to greater clarity. For Roh, magic realism is a form of realism rooted as much in acts of imagination as in representation. Roh suggests that magic realism is a realism that may be located between two philosophical poles – one seeking to remain in relation to reality as something clearly existing and knowable, and another passing beyond such knowledge to fantastic constructions of its own. Roh, describing magic realism as a new philosophical position, argues that it 'will exist on a middle ground not through weakness but, on the contrary, through energy and awareness of its strength. It will be a sharp edge, a narrow ledge between two chasms on the right and the left'.<sup>14</sup>

Magic realism is still discussed in the context of pictorial art.<sup>15</sup> It is, however, within a literary context that most contemporary criticism chooses to make use of the term.<sup>16</sup> This usage has traditionally side-stepped the problem of applying a term developed in the plastic arts to a literary realm, preferring instead to locate magic realism within a

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<sup>11</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', p. 24 (Roh's italic).

<sup>14</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> For examples of this discussion, see: Seymour Menton, *Magic Realism Rediscovered*; Wechsler, Jeffrey, 'Magic Realism: Defining the Indefinite', *Art Journal*, 45.4 (1985), 293-298; Nancy-Lou Patterson, 'The Spiritual Eye: Magic Realism in Art', in Hinchcliff, Peter, and Ed Jewinski eds, *Magic Realism and Canadian Literature: Essays and Stories* (Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1986) 23-33; Eunice Agar, 'Tradition and Innovation', *American Artist*, 54.578 (1990), pp. 56-86.

<sup>16</sup> Roh briefly mentioned magic realism in a literary context, dedicating just a few lines to authors such as Arthur Rimbaud, Emile Zola, Carl Sternheim, Heinrich Mann, Georg Kaiser, Berthold Brecht and Walter Mehring. See: Irene Guenther, 'Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic', p. 57.



specific geographical literary context – that of Latin American fiction.<sup>17</sup> In doing so, moreover, such criticism also restricts usage of the category to the theoretical and literary context of postcolonialism.<sup>18</sup> James Irish, for example, argues that literary magic realism ‘must be evaluated in the context of the general attempt by nineteenth and twentieth century Latin American thinkers to discover, analyse and define the truly characteristic features of the Latin American reality’.<sup>19</sup> Irish charts magic realism’s literary history in terms of the struggle of Latin American writers to gain freedom from European artistic influence so they might establish an indigenous literary mode capable of fully expressing what he describes as the ‘transcendental values of our reality’.<sup>20</sup> Above all, for Irish, this is a mysterious reality, too enormous, too complex, for traditional European forms to encompass. Similarly, Cynthia Duncan argues that the early part of the twentieth century witnessed an increasing sense that:

Words, ideas and literary traditions that had given voice to European thought for centuries no longer served to express American reality. Even the concept of ‘reality’ seemed to vary from one hemisphere to another, for what seemed a commonplace practice or belief in indigenous Mexico struck the Spaniard as fantastic or bizarre.<sup>21</sup>

Debate continues as to the precise origins of magic realism within a Latin American literary context. Angel Flores, perhaps the most influential critic on magic realism, points to the 1935 publication of Jorge Luis Borges’ collection *Historia universal de la*

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<sup>17</sup> It remains unclear why critics adopted the term magic realism and applied it to this geographical context. Some critics, however, point to the translation of Roh’s work into Spanish as one possible explanation for the migration and transformation of the term. For example, see: Enrique Anderson Imbert, ‘“Magical Realism” in Spanish-American Fiction’, *The International Fiction Review*, Vol. 2 (1975), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> My use of the term postcolonialism is intended to indicate a broad range of different theoretical and artistic engagements with the experience and legacy of European colonialism and the relations that are continuing to develop between the colonial powers and their former colonies.

<sup>19</sup> James Irish, ‘Magical Realism: A Search for Caribbean and Latin American Roots’, *The Literary Half-Yearly*, 11.2 (1970), p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> James Irish, ‘Magical Realism: A Search for Caribbean and Latin American Roots’, p. 138.

<sup>21</sup> Cynthia Duncan, *The Fantastic and Magic Realism in the Contemporary Mexican Short Story as a Reflection of “Lo Mexicana”* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Ph.D.: University Microfilms International, 1983), p. 39.



*infamia* as ‘the point of departure of this new phase of Latin American literature of magical realism’.<sup>22</sup> Luis Leal, however, responding to Flores’ article, points to the Venezuelan Arturo Uslar Pietri as the writer responsible for first applying the term to a Latin American Literary context.<sup>23</sup> Pietri writes: ‘What became prominent in the short story and left an indelible mark there was the consideration of man as a mystery surrounded by realistic facts. A poetic predilection or a poetic denial of reality. What for lack of another name could be called a magic realism.’<sup>24</sup>

For most critics, however, the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier supplies the first fully developed combination of magic realist theory and practice to the Latin American literary context. Carpentier certainly allows for such a reading of his work when in the prologue to his novel *The Kingdom of this World* (1949) he describes his writing in relation to a specifically Latin American form of literary expression he termed the marvellous real. Carpentier writes:

After sensing the unmistakable witchery of Haiti, and having found sign of magic along the red roads of the Central Plateau, and after hearing the drums of the Petro and the Rada, I found myself comparing this recently experienced, marvellous reality with the exhausting presumption of evoking the marvellous which characterized certain European literatures of the last thirty years.<sup>25</sup>

When Carpentier writes that in Haiti he ‘found the marvellous real at every turn’, he is describing his freshly awakened awareness of the rich historical and cultural heritage of the Latin American continent. According to Carpentier, ‘the presence and vitality of this marvellous real was not the unique privilege of Haiti but the heritage of all of America, where we have not yet begun to establish an inventory of our cosmogonies’.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Angel Flores, ‘Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction’, *Hispania*, 38 (1955), p. 189.

<sup>23</sup> Luis Leal, ‘Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature’, trans. Wendy B. Faris, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> Arturo Uslar Pietri, *Letras y Hombres de Venezuela* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1949), pp. 161-2. Translated by Wendy B. Faris, in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris eds, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. p. 120.

<sup>25</sup> Alejo Carpentier, ‘On the Marvellous Real in America’, trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 84.

<sup>26</sup> Alejo Carpentier, ‘On the Marvellous Real in America’, p. 87.



Through an understanding of Latin American reality as marvellous, Carpentier claims to re-discover a world he can call his own. Carpentier argues, moreover, that it is through the marvellous real that a distinctly Latin American literary style finds expression. The marvellous real represents, for Carpentier, an authentic expression of a Latin America breaking away from European artistic models that serve only to express a European world-view. In his attack upon European art, Carpentier is especially critical of the Surrealists. Though Carpentier was himself for a time in the late 1920s and early 1930s closely associated with the French Surrealist movement, he attacks the Surrealists as ‘dream technicians become bureaucrats’.<sup>27</sup> For Carpentier, the Surrealist juxtaposing of differences, their appeal to myths and dreams, expressed little more than a contrived sense of the marvellous when compared to the actualities of such juxtapositions found in the marvellous reality of the Latin American continent.

Carpentier, in his essay ‘The Baroque and the Marvellous Real’, seems to suggest that his conception of the marvellous real should not be confused with magic realism.<sup>28</sup> The great majority of critics, however, insist upon conflating the two terms. Irish, for example, uses the marvellous real and magic realism as though they were interchangeable terms. Leal, even as he points to the critical confusion arising from the conflation of the two terms, discusses Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World* in terms of its magic realist qualities.<sup>29</sup> Enrique Anderson Imbert points to the sense of strangeness generated by Carpentier’s *The Lost Steps* (1953) and positions it as ‘characteristic of “magical realism”’.<sup>30</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris introduce Carpentier’s marvellous real as ‘a uniquely American form of magic realism’.<sup>31</sup>

Yet it was not until 1955, with the publication of Angel Flores’ paper ‘Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction’, that the actual term ‘magic realism’ was formally linked to

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<sup>27</sup> Alejo Carpentier, ‘On the Marvellous Real in America’, p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> Alejo Carpentier, ‘The Baroque and the Marvellous Real’, trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, pp.102-3.

<sup>29</sup> Luis Leal, ‘Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature’, p. 121.

<sup>30</sup> Enrique Anderson Imbert, ‘“Magical Realism” in Spanish-American Fiction’, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris eds, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. p. 75.



Latin American literature. In this article, Flores makes no mention of Carpentier or the marvellous real. Like Carpentier, however, Flores describes a distinctly Latin American literature – one that represents a more authentic response by Latin American authors to their continent. Flores uses the term magic realism to indicate ‘a genuinely Latin American fiction’, and goes on to declare that ‘we may now claim, without apologies, that Latin America is no longer in search of its expression, [...] we may now claim that Latin America possesses an authentic expression’.<sup>32</sup>

Flores is writing in response to criticism of Latin American fiction as second-rate and is clearly attempting to establish the credibility of Latin American literature by describing it as magic realist.<sup>33</sup> Flores points to the qualities of writers such as Borges, Silvina O Campo, Adolfo Bioy Casares and Enrique Anderson Imbert, and describes them in terms of a core of excellence from which Latin America’s literary future might develop. For more contemporary critics, the notion of a core of excellence culminates in the works of ‘Boom’ writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Julio Cortázar and is still very evident in the works of authors such as Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel.<sup>34</sup> As Doris Sommer observes, the Latin American ‘Boom’ sensation established the notion that Latin American authors had ‘*invented* a truly proper language, it seemed that the Adamic dream had come true. Latin Americans could finally (re)name the world and, in doing so, name themselves. Caliban could at last possess his own kingdom.’<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Angel Flores, ‘Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction’, p. 192.

<sup>33</sup> Angel Flores, ‘Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction’, p. 192.

<sup>34</sup> According to Gerald Martin, the Latin American ‘boom’ started with the publication of Carlos Fuentes’ *Where the Air is Clear* (1958) and reached its climax with Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). For Martin, the term ‘boom’ describes a period of self-conscious literary production in Latin America fuelled by a sense of cultural emancipation from European influence. He discusses *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, as a text that ‘is perfectly aware of its own literary-historical significance, one whose implicit claim is that the ‘boom’ itself was a proof of the end of neo-colonialism and the beginning of true liberation’. See: Gerald Martin, *Journeys through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 233.

<sup>35</sup> Doris Sommer, ‘Irresistible Romance: The Foundational Fictions of Latin America’, in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 71, (Sommer’s italic and parentheses).



When critics apply the term to early Latin American magic realists such as Alejo Carpentier, echoes of the category's origins in realist debates remain. For Carpentier's description of a Latin American reality as marvellous is one that stays rooted in a very real and tangible experience of that reality – unimpaired by what Carpentier considers a European response to Latin America in terms of the fantastic.<sup>36</sup> Leal, for example, conflates Carpentier's term 'lo real maravilloso americano' (the marvellous real in America) with magic realism, and in doing so argues that the magic realist writer 'doesn't create imaginary worlds in which we can hide from everyday reality. In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts'.<sup>37</sup> For Leal, magic realist writers such as Carpentier seek 'to seize the mystery that breathes behind things'.<sup>38</sup> Such a description of magic realism clearly resembles Roh's original conception of the term.

The migration of magic realism, from the realm of pictorial art to that of literature, has however, since Flores' article, involved a shift in formal emphasis from realism towards the fantastic. Flores suggests that magic realism is best understood as an 'amalgamation of realism and fantasy'.<sup>39</sup> Yet, For Flores, magic realism's reference to the real serves only a secondary function. He argues that 'the practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent "literature" from getting in their way', to prevent their works 'from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms'.<sup>40</sup> Flores, however, clearly privileges the fantastic elements of a magic realist work.<sup>41</sup> He does so by elevating the fantastic elements of magic realist works, and by placing these elements in direct opposition to what he terms the 'blind alley' of realism.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Alejo Carpentier, 'On the Marvellous Real in America', pp. 84-86.

<sup>37</sup> Luis Leal, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature', p. 121.

<sup>38</sup> Luis Leal, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature', p. 123.

<sup>39</sup> Angel Flores, 'Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction', p. 189.

<sup>40</sup> Angel Flores, 'Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction', p. 191.

<sup>41</sup> Indeed, as Imbert observes of Flores: 'In 1959, he was to replace the term "magical realism" with that of "fantastic literature": for him they were one and the same.' See: Enrique Anderson Imbert, "'Magical Realism" in Spanish American Fiction', p. 2. Imbert gives the reference for Flores' 'conversion' as Angel Flores, *Historia y antología del cuento y la novela en hispanoamerica* (New York: Las Americas, 1959), pp. 386-388.

<sup>42</sup> Angel Flores, 'Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction', p. 188.



Flores' conception of magic realism continues to influence critical understanding of magic realism. Magic realism is, for most critics, a blending of fantasy with realism – an oxymoronic combination of formal opposites. Flores' conception of magic realism as anti-realist, moreover, still dominates discussion of the category and critics continue to describe magic realism in similar terms. Robert Wilson, for example, also clearly privileges the fantastic in his understanding of magic realism, going so far as to describe it 'as a mode of fantasy' and claims that, as a form of fantasy, magic realism seeks to subvert the conventions of realism.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Faris employs Tzvetan Todorov's formulation of the fantastic to establish a similarity between it and magic realism. Faris stresses Todorov's suggestion that hesitancy is a defining feature of the fantastic and that a similar quality can be observed in magic realist texts.<sup>44</sup> Faris states that the reader of a magic realist text 'may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events. Much of magic realism is thus encompassed by Tzvetan Todorov's well-known formulation of the fantastic'.<sup>45</sup> This is, moreover, according to Faris, a magic realism expressing a 'narrative freedom from realism'.<sup>46</sup>

Discussion of magic realism in the context of Latin American fiction and postcolonial thought is dominated by the idea that magic realism may be linked to the fantastic and placed in opposition to realism. Critics frequently discuss the fantastic elements of magic realist works in terms of a challenge to the authority of the former colonial centres through a formal challenge to realism intimately allied to such authority. Duncan, for example, describes Latin American magic realism as postcolonial literature that aims to 'explore new points of view and unusual facets of reality overlooked by traditional realism'.<sup>47</sup> Faris not only suggests that magic realism represents a 'desire for narrative freedom from realism', but clearly links realism to colonial oppression observing 'that realism has been a European, or first world, export, in conjunction with its mimetic program, its claims to fashioning an accurate portrait of the world has in

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Wilson, 'Magic Realism', *Quarry*, 32.2 (1983), p. 88.

<sup>44</sup> Todorov's conception of the fantastic will be discussed in the following chapter of this thesis.

<sup>45</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 171, (Faris's parentheses).

<sup>46</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children', p. 180.

<sup>47</sup> Cynthia Duncan, *The Fantastic and Magic Realism in the Contemporary Mexican Short Story as a Reflection of "Lo Mexicana"*, p. 537.



some instances tended to ally it to imperialism'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Linda Hutcheon defines magic realism as a postcolonial literature of resistance that in formal terms enacts that resistance through a challenge 'to genre distinction and to the conventions of realism'.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, Stephen Slemon, in his examination of magic realism's relationship to postcolonial debate, suggests that 'in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working towards the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other'.<sup>50</sup> For Slemon, the two different systems are those of the fantastic and realism.

However, despite its dominance within magic realist debate, this shift in formal emphasis towards the fantastic, in opposition to realism, has contributed enormously to the uncertainty associated with the critical value of magic realism. Imbert, for example, points to a significant number of magic realist critics who fail to 'distinguish between "magical realism" and "fantastic literature"'.<sup>51</sup> Stephen Slemon goes further when he argues that 'in none of its applications to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighbouring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvellous'.<sup>52</sup> Even critics who propose a direct relationship between magic realism and the fantastic will occasionally identify problems arising from such an association. Wilson, for example, while conflating magic realism with the fantastic and celebrating its attack upon realism, feels obliged to concede that such fictions may have only a limited potential to effect change or even illuminate. Wilson points to magic realism's (fantastic) 'unconventional conventions [that] perhaps excite and challenge, but can tell us about ourselves (at best) only indirectly [...] a literature of pure speculation, of mere conceptual exploration'.<sup>53</sup> Slemon makes a similar point in his discussion of magic realism as postcolonial writing. Slemon identifies a tendency among writers and critics to position magic realism as a

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<sup>48</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children', p. 180.

<sup>49</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "'Circling the Downspout of Empire": Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 20.4 (1989), p. 151.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Slemon, 'Magical Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', *Canadian Literature*, 116 (1988), pp. 10-11.

<sup>51</sup> Enrique Anderson Imbert, "'Magical Realism" in Spanish-American Fiction', p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Wilson, 'On the Boundary of The Magic and The Real', p. 38, (Wilson's parentheses).



mode operating from the margins, in opposition to a still dominant imperial centre. In such a configuration, the margins represent a site of fantastic potential, free from the restraints of the more formally rigid centre. Slemon argues, however, that this very tendency makes magic realism attractive to an imperial publishing industry. For, according to Slemon, this is a centre wishing to confirm its position of dominance by promulgating a view of the margins as ‘sites of the bizarre or fantastic’.<sup>54</sup> Guillermo Cabrera Infante makes a similar point and suggests a rather extreme solution: ‘Listen reader, if you ever come across one of those third world angels, do me a favour, will you: Shoot the hairy bird on sight.’<sup>55</sup> Discussion of magic realism’s opposition to realism through the fantastic, moreover, is similarly vulnerable to criticism. Though such opposition is central to contemporary usage of the term, barely any consideration is given to what is meant by the term realism. Except, that is, to broadly identify it as an artistic form that is fundamentally limited in its application and historically compromised.

So, because of its migration across artistic and geographical contexts and because of shifts in formal emphasis, the critical worth of magic realism remains somewhat uncertain. The term was first applied to European pictorial art of the inter-wars years. It is still occasionally discussed in relation to pictorial art. It is now, however, more frequently applied to Latin American literary texts within the context of postcolonial thought. It is within this context that the vast majority of critics still make use of the category. For many critics, indeed, magic realism should only be discussed in this context. Yet, the term is increasingly linked to other sorts of texts and different theoretical perspectives – though the usefulness of doing so remains largely unexplored. Uncertainty also surrounds the supposed formal qualities of magic realist works. First conceived of as a form of realism, magic realism is now commonly linked to the fantastic and placed in opposition to realism. Some critics, however, cast doubts upon its usefulness when linked so closely to the fantastic while others call for its dismissal. What then is the value of reading *Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Satanic Verses* as magic realist works? In response to this question, this thesis argues that such an exercise very valuably reveals the possibility of a much more

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<sup>54</sup> Stephen Slemon, ‘Cultural Alterity and Colonial Discourse’. *Southern Review*, 20 (1987), p. 102.

<sup>55</sup> Guillermo Cabrera Infante, ‘Piñera’s Virgil’, *Review: Latin American Literature and Art*, 35 (1985), p. 19.



complicated understanding of magic realism as a literary critical category both in terms of context of use and formal conception of the term. It also argues that such an understanding, in turn, allows for the most interesting connections and points of comparison to be drawn between them in terms of their thematic content and their relationship to theory.

There is no reason to believe that magic realism must only be discussed in relation to Latin American fiction and postcolonial thought. There exists within magic realist criticism references to a number of works that clearly emerge out of different geographical and theoretical contexts. The four novels examined in this thesis fall into this category. Though references to these novels are for the most part brief and fail to fully explore the manner in which magic realism might be productively applied to them, they clearly indicate the need for such exploration.<sup>56</sup>

Flores was the first critic to discuss *Metamorphosis* as a magic realist novel.<sup>57</sup> After first linking Kafka to writers such as Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Flores points to Kafka's influence in the works of Latin American magic realists such as Borges and Casares.<sup>58</sup> Though Flores refers to Kafka to establish the credibility of Latin American magic realism in a postcolonial context, in doing so he also points to the existence of a very different sort of magic realism. For Flores' reading of *Metamorphosis* appears to place the novel and magic realism in relation to psychoanalytical thought when he describes Kafka's 'difficult art of mingling his drab reality with the phantasmal world of his nightmares'.<sup>59</sup> Subsequent criticism occasionally echoes this approach to Kafka's novel. Faris, for example, goes so far as to argue that Kafka's examination of

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<sup>56</sup> This is not to say that I will ignore the manner in which magic realism evolved as a critical term in relation to Latin American fiction and postcolonial debate. This remains the dominant understanding of the term. This thesis will, therefore, examine ways in which these novels, and the theoretical perspectives associated with them, may be discussed as magic realist works in relation to such an understanding of the term. It will, however, also indicate important areas of difference.

<sup>57</sup> Flores also edited several collections of essays on Kafka. See: *The Kafka Problem*, ed. Angel Flores (New York: New Directions, 1946); *Franz Kafka Today*, eds Angel Flores and Homer Swander (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958); *The Kafka Debate: New Perspectives for Our Time*, ed. Angel Flores (New York: Gordian Press, 1977).

<sup>58</sup> Angel Flores, 'Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction'. pp. 189-190.

<sup>59</sup> Angel Flores, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction', p. 189.



psychological motivations in *Metamorphosis* actually distinguishes this novel as a magic realist work, in contrast to what she describes as the unmotivated ‘magical images constructed by surrealism’.<sup>60</sup>

Within magic realist criticism, a number of different connections are suggested between magic realism and psychoanalytical thought. Menton, for example, in his discussion of magic realism’s inception within the realm of pictorial art, links the ideas of Carl Jung to magic realism.<sup>61</sup> Menton argues, ‘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 have been lost through the centuries’.<sup>62</sup> For Menton, magic realist painters incline towards the Jungian concepts of the collective unconscious and mythic archetypes as they attempt to explore in their work a less solitary mode of being in the world. This is a conception of magic realism as an artistic practice working to overcome the solitude of an overly rational twentieth century. Jung’s ideas are also applied to literary magic realism. Martin Bakker provides a reading of the works of the Flemish author Hubert Lampo to demonstrate the link between magic realist literature and Jung’s work on the collective unconscious.<sup>63</sup> Stephen F. Walker applies a similar reading to Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>64</sup> David Mikics adopts a comparable position to Menton when he argues that magic realism expresses a ‘twentieth-century preoccupation with how our ways of being in the world resist capture by the traditional logic of the waking mind’s reason’.<sup>65</sup> Mikics,

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<sup>60</sup> Wendy B. Faris, ‘Scheherazade’s Children’, p. 171.

<sup>61</sup> Although Jung has been criticised for his interest in the supernatural and the mystical and so not received the full acceptance of the intellectual establishment, he remains a key figure in the attempt ‘to establish the professional credentials of psychoanalysis’. See: J. J. Clarke, *In Search of Jung* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 5. Jung himself, moreover, claims ‘my endeavours in psychology have been essentially pioneer work, leaving me neither time nor opportunity to present them systematically’. See: Carl Jung, ‘Foreword’, in *The Psychology of C. G. Jung*, Dr. Jolan Jacobi (London: Keegan Paul, 1942), p. v.

<sup>62</sup> Seymour Menton, *Magic Realism Rediscovered*, p. 10.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Bakker, ‘Magic Realism and the Archetype in Hubert Lampo’s Work’, *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies*, 12.2 (1991), pp. 17-21.

<sup>64</sup> Steven F. Walker, ‘Magical Archetypes: Midlife Miracles in *The Satanic Verses*’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, pp. 347-369.

<sup>65</sup> David Mikics, ‘Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier: Nature, History, and the Caribbean Writer’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 372.



however, in his examination of Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier, links magic realism to Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny. For Mikics, magic realism is not only similar to the uncanny in that both 'narrate fantastic events not merely alongside real ones, but as if they were real', but goes on to argue that 'magical realism is a mode or subset of the uncanny in which the uncanny exposes itself as a historical and cultural phenomenon'.<sup>66</sup> In the absence of any full-length study, however, the nature of the relationship between magic realism and Freudian thought, and the usefulness of placing the term in relation to such thought remains somewhat undecided.

History and historical debate have played a central role in the evolution of literary magic realism. Early Latin American magic realism, indeed, emerged out of a response to a specific period in European history. It was the rise of European fascism that led Carpentier to turn away from Europe and return to Latin America where he developed his concept of the marvellous real. The marvellous real, however, is not simply a physical turning away from Europe. It is as Edwin Williamson observes, more fundamentally, a call 'for a new model of history'.<sup>67</sup> This new model, according to Carpentier, allows for a broader appreciation of the artist's role in relation to history, one where 'the novelists of Latin America, are the witnesses, historians, and interpreters of our great Latin American reality'.<sup>68</sup> In the third chapter of this thesis, I examine Grass's *The Tin Drum* as a magic realist novel and explore the manner in which it might be seen to operate in similar fashion in relation to the German experience of World War Two. For a number of critics wishing to discuss connections between magic realism and historiography indicate that *The Tin Drum* may be read in just this way. Robert Alter, for example, identifies in Grass's novel a magic realism concerned with 'the horrors of the Hitler years'.<sup>69</sup> Patricia Merivale, in her examination of the relationship between Grass and Rushdie as magic realists, observes that Oskar's 'vision of the world is also a

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<sup>66</sup> David Mikics, 'Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier', pp. 372, 373.

<sup>67</sup> Edwin Williamson, 'Coming to Terms with Modernity: Magic Realism and the Historical Process in the Novels of Alejo Carpentier', in *Modern Latin American Fiction: A Survey*, ed. John King (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 83.

<sup>68</sup> Alejo Carpentier, 'The Baroque and the Marvellous Real', p. 107.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Alter, 'Magic Realism in the Israeli Novel', *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, 16.2 (1996), p. 155.



vision of world war'.<sup>70</sup> Born out of the desolation of post-war Germany and received by a literary establishment stunned by the holocaust, *The Tin Drum* is a novel published just when writers such as Theodor Adorno regarded literature as being incapable of expressing the horror of such a period.<sup>71</sup> *The Tin Drum* clearly engages with a specific period of European history, but also raises issues of literature's relationship to history and so might also signal the presence of magic realism within such debates.

In the fourth chapter of this thesis, I examine Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. Of all the authors examined in this thesis, Carter is the one most frequently described as a writer of magic realism. As Joseph Bristow and Trevor Lynn Broughton observe, from the 1980s, a period during which the term gained a great deal of currency in literary debate, Carter's fictions have increasingly 'become associated with the label "magic realism"'.<sup>72</sup> John Haffenden is rather more extravagant when he opens his account of his interview with Carter with the bold declaration that 'the term "magical realist" might well have been invented to describe Angela Carter'.<sup>73</sup> For her part, Carter claims a 'family talent for magic realism'.<sup>74</sup>

In her essay, 'Notes From the Front Line', Carter discusses the importance of the Women's Movement to her life and its effect upon her writing. Carter declares: 'I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I'm a feminist in everything else and one can't compartmentalise these things in one's life.'<sup>75</sup> In this essay, she charts her development as a feminist writer and the changes in her emotional development and

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<sup>70</sup> Patricia Merivale, 'Saleem Fathered by Oskar: *Midnight's Children*, Magic Realism, and *The Tin Drum*', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 334.

<sup>71</sup> I am referring here to his famous line: "Man kann nach Auschwitz keine Gedichte mehr schreiben" (One cannot write poetry after Auschwitz). Quoted in Heinrich Böll, *Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1966), p. 26 (my translation).

<sup>72</sup> Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, 'Introduction', *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, eds Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London: Longman, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> John Haffenden, 'Angela Carter', *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 76.

<sup>74</sup> Angela Carter, 'The Mother Lode', *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings*, 2nd edn (London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983), p. 69.



how those changes have been reflected in her fictions. Carter observes, however, that despite such changes, the driving force behind her feminism remains that of an ongoing project to question:

How that social fiction of my ‘femininity’ was created by means outside my control, and palmed off to me as the real thing [...] This investigation of the social fictions that regulate our lives – what Blake called the ‘mind-forg’d manacles – is what I’ve concerned myself with consciously since that time. [...] I realise, now, I must always have sensed that something was badly wrong with the versions of reality I was offered that took certain aspects of my being *as a woman* for granted.<sup>76</sup>

In this chapter, I investigate the usefulness of reading Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* as a magic realist novel in relation to such a project. Few articles discuss magic realist novels in the light of feminist debate. Even when such discussion occurs, the feminism of such novels is seen to emerge out of a postcolonial context.<sup>77</sup> Carter’s use of magic realism cannot be said to emerge out of such a context. Carter’s claim that she is a feminist writer, and her description of herself as a magic realist one at that, however, demand that the relationship between the two be explored.<sup>78</sup>

The fifth chapter of this thesis examines Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* as a magic realist novel engaging with postcolonial thought outside the context of Latin America. Such an examination is clearly at odds with the dominant usage of the term. However, as this chapter seeks to demonstrate, magic realism is a critical term that might usefully be applied to a range of different geographical colonial and postcolonial contexts. Indeed, according to Homi K. Bhabha, ‘magical realism’ after the Latin American Boom,

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<sup>76</sup> Angela Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, p. 70 (Carter’s italic).

<sup>77</sup> See: Brenda Cooper, ‘Does Marxism Allow for the Magical Side of Things? Magical Realism and a Comparison Between One Hundred Years of Solitude and The House of the Spirits’, *Social Dynamics – A Journal of the Centre for Africa Studies of Cape Town*, 17.2 (1991), pp. 126-154; Oralia Preble-Niemi, ‘Magical Realism and the Great Goddess in Two Novels by Alejo Carpentier and Alice Walker’, *The Comparatist*, 16 (1992), pp. 101-114; P. Gabrielle Foreman, ‘Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, pp. 285-303.

<sup>78</sup> For example, see: Angela Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, pp. 76-77.



becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world'.<sup>79</sup> As Isabel Allende observes, 'magic realism is all over the world'.<sup>80</sup>

Rushdie seems to agree with this proposition when he suggests that it is not only the work of Márquez, and by extension Latin America magic realism, that is capable of expressing postcolonial "'Third World' consciousness'. In his essay "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist', Rushdie argues that if we ignore the term 'Commonwealth Literature', we might still be able to identify a less rigidly defined form of commonality in literature 'emerging from those parts of the world which one could loosely term the less powerful, or the powerless'.<sup>81</sup> Rushdie suggests that one aspect of this commonality is magic realism. Rushdie's use of magic realism is clearly linked to postcolonial debates. Yet, *The Satanic Verses* does not comfortably support a conventional understanding of the category in this context. Magic realism is often applied to texts that express some sort of 'authentic' postcolonial voice. It is employed to categorise works that seek to escape the cultural constraints imposed by the colonial process. Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* certainly raises the issue of authenticity and engages with the colonial experience. His novel, however, goes on to present a different treatment of these issues by placing them alongside the notion of cultural exchange or hybridity. If *The Satanic Verses* is to be read as a magic realist novel operating within the realm of postcolonial debate, such is the complexity of Rushdie's engagement with those debates that a more complex conception of magic realism is required.

In this thesis, I offer just that – not only by examining magic realism outside its usual geographical and theoretical context of use, but also by exploring the ways in which *Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Satanic Verses* reveal the need for a more comprehensive formal understanding of the term. Just as there is no reason to believe that magic realism can only be discussed in relation to Latin American fiction and postcolonial thought, there is no need to accept that magic realism is best discussed in terms of the fantastic and in opposition to realism.

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<sup>79</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'Introduction: Narrating the Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 7. Unfortunately, Bhabha does not develop this argument further.

<sup>80</sup> Isabel Allende 'The Shaman and the Infidel', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 8.1 (1991), p 54.

<sup>81</sup> Salman Rushdie, "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist', in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 68.



Yet, as this thesis will demonstrate, magic realism is linked to the fantastic and placed in opposition to realism for understandable reasons. Works described as magic realist do typically contain fantastic characters, depict fantastic events, and so appear to function in ways that very much resemble those of the fantastic. Rosemary Jackson, for example, claims that fantastic works ‘produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different’.<sup>82</sup> She qualifies this statement, however, by arguing that ‘fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real’.<sup>83</sup> For Jackson, moreover, the means by which the fantastic establishes this reality ‘are initially mimetic (‘realistic’, presenting an ‘object’ world ‘objectively’)’.<sup>84</sup> Despite this apparent intimacy, Jackson argues that the fantastic may be thought of as a direct challenge to what she considers a closed, monologic, realism.<sup>85</sup> Such a view of the fantastic bears a striking resemblance to what remains the overwhelmingly dominant conception of magic realism. Faris, for example, even as she describes magic realism as a ‘clear departure from realism’, points to the power of the realistic detail in a magic realist work to ‘create a fictional world that resembles the one we live in’.<sup>86</sup> However, like Jackson, Faris suggests that such a relationship serves only to facilitate the eventual subversion of realist conventions.

In the first section of each chapter, I explore the ways in which such an understanding of magic realism may indeed be applied to my chosen texts, their shared thematic concerns and the theoretical perspectives associated with them. In terms of their shared treatment of the repressed, the creation of physical, psychic and social borders, the dynamics of othering and resistance to the authority of the family or state, each of these novels certainly appears capable of supporting readings that privilege the fantastic placed in opposition to realism. Similarly, the theoretical perspectives they are most closely linked to seem equally open to such an approach. Flores, for example, appears to connect magic realism to a somewhat oppositional understanding of psychoanalytical thought. His reference to *Metamorphosis* as a magic realist novel appears to suggest that

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<sup>82</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 8.

<sup>83</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, p. 20 (Jackson’s parentheses).

<sup>85</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>86</sup> Wendy B. Faris, ‘Scheherazade’s Children’, p. 169.



Gregor's fantastic transformation might be the expression of a disturbing and irrational unconscious realm rebelling against the repressive forces of consciousness and rationality, which, given his formulation of the term, might in turn be loosely equated with the formal properties of realism.<sup>87</sup> The relationship between magic realism and history is discussed in comparable terms. David Mikics argues that 'the theory of magic realism must supply an approach to history, not merely literary genre'.<sup>88</sup> Implicit in this approach, however, is the suggestion that 'official' history, seen to be heavily dependent upon the validation of empiricism for its support, may be linked to a similarly empirical literary realism. Consequently, the fantastic content of magic realist works allow for the emergence of unofficial or hidden histories and so represents a challenge to both official historical discourse and literary realism as an artistic practice analogous to that discourse.<sup>89</sup> Such an approach might be applied to Grass's *The Tin Drum*. Similarly, Isobel Armstrong refers to *Nights at the Circus* as a 'critique through fantasy which is the prerogative of what has come to be called magical realism'.<sup>90</sup> Armstrong suggests that through her magic realism, Carter isn't simply questioning patriarchal 'versions of reality', but seeks through her use of the fantastic to challenge the power from which they draw their authority. This is, moreover, a challenge expressed through opposition to realism, which for many feminists serves to naturalise patriarchal hegemony.<sup>91</sup> Rushdie's engagement with postcolonial debate might be read in terms of a similar challenge. Both postcolonialism and feminism interrogate politics of domination and exploitation. Both identify dynamics of othering and similarly seek to reinstate the Other in the face of oppression. For Theo L. D'haen, Rushdie's magic realism does this by

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<sup>87</sup> Angel Flores, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction', p. 188.

<sup>88</sup> David Mikics, 'Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier: Nature, History, and the Caribbean Writer', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 373.

<sup>89</sup> See: Marguerite Alexander, *Flights From Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), pp. 142-143; Richard Todd, 'Narrative Trickery and Performative Historiography: Fictional Representation of National Identity in Graham Swift, Peter Carey, and Mordecai Richler', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, pp. 305-328.

<sup>90</sup> Isobel Armstrong, 'Woolf by the Lake, Woolf at the Circus: Carter and Tradition', in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press, 1994), p. 269.

<sup>91</sup> For example, see: Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 40; Laura Marcus, 'Feminist Aesthetics and the New Realism', in *New Feminist Discourse: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 14.



subverting ‘the typically English tradition of the colonial novel’.<sup>92</sup> D’haen argues that Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), for example, challenges such a tradition by presenting an Indian view of the colonial and postcolonial experience. He suggests that Rushdie, through his use of ‘indigenous magic’, gives ‘voice to an entire subcontinent; a proper voice this time, as the subjects of their own story and not as the objects of the colonial novel’.<sup>93</sup> Such an understanding of magic realism may also be applied to *The Satanic Verses* – as a magic realist novel that depicts an antagonistic tension between centralised colonial hegemony and the eccentricity of the colonised margins played out in terms of a formal conflict between the fantastic and realism.

Yet, if magic realism may be applied to these novels through its association with the fantastic, what then is the value in describing them as magic realist works when one might just as easily use the term fantastic? I argue, however, that despite the similarity and links between the two categories, and despite the influence of Flores’ article and subsequent usage of the term, *Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Satanic Verses* reveal that texts described as magic realist function in ways that are very different from those of the fantastic. In the second section of each chapter, I explore the manner in which they demonstrate that magic realism’s usefulness as a critical category derives from its ability to function as a ‘marker’ for works that set up formal tensions and oppositions only to undermine them. Works described as magic realist do indeed elevate the fantastic, and by doing so draw upon its subversive potential, but they also present a direct challenge to the fantastic, ask questions of it and where ever possible undercut that potential. Similarly, though works that are described as magic realist might appear to represent a challenge to realism conceived simply in terms of strict mimesis and complicity with hegemonic power, they also stand in a less oppositional relationship to realism. Though the term magic realism may not go so far as to provide a new and fully developed conception of realism, it certainly points the way towards less damning discussion of the term.

On a formal level, each of these novels makes quite dramatic use of fantastic characters and depicts unsettling fantastic events. Their use of the fantastic, however, is

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<sup>92</sup> Theo L. D’haen, ‘Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 198.

<sup>93</sup> Theo L. D’haen, ‘Magical Realism and Postmodernism’, pp. 198-199.



problematic. They appear to draw upon its subversive potential only to cast doubt upon it. *Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Satanic Verses* may also be placed in a less than damning relationship to realism. Much of the criticism surrounding these texts reveals that debates on its properties and value are ongoing and far from settled. Such formal ambivalence is also reflected on the thematic level where emphasis within these novels shifts between the repressed to the very forces of oppression, certainty is replaced with doubt as borders are crossed and oppositions eroded, resistance becomes passivity and innocence becomes complicity and corruption. It is also clearly reflected in their relationship to theory; the theoretical perspectives of psychoanalytical thought, historical debate, feminism and, indeed, postcolonialism are simply far too complex to be articulated through a dynamic of formal oppositions.



**Chapter One**  
**Psychoanalytical Thought and Magic Realism in**  
**Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis***

The Fantastic Potential of the Repressed

When Gregor Samsa awakes from uneasy dreams he is in his own bed. His fantastic transformation into a gigantic insect occurs within the familiar four walls of his own room. Gregor feels himself to be a captive within this space. The walls may well be familiar, 'his room a regular human bedroom', yet this space is felt to be 'rather too small'.<sup>1</sup> For, following the collapse of his father's business, it has fallen upon Gregor to take on the role of breadwinner. Gregor, however, is not the head of the family but its servant. Responsible not only for the upkeep of the home, but also for his father's debts, he is in bondage to both his family and the company that employs him. Gregor appears crushed under the weight of his responsibilities and finds it almost impossible to assert himself. Even as he struggles to manoeuvre his transformed body out of bed, it is not concern for his own well-being that dominates his thoughts. Gregor is anxious that his noisy efforts might disturb the family, or that he might attract the wrath of his employers by appearing late for work.

While Gregor is a captive within his own home, he also experiences a profound sense of exclusion from it. As Allen Thiher observes, when *Metamorphosis* (1916) was first published, Gregor was even to be excluded from any cover illustration. Kafka wrote to his publisher:

If I were to offer suggestions for an illustration, I would choose such scenes as the following: the parents and the head clerk in front of the locked door, or even better, the parents and the sister in the lighted room, with the door open upon the adjoining room that lies in darkness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis* in *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 9. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Allen Thiher, *Franz Kafka: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), p. 106.



Throughout most of the story, the parents and the sister do indeed stand in the light and Gregor is relegated to the darkness. In this respect, Gregor closely resembles the character of Oskar Matzerath in Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959). Like Oskar, Gregor functions in relation to his family, but is depicted in terms of absence rather than presence.<sup>3</sup> Just as Oskar finds himself largely ignored by his family and friends, Gregor is rarely directly addressed within the novel. Characters talk about him, across him, or above him, but not to him. Oskar, however, chooses his position of isolation. Using his drum and glass-shattering scream to keep the adult world at bay, Oskar is vigilant in the policing of his solitude. Gregor, on the other hand, would like nothing more than to be accepted as one of the family. Yet throughout Kafka's novel, he is denied any of the support or comfort a family might be expected to provide. As Gregor attempts to unlock his bedroom door, for example, he is forced to turn the key by gripping it in his mouth and injures himself in the process. As he struggles to overcome the physical barrier between himself and his family, Gregor can only imagine cries of encouragement from the other side of the door. Later in the text, when the family's horror of Gregor has mellowed into disgust, Gregor's feelings of exclusion become a physical reality. He is locked in his room, surrounded by household refuse, an embarrassment to his family as they pray to be rid of him. Yet, it is clear that Gregor's fantastic metamorphosis into insect serves only to compound his sense of exclusion – it is not the cause of it.

Metamorphosis is a theme common to and even characteristic of magic realist texts. John M. Kirk, for example, in his discussion of Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* (1949), draws attention to the number of characters who can transform themselves at will into a variety of different animals. Kirk points to the connections explored in magic realism between acts of metamorphosis and indigenous culture, arguing of Carpentier's novel that its depiction of 'metamorphosis, when combined with time-honoured voodoo secrets and the slaves' total and unequivocal faith in the secret rituals, makes for a truly invincible force'.<sup>4</sup> In Carpentier's novel, this force contests the

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<sup>3</sup> Saladin Chamcha and Fevvers, in different ways, also experience a sense of estrangement from family. Saladin is physically separated from his family after being sent to England for a public school education and has little contact with them after that. Fevvers, found abandoned as an infant and packed in straw, surrounded by broken eggshells, suggests an unworldly form of conception.

<sup>4</sup> John M. Kirk, 'Magic Realism and Voodoo: Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*', *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature*, 5 (1979), p. 127.



authority of the European colonial administration of Haiti, and the equally oppressive regime that replaced it under the leadership of the black ruler Henri-Christophe.

Gregor, however, has no control over his transformation. It appears to have emerged from within, unbidden. Gregor's transformation, moreover, cannot be directly linked to the sort of postcolonial debates magic realist critics usually associate with such magical events. Wendy B. Faris, for example, argues that metamorphosis in magic realist texts represent a challenge to colonial authority inasmuch as they 'embody in the realm of organisms a collision of two different worlds'.<sup>5</sup> Yet, perhaps Gregor's transformation points to a different sort of collision occurring within Kafka's novel – one between Gregor's inner and outer worlds, between the psychic and the material. If this is the case, *Metamorphosis* may indicate the existence of a European magic realism that, though it has little to do with postcolonial thought, engages with similar dynamics of repression and expression best understood in relation to psychoanalytic thought.

*Metamorphosis* is occasionally referred to as a magic realist text in the light of such thought. Angel Flores, for example, observes of Kafka's narrative that it appears to assert the authority of consciousness inasmuch as the characters of the novel accept Gregor's condition and attempt to incorporate it into the 'reality' of their lives. Yet, such is the impact of Gregor's transformation that the narrative can only mimic the logic associated with consciousness. The narrative appears to proceed with 'logical precision', but unable or unwilling to explain away the result of Gregor's troubled sleep it dissolves into 'ambiguity or confusion'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Faris describes Gregor's transformation as an actualised metaphor, yet one that may be placed in relation to psychoanalytical thought in that it projects 'inner states outward'.<sup>7</sup>

What is particularly interesting about Flores's and Faris's references to *Metamorphosis* is the manner in which they both provide an approach to the novel that indicates a link between magic realism and psychoanalytical thought, but one which also reflects the

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<sup>5</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 178.

<sup>6</sup> Angel Flores, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction', *Hispania*, 38 (1955), p. 189.

<sup>7</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children', p. 171.



dominant formal understanding of the category – namely in terms of a privileged fantastic. Faris, for example, while touching upon a psychoanalytical reading of the novel, argues that *Metamorphosis*, like many magic realist works, creates a sense of hesitancy in the reader between two apparently contradictory understandings. According to Faris, a moment of doubt grips the reader who is unsure whether to read the narrative in terms of the real or the unreal. This moment of doubt allows Faris to point to the similarity between magic realism and Tzvetan Todorov’s formulation of the fantastic.<sup>8</sup> Faris suggests that such a connection exists when the reader, or character, of a magic realist text hesitates between an understanding of an event, which may be explained ‘according to the laws of the natural universe as we know it, and the marvellous, which requires some alteration to those laws’.<sup>9</sup> Some magic realist critics seek to develop this relationship further. Robert Wilson, for example, describes *Metamorphosis* as a ‘clear unmistakable instance of magic realism’, and like Faris observes that a refusal to distinguish between the real and the unreal is characteristic of the category.<sup>10</sup> Wilson, however, goes beyond suggesting a similarity between magic realism and the fantastic. Wilson does not draw upon Todorov’s formulation of the term, but states categorically: ‘Thus whatever else “magic realism” may suggest it must be seen, in the first place, as having its place in the history of Literature as a mode of fantasy, though exceptional, untraditional and strangely powerful.’<sup>11</sup> For Wilson, the critical category of magic realism should be understood not in terms of its similarity to, but as, fantasy.

Defining magic realism in relation to the fantastic certainly allows the term to be applied to *Metamorphosis* and in doing so linked to psychoanalytical thought. Todorov himself argues that ‘the themes of fantastic literature have become, literally, the very themes of the psychological investigations of the last fifty years’.<sup>12</sup> Walter H. Sokel, in his work ‘Freud and the Magic of Kafka’s Writing’, provides a reading of *Metamorphosis* that clearly establishes the validity of linking a Freudian conception of the psyche with the

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<sup>8</sup> Todorov’s formulation of the fantastic and his reading of *Metamorphosis* will be examined in the second section of this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Wendy B. Faris, ‘Scheherazade’s Children’, p. 171.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Wilson, ‘Magic Realism’, *Quarry*, 32.2 (1983), p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Wilson, ‘Magic Realism’, p.88.

<sup>12</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 161.



formal qualities of the fantastic. He goes so far as to argue that ‘it is not Todorov, but Freud who will help to illuminate the function of the fantastic in Kafka’s work’.<sup>13</sup>

Rosemary Jackson places Kafka’s work firmly within the category of what she terms the modern fantastic, arguing that such a term serves to describe a secularised movement ‘away from orthodox demonology towards psychology, to account for difference and strangeness’.<sup>14</sup> However, before discussing the possible connections between such a view of the fantastic and the critical category of magic realism, it is worth outlining Kafka’s relationship to psychoanalytical, predominantly Freudian thought and the ways in which that thought may be applied to *Metamorphosis*.

Kafka’s novels’ are frequently discussed in terms of their engagement with a Freudian conception of the human psyche. One of the earliest and most notable examples of this approach to Kafka’s writing is Hellmuth Kaiser’s ‘Franz Kafka’s Inferno: Eine psychologische Deutung seiner Strafphantasie’.<sup>15</sup> By the 1950s, the practice of reading Kafka’s work within the context of Freudian thought was firmly established through the work of critics such as F.D. Luke and Sokel. Sokel writes:

To call Franz Kafka ‘the Dante of the Freudian age’ would not be without justification. The statement implies this analogy: as Dante had given poetic expression to the world view developed conceptually in scholastic philosophy, Kafka presented in fictional terms the image of man as conceived by Freud.<sup>16</sup>

Though Sokel qualifies this statement by pointing to the differences between Freud’s positivist faith in the scientific method and Kafka’s leanings towards the spiritual and mystical, he clearly promotes the validity of Freudian readings of Kafka’s writing. Sokel argues that Freud’s descriptions of the workings of the human mind are clearly

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<sup>13</sup> Walter H. Sokel, ‘Freud and the Magic of Kafka’s Writing’, in *The World of Franz Kafka*, ed. J. P. Stern (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 149.

<sup>14</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> Hellmuth Kaiser, ‘Franz Kafka’s Inferno: Eine psychologische Deutung seiner Strafphantasie’, *Imago*, 17.1 (1931), pp. 41-104. A shortened version is available in translation as ‘Kafka’s Fantasy of Punishment’, in *‘The Metamorphosis’ by Franz Kafka*, ed. and trans. Stanley Corngold (New York: Bantam, 1972), pp. 147-56.

<sup>16</sup> Walter H. Sokel, ‘Freud and the Magic of Kafka’s Writing’, p. 145.



analogous to the structure of Kafka's texts.<sup>17</sup> For Sokel, moreover, Kafka is not merely compatible with Freudian thought, 'but almost incomprehensible without it'.<sup>18</sup>

Kafka's works are contemporaneous with Freud's writing. It is also clear that Kafka often came into direct contact with psychoanalytic thought. While at university, Kafka studied under Professor Hans Gross, one of the founders of scientific criminology and forefather of what is now termed criminal psychology. Kafka was later to become personally acquainted with the professor's son Otto Gross, a student of psychoanalysis and member of Freud's inner circle. Kafka also frequented Frau Berta Fanta's literary salon, a venue for lectures and debates on Freud's theories.<sup>19</sup> Evidence of Freud's influence upon Kafka may also be detected in Kafka's personal writings. In a diary entry, dated 23 September 1912, Kafka reflects upon his short story *The Judgment* (1912) and concludes 'thoughts about Freud, of course'.<sup>20</sup> That Kafka should adopt such a tone of familiarity towards Freud's ideas, when discussing a text structured around a complex and ritualised conflict between a father and his son, suggests more than a passing acquaintance with Freud's work. *The Judgment*, moreover, was written only a few months before *Metamorphosis* and both texts share similar thematic concerns.<sup>21</sup> Like *The Judgment*, *Metamorphosis* is a novel structured around the conflict between a father and his son, and it too seeks to examine the role played by the family as an oppressive institution in the construction of identity.

Indeed, all of the novels examined in this thesis share this thematic concern. Even Fevvers, who is uniquely fatherless, equates masculine authority with exploitation and violence. Like Gregor, both Saladin and Oskar experience the father's authority as oppressive and a potential source of guilt. In *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Saladin is forced from his home, by his father, to be schooled abroad. He is thrust into an alien environment without preparation or adequate support, but is assured it is for his own benefit. Because of his father's actions, Saladin is cast adrift from his emotional and

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<sup>17</sup> This will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>18</sup> Walter H. Sokel, 'Freud and the Magic of Kafka's Writing', p. 149.

<sup>19</sup> See Walter H. Sokel, 'Freud and the Magic of Kafka's Writing', pp. 145-147.

<sup>20</sup> *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910-1913*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Joseph Kresh (London: Secker & Warburg, 1948), p. 276.

<sup>21</sup> Both works were written in 1912.



cultural moorings. Over time, Saladin's resentment towards his father grows and he chooses to remain in England. Yet, in doing so, Saladin is forced to desert the rest of his family. For much of *The Tin Drum* (1959), Oskar remains within the family home. It is for Oskar, however, a place of claustrophobic bourgeois values and sexual betrayals that reflect national and cultural division. Oskar's guilt is complex, emerging in part from association with the violence reflected in his father's shining boots and gleaming party badge, but also from the active role he plays in his father's death.

Similarly, Gregor's experience of the oppression of family life is most clearly expressed through his relationship with his father. While his mother and sister plead with Gregor to prepare himself for work, his father knocks gently on Gregor's bedroom door, 'yet with his fist' (p. 12). Behind the authority of the father, there exists the threat of violence. Kafka's troubled relationship with his own father is well documented by biographers such as Max Brod and Ernst Pawel.<sup>22</sup> It is also the subject for much of Kafka's personal writings, the most famous example being the long and damning letter Kafka sent to his father, entitled 'Dearest Father'. Kafka opens the letter:

Dear Father:

You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, and partly because an explanation of the grounds for this fear would mean going into far more details than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking.<sup>23</sup>

Sons who have reason to fear their fathers are depicted time and again in Kafka's works. Karl Rossman, the central character in Kafka's *America* (1927), finds himself accused of a minor sexual indiscretion and is immediately expelled from the family home. Forced to forge a new life for himself in America, Karl's fortunes appear to improve when a rich uncle assumes the role of father and takes him in. It is not long, however,

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<sup>22</sup> Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1947); Ernst Pawel, *Franz Kafka: The Nightmare of Reason* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1984).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Michel Carrouges, 'The Struggle Against the Father', in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Leo Hamalian (New York: McGraw-Hill, n.d.), p. 29.



before the uncle, describing himself as ‘essentially a man of principle’, finds fault in Karl’s behaviour and again drives him out of the family space.<sup>24</sup> At least Karl survives this experience. Characters such as Georg Bendemann in *The Judgment* must pay with their lives for failing to meet the demands of the father. Accused of misrepresenting himself and his family, his father judges Georg and condemns him to death. A dutiful son to the last, Georg carries out the sentence by throwing himself from a bridge.

Gregor also has good reason to fear his father. The father’s potential for violence is soon realised within the novel. His father repeatedly strikes Gregor whenever he dares to step beyond the limits of his bedroom. The novel is structured around these acts of violence. Both chapters one and two end with Gregor horribly injured and barely able to crawl back into his room, while the third and final chapter depicts Gregor’s death. Gregor feels defenceless against his father’s violence: ‘No entreaty of Gregor’s availed, indeed no entreaty was even understood, however humbly he bent his head his father only stamped on the floor the more loudly’ (p. 24). Unable to stand up to his father, Gregor is simply left ‘dumbfounded at the enormous size of his shoes’ (p. 43).

Kafka’s depictions of sons fearful of patriarchal authority supported by violence have much in common with Freud’s description of the Oedipus complex.<sup>25</sup> *Metamorphosis*, indeed, appears to invite such a reading. Kaiser’s 1931 article represents one of the earliest readings of *Metamorphosis* in terms of the Oedipus conflict. Later critics adopt a similar approach. F. D. Luke in an examination of the conflict between fathers and sons in Kafka’s work praises Kaiser’s study as an ‘exemplary monograph’.<sup>26</sup> J. Jofen discusses Kafka’s depiction of the mother figure in *Metamorphosis* and examines the father’s attempts to ‘protect’ his wife from her son. He asks why the father attacks

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<sup>24</sup> Franz Kafka, *America*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 91.

<sup>25</sup> See: Sigmund Freud: ‘A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men’ (1910), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), vol. 11, pp. 163-175; *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905, revised 1920), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 7, pp. 122-243; *The Ego and the Id* (1923), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 19, pp. 12-66; ‘The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex’ (1924), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 19, pp. 171-179; ‘The Infantile Genital Organisation: An Interpolation into the Theory of Sexuality’ (1923), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 19, pp. 139-145; ‘Female Sexuality’ (1931), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 21, pp. 221-243.

<sup>26</sup> F. D. Luke, ‘Kafka’s ‘Die Verwandlung’’, *Modern Language Review*, 46 (1951), p. 233.



Gregor with a barrage of apples and suggests that the apples may be symbolically linked to both guilt and paradise. Jofen argues that 'if we interpret 'paradise' as 'The Mother' we again see the Oedipus complex'.<sup>27</sup> Michel Carrouges states quite simply of Kafka's life and works: 'Oedipus complex? No doubt.'<sup>28</sup>

Much the same could be said of Grass's depiction of Oskar. Oskar claims that he chooses to remain a child. In doing so, his relationships with the women of his family appear frozen, unsexualised, pre-oedipal. However, despite his outward appearance, Oskar develops into a highly sexualised character. His fascination with the contents of his Grandmother's voluminous skirts, the hours spent beneath the living room table observing the furtive exchange of caresses between his mother and her lover, and the affair he has with the woman who later becomes his stepmother, clearly testify to his incestuous sexual tendencies. Yet, for the most part, Oskar escapes censure.

Gregor is not so fortunate. His complex, and at times sexually charged, relations with his mother and sister precipitate much of the violence suffered by Gregor. Gregor is repeatedly confronted with his mother in various states of undress. The mother is virtually naked before her son, yet always fleeing into the arms of the father for safety. The father's voice is 'no longer like the voice of a single father', but like that of all fathers who must enforce prohibition upon the son's desire for the mother (p. 25). When Gregor is not being beaten insensible, the mere sight of his parents embracing is enough to cause him to lose consciousness. Gregor appears to resemble Kafka himself, who in his diaries has this to say of the parental bed 'the sight of the double bed at home, the used sheets, the nightshirts carefully laid out, can exasperate me to the point of nausea, can turn me inside out'.<sup>29</sup> Gregor's relationship with his sister also strays dangerously close to incest. Gregor repeatedly compares his sister and his mother, judging them not only in terms of their ability to care for him, but also in terms of their sexual attractiveness. The sister as a potential means to short circuit the desire for the mother is, however, an option denied to him.

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<sup>27</sup> J. Jofen, 'Metamorphosis', *American Imago*, 35 (1978), p. 355.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Carrouges, 'The Struggle Against the Father', p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1914-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg with Hanah Arendt (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), p. 167.



According to Freud, the prohibitions of the father have broader connotations than the thwarting of incestuous desire. Freud argues that the successful repression of the Oedipus complex can only be achieved after the infantile ego has internalised elements of what was formally perceived as the external obstacle to desire, that it ‘fortified itself for the carrying out of the repression by erecting this same obstacle within itself. It borrowed strength to do this, so to speak, from the father’.<sup>30</sup> By doing so, the Oedipus complex is replaced with the super-ego.

The super-ego serves as conscience, as obstacle, against all socially prohibited behaviour. The formation of the super-ego points to a necessary and fundamental process undergone by all individuals if they are to successfully function as an adult in their specific cultural and social context. Yet, Gregor experiences this ‘necessity’ as oppression from without and frustration, anxiety and guilt from within. While being denied the privileges of the father figure, Gregor is required to identify with the authority invested in that figure, or else suffer the consequences.

The Oedipus complex is, however, just one of a number of different terms used by Freud to discuss the manner in which an individual’s development is characterised by the demands and significance of external reality necessarily modifying internal drives and wishes. Freud also uses terms such as reality principle and reality-testing to discuss this development. For Freud, the reality principle, discussed most fully in ‘Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning’ (1911), is central to mental functioning as it regulates and attempts to satisfy in a practical fashion the needs of the pleasure principle. If needs are to be satisfied in ways other than a purely hallucinatory state, then the conditions imposed upon satisfaction by the real must be taken into account. One important consequence of the reality principle, moreover, Freud argues, is the heightening of ‘the importance too, of the sense organs that are directed towards the external world, and of the consciousness attached to them’.<sup>31</sup> So, the reality principle is, for Freud, linked to the realm of the real and consciousness. It is also linked to what Freud describes as a process of reality testing – an ongoing process whereby thoughts, feelings, and experiences are judged in terms of their correspondence to an external,

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<sup>30</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning* (1911), in *The Standard*



accepted reality. Reality testing, and the forces of repression to which it is allied, serves to maintain the sanctity of consciousness and so allow for the proper functioning of the reality principle. These are repressive forces whose essence ‘lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the consciousness’ and in doing so countering any threat to it.<sup>32</sup>

Gregor appears to enact this dynamic as he struggles to get out of his bed. He is unable to control the lower portion of his body; his legs wave uselessly in the air, and any attempt to make use of them only causes him pain. Faced with the impossibility of this situation Gregor is driven by the imperative that ‘at all costs he must not lose consciousness now; precisely now’ (p.13). Gregor fights to maintain a grip on reality through consciousness in an effort to repress the forces of disorder represented by his transformed body. For all his efforts, however, Gregor sees ‘no way of bringing any order into this arbitrary confusion,’ while his legs ‘wave more wildly than ever, if that were possible’ (p. 13). However hard Gregor attempts to maintain the divide between his consciousness and the non-conscious disorder of his fantastically metamorphosed body, his efforts result in failure.

Gregor’s struggle between consciousness and unconscious disorder is central to an understanding of Kafka’s novel in psychoanalytical terms in relation to the fantastic. For *Metamorphosis* depicts not only the forces of repression, but may also depict the very dramatic return of those drives and wishes through the fantastic event of his transformation into insect. Freud himself argues that processes of repression are never easy, complete, or even permanent and that the repressed continues to thrive in the unconscious, developing ‘with less interference and more profusely if it is withdrawn by repression from conscious influence. It proliferates in the dark, as it were, and takes on extreme forms of expression’.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Gregor the insect may represent just such an extreme form of expression as the physical manifestation of the repressed, unconscious drives and forces of the id erupting into the conscious realm.<sup>34</sup>

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*Edition*, vol. 12, p. 220.

<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Repression’ (1915), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 14, p. 147.

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Repression’, p. 148.

<sup>34</sup> For critics who discuss Gregor’s transformation in such terms, see David Eggenchwiler, “‘The Metamorphosis,’ Freud, and the Chains of Odysseus’, in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York:



Freud also indicates how a literary text may illuminate an understanding of psychical processes of repression and may express the return of the repressed. In his essay ‘The Uncanny’ (1919), for example, he examines E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story *The Sand-Man* (1817) and describes the manner in which it expresses through fear, dread, and horror something that is neither:

new or alien, but something which is familiar and old established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression [...] something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.<sup>35</sup>

Irene Guenther, moreover, points to just this quality in magic realism in her discussion of early magic realist painters. Guenther argues, moreover, for a clearly Freudian understanding of the category in terms of the uncanny. Guenther states that for magic realist painters of the post-World War 1 era, ‘over-exposed, isolated, rendered from an uncustomary angle, the familiar became unusual, endowed with an *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness) which elicited fear and wonder.’<sup>36</sup>

Critics wishing to argue that Gregor’s transformation into an insect represents the return of the repressed, frequently choose to discuss Kafka’s novel in terms of a privileged fantastic. Sokel for example, argues, ‘as the return of the repressed forms the basis of the uncanny for Freud, it supplies the foundations for the fantastic in Kafka’.<sup>37</sup> He suggests that the fantastic represents the most appropriate literary form to express a realm that cannot be denied, one at odds with the demands of reality-testing and the conscious realm. For Sokel, *Metamorphosis* depicts an external or conscious reality

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Chelsea House, 1986), p. 203; Walter H. Sokel, ‘Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Franz Kafka’, in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Harold Bloom, p. 174.

<sup>35</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ (1919), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 17, p. 241.

<sup>36</sup> Irene Guenther, ‘Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 36 (Guenther’s italic and parentheses). Guenther is referring to, for example, artists such as Alexander Kanoldt, Christian Schad, Franz Radziwill, George Grosz and Otto Dix.

<sup>37</sup> Walter H. Sokel, ‘Kafka’s Beginnings: Narcissism, Magic, and the Function of Narrative in “Description of a Struggle”’, in *Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance*, ed. Alan Udoff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 106.



validated by reality-testing, overshadowed and eventually replaced by a previously buried and invalidated psychic reality.<sup>38</sup> If this is the case, the fantastic transformation experienced by Gregor represents a direct challenge to the authority of the ego and conscious rationality. This is a challenge it is unable to resist and by failing to do so reveals not only the vulnerability of consciousness and rationality, but also the values they are associated with.

Two distinct, though related areas of Freudian thought, those of dreams and neurosis, perhaps best serve discussion of Gregor's fantastic transformation as a physical manifestation of the return of the repressed.<sup>39</sup> Gregor awakes from troubled dreams to find himself transformed into an insect. Yet, though he appears to have regained consciousness, he does not appear to have fully left the realm of dreams behind him. Such is the nature of his impossible transformation, and more significantly, such is his and the family's acceptance of that transformation, that it seems that Gregor has left one dream only to enter another. Or that the rules and conditions that apply to the dreaming realm have followed him into and replaced those of consciousness.

Kafka applies a dreamlike literalness to his descriptions of horrific and impossible events. Gregor does not awake to find himself 'like' a gigantic insect, but 'is' a gigantic insect. Freud points to just this characteristic in dreams when he argues that dreams lack the means for expressing subjunctives such as 'just as', and 'although'.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the connection between Gregor the man and Gregor the insect is something to be interpreted by the reader in much the same way that Freud argues that 'the restoration of the connections which the dreamwork has destroyed is a task which has to be performed by the interpretative process'.<sup>41</sup>

Freud himself, moreover, points to the similarity between dreams and neurosis, arguing that both are expressions of repressed wishes that have undergone distortion through

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<sup>38</sup> Walter H. Sokel, 'Freud and the Magic of Kafka's Writing', p. 152.

<sup>39</sup> For example, see: Theodor W. Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 248; Walter H. Sokel, 'Freud and the Magic of Kafka's Writing', p. 151.

<sup>40</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 4, p. 312.

<sup>41</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 312.



ensorship. What appears to the dreamer as a dream, is expressed by the neurotic as symptoms which are ‘nothing else but phantasies translated into the motor sphere, projected on to motility and portrayed in pantomime’.<sup>42</sup> In a similar fashion, Gregor’s transformation might be read as a neurotic symptom; the unconscious exerting an influence upon the physical body with a power exceeding that of consciousness.

This is, moreover, a potentially destructive power. As Theodor W. Adorno observes, it is a power that may tear ‘down the soothing facade to which a repressive reason increasingly conforms’.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, whether discussing *Metamorphosis* in terms of dreams or neurosis, Kafka’s use of the fantastic may be linked to the unconscious and placed in opposition to a more rational realm represented by consciousness. Gregor’s metamorphosis need not simply reflect processes of repression, but might also represent an active expression of protest against all those forces of repression that have shaped his life.

This protest may be seen to take many forms. One such form, suggested by Martin Greenberg, is that Kafka’s use of the dream narrative allowed him to develop what was to become the dominant theme of his work: ‘the struggle of the self with itself to be itself’.<sup>44</sup> So Gregor’s transformation may represent an act of protest against an imposed and burdensome selfhood, unrelated to Gregor’s desires for himself but a product of the demands placed upon him by a capitalist society and articulated through the family. These demands require him to sacrifice himself to soul-destroying labour to maintain the outward appearance of middle class wealth for a loveless family.

Magic realist critics, moreover, often adopt a similar approach to dreams - as the expression of a conflict associated with the experience of self. Since most magic realist criticism focuses upon the relationship between magic realism and postcolonial literature, dreaming is frequently read in terms of an expression of a repressed and ‘authentic’ pre-colonial selfhood seeking to transcend colonial processes that describe those oppressed in terms of the Other. Suzanne Baker, for example, describes dreaming

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<sup>42</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Some General Remarks on Hysterical Attacks’ (1909), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 9, p. 229.

<sup>43</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Notes on Kafka’, p. 252.

<sup>44</sup> Martin Greenberg, ‘Art and Dreams’, in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Harold Bloom, p. 66.



as an expression of indigenous systems of belief. This belief is positioned in opposition to the modernity of European colonial power. Baker discusses the importance of dreaming to Aboriginal magic realist writers such as Sam Watson. For Baker, the power to dream represents a return to the very bedrock of Aboriginal belief while suggesting the possibility of a creative response to what she considers to be the continued oppression of Aborigine culture. Baker argues that, as a consequence, magic realism offers Aboriginal literature ‘an imaginative and effective means of showing the ‘real’ living experience of Aborigines in their day-to-day survival, while expressing the tremendous value and importance of their rich and complex ‘magic’ cultural heritage which continues to inform their unique sense of Aboriginality’.<sup>45</sup>

It is, however, difficult to discern in what way Gregor’s transformation might be regarded as an act of protest through the expression of selfhood or how this might link to discussion of *Metamorphosis* as a magic realist work. Yet, as Freud so famously observes ‘*a dream is a (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish*’.<sup>46</sup> It is this element of disguise, expressed through the fantastic, which allows for a reading of Gregor the insect in terms of a struggle to express a previously repressed aspect of selfhood. Freud argues that desire must necessarily be disguised within dreams if it is to bypass a mechanism of censorship in service to the forces of repression. In short, if certain desires or drives have been repressed then they must stay repressed, even in sleep, and can only find expression in distorted form. Though Gregor initially appears distressed by his metamorphosis, this distress does not necessarily negate its status as wish-fulfilment. Freud points out: ‘This is possible if dream distortion has occurred and if the distressing content serves only to disguise something that is wished for.’<sup>47</sup>

The uneasy dreams experienced by Gregor might well suggest the sort of conflict that Freud describes between unconscious, repressed, desire and the forces of censorship that seek to deflect that desire. However, the ultimate sanction of the dream censor, its power to awaken the dreamer rather than allow dangerous levels of energy or excitement to the repressed, seems to fail when Gregor awakens to his transformation. Gregor’s

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<sup>45</sup> Suzanne Baker, ‘Magic Realism as a Postcolonial Strategy: *The Kadaitcha Sung*’, *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* (1991), pp. 62-3.

<sup>46</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 160 (Freud’s parentheses and italic).

<sup>47</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 145.



internal desires appear to have erupted into external reality. Because of his transformation, Gregor is at first unable to get out of bed. He is unable to take up a waking role that has for so long crushed him under the weight of its obligations and hardships. As Gregor points out, if he is indeed a gigantic insect, if his family are horrified at his appearance, ‘then the responsibility was no longer his and he could stay quiet’ (p. 18). Only if they respond to him as though nothing at all had changed would he have to hurry to catch his train for work. But the family is horrified at his appearance, if not the fact of his transformation. So horrified are they that not only is Gregor freed from his responsibilities but he is also empowered to enact, though perhaps unintentionally, some degree of revenge against his family and employer. The chief clerk is struck dumb at the sight of Gregor, his mother collapses, and his father’s anger soon turns to tears.

Faris suggests that a common characteristic of magic realist texts is ‘a position that is antibureaucratic, and so they often use their magic against the established social order’.<sup>48</sup> The effect of Gregor’s transformation is, indeed, to drive the chief clerk from his life. Gregor finds himself released from the captivity of the workplace and, therefore, released from his financial obligation to his family. The father, mother, and daughter must now work if they are to maintain the family as a productive institution. Gregor’s transformation does not only appear to free him from his obligations, it may also attack the rationality employed to support them. The text opens with Gregor attempting to apply reason to the circumstances of his metamorphosis. Gregor is not attempting to explain how such an event might have occurred, but is reasoning how he might still go to work. When the family discovers Gregor is still in bed they reasonably request him to take up his responsibilities. Yet Gregor is unable to comply and so his family seeks to excuse this unusual behaviour. His mother assures the chief clerk ‘he’s not well, sir, believe me. What else would make him miss a train! The boy thinks about nothing but his work’ (p. 16). Gregor’s inability, however, is soon perceived to be a blatant refusal to conform. The chief clerk demands that Gregor provide ‘an immediate and precise explanation.’ When none is forthcoming, he declares: ‘You amaze me, you amaze me’ (p. 17).

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<sup>48</sup> Wendy B. Faris, ‘Scheherazade’s Children’, p. 179.



As an expression of neurosis, Gregor's condition confounds the notion of identity founded upon reason. Gregor the insect cannot in reason coincide with Gregor the man, yet from Gregor's point of view this is clearly the case. Gregor is himself, yet at the same time he is Other. This Other, the product of exclusion or repression, is by its very nature unintelligible. The family struggle to identify Gregor in his transformed state. Unable to ascribe any meaning to the transformation, they wait for reality to reassert itself, or for Gregor to take himself away. When neither happens, they have little choice but to deny his existence altogether. The sister best articulates the family's dilemma when she tells the father, 'you must just try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we've believed it for so long is the root of all our trouble. But how can it be Gregor? If it were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can't live with such a creature, and he'd have gone away of his own accord' (p. 57).

Existing beyond the realm of reason, Gregor as insect exists in a realm where language no longer functions as a tool of reason. As Stanley Corngold observes, 'the sense of Gregor's opaque body is thus to maintain him in a solitude without speech or intelligible gesture, the solitude of an indecipherable sign'.<sup>49</sup> Corngold's reading of Kafka's use of the fantastic in *Metamorphosis* is an interesting one in that it might be applied to all the novels examined in this thesis. Just as Gregor transformed into insect may represent an 'indecipherable sign', so too might Oskar the dwarf, the bird-like Fevvers, the devilish Saladin and the angelic Gibreel. All these characters undergo fantastic transformations the meanings of which remain elusive. They are indecipherable, however, only inasmuch as they fail to be contained by a singularly reasoned and definitive description. Their fantastic transformations generate a multitude of different meanings. To such an extent, indeed, that meaning itself becomes a somewhat clouded concept.

*Metamorphosis* not only points to the limitations of language, but through Gregor's transformation gives paradoxical expression to these limitations. Gregor's parents and sister are unable to ascribe reassuring meaning to his transformation because they lack the means to do so; Gregor is unintelligible because his multiplicity equates to a form of inexpressibility. The family, indeed, would rather banish Gregor than accept the failure

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<sup>49</sup> Stanley Corngold, *The Commentators' Despair: The Interpretation of Kafka's Metamorphosis* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1973), p. 12.



of language to provide meaning to their experience. For the family, access to and possession of language is associated with an authority they are unwilling to deny. The novel, for example, describes the father's habit of sitting before the family reading out the afternoon newspapers in a loud voice. As head of the household, the father serves as the custodian of knowledge, the representative of a shared world-view expressed through the written word. Yet, the authority invested in language is clearly disturbed by Gregor's metamorphosis; after his confrontation with Gregor the insect, the father no longer reads out the news, but sits in silence while the newspapers are used to serve Gregor his meals of rotten food. Language also fails Gregor. Soon after his transformation occurs, Gregor finds himself losing the power of speech. His voice takes on a 'persistent horrible twittering squeak' (p. 11). Gregor restricts himself to monosyllabic responses in an attempt to mask his failing voice, but is condemned by the chief clerk who declares: 'That was no human voice' (p. 19). Gregor cannot express himself because his sense of self has been cast so far into doubt that language proves an inadequate tool for the task.

Kafka's use of the fantastic seems to undermine the notion of language as something singular, shared and coherent. The fantastic as an expression of the repressed appears placed in opposition to a consciousness, founded upon a process of reality-testing that relies upon language to support an acceptable version of the real. For many critics, moreover, this aspect of Kafka's work represents a direct attack upon the conventions of a literary realism founded upon similar dynamics. As Allen Thiher argues: 'Of course the first effect of Gregor's metamorphosis, in spite of the presence of an alarm clock telling him to get up, is that it subverts the realistic code, for the realistic mode that promises stability and hence readability is juxtaposed with totally gratuitous instability.'<sup>50</sup> Just as consciousness, and more broadly identity, is formed and regulated through conventions that originate in the homogenising requirements of order and authority, so realism might represent the artistic subscription to and expression of that authority. The effect of Gregor's metamorphosis appears to expose realism's vulnerability when confronted with a realm existing beyond the influence of that authority.

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<sup>50</sup> Allen Thiher, *Franz Kafka: A Study in Short Fiction*, p. 45.



Reading *Metamorphosis* in this fashion clearly shares much in common with the dominant conception of magic realism as a critical category. Such a reading, indeed, resembles the numerous, but always brief references made to the novel by magic realist criticism. Flores, for example, states clearly that magic realist novels such as *Metamorphosis* represent a direct attack upon the ‘blind alley’ of realism.<sup>51</sup> Robert Wilson describes *Metamorphosis* in terms of a magic realism, aligned with fantasy.<sup>52</sup> Wilson argues this is a fantasy that ‘aggressively subverts the conventions of realistic fiction’.<sup>53</sup> Magic realist readings of *Metamorphosis* as anti-realist clearly emerge out of an understanding of magic realism itself in these terms. Magic realism is seen by most critics to be in direct opposition to realism. Brenda Cooper, for example, describes magic realism’s experimental techniques, its embrace of ‘the inscrutable and the mysterious’ as a direct challenge to the adherents of the ‘conventions of social realism’.<sup>54</sup> For others, magic realist works attempt to correct realism’s deficiencies by introducing ‘magical supplements’ that allow for a more complex conception of reality.<sup>55</sup> For Zamora and Faris, the appeal of magic realism lies in ‘its impulse to reestablish contact with traditions temporarily eclipsed by the mimetic constraints of nineteenth-and twentieth-century realism’.<sup>56</sup> These are traditions that offer a different sort of vision of the world, less prescribed than that provided by a realism too intimately linked to the reason of modernity from which it emerged.

Gregor, whose perspective dominates *Metamorphosis*, finds that clarity of vision eludes him. Gregor finds that the view from his window, his access to the world beyond the confines of the domestic space, becomes increasingly obscured. In a similar fashion, *Metamorphosis* employs a narrative voice that lacks the clarity of vision, the informed

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<sup>51</sup> Angel Flores, ‘Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction’, p. 188.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Wilson, ‘Magic Realism’, p. 88.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Wilson, ‘On the Boundary of The Magic and The Real: Notes on Inter-American Fiction’, *The Compass*, 6 (1979), p. 37.

<sup>54</sup> Brenda Cooper, ‘Does Marxism Allow for the Magical Side of Things? Magical Realism and a Comparison between *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The House of the Spirits*’, *Social Dynamics*, 17.2 (1991), p. 126.

<sup>55</sup> See: Scott Simpkins, ‘Magical Strategies: The Supplement of Realism’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 34.2 (1988), pp. 140-154.

<sup>56</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, ‘Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 2.



perspective, normally associated with realist narratives. While the narrative voice assumes an authoritative tone, supported by an abundance of detailed description, it lacks the ability to explain or contextualise the events of the text within reason. The text almost makes sense, but does not. Kafka himself describes *Metamorphosis* as ‘rather illegible’.<sup>57</sup>

Opposition to realist conventions seems most apparent in Kafka’s construction of Gregor as ‘character’. *Metamorphosis* mobilises debates that question the manner in which language attempts to construct and articulate selfhood. For the classic realist text, the construction of stable and believable characters represents the bedrock upon which the rest of the narrative rests. Yet, Gregor’s character not only consists of contradictory personal values, but also emerges from the sheer irrationality of his metamorphosis into a gigantic insect. The narrative voice and the characters in the novel lack the sort of shared ‘knowledge’ with the reader, supposedly implicit in realism, that would allow them to say who, or what, Gregor is.

Kafka’s use of the fantastic does serve to confound the notion of selfhood as something stable and unified. Gregor inhabits a body unfamiliar to him. It is a physical self, made up of segments, legs multitudinous beyond his control. Like his psychic self, his body is depicted in terms of fragmentation and dissolution. Kafka’s use of the fantastic not only serves to disturb the notion of character, but also is seen to challenge the ideology behind it. Hélène Cixous argues:

The ideology underlying this fetishization of “character” is that of an “I” who is a *whole* subject (that of the “character” as well as the author), conscious, knowable; and the enunciatory “I” *expresses himself* in the text, just as the world is represented complementarily in the text in a form equivalent to pictorial representation, as a simulacrum.

This is all accomplished in the name of some reality principle (“Life, “truth,” “biography,” “sense”) to which the text is subordinated. It is a subjugation enunciated from the outset by the semantic history of the word *character*:

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Allen Thiher, *Franz Kafka: A Study in Short Fiction*, p. 105.



coming from the Greek *Kharattein*, to engrave, it is first the mark, the drawn, written, preserved sign; then the *title*, natural or legal, which confers a rank, a right.... A mark, then, by which the “character” is assured to be that which has been characterized and refers back to the stamp, to the origin.<sup>58</sup>

When Cixous refers to *Metamorphosis*, she points to the disturbing potential of certain kinds of texts that refuse to adopt the fetishization of character by presenting, in the place of traditional character, the fantastic non-human.<sup>59</sup> Though Cixous does not do so, moreover, it is possible that *Metamorphosis* might be usefully discussed as magic realist in just such terms. Such an approach to the novel would certainly indicate one of the ways in which the term might be linked to the fantastic and consequently placed in opposition to realism. For within magic realist criticism, the prevailing view on depictions of metamorphosis is that they draw attention to processes of oppression founded upon the imposition of ‘character’ while also presenting the possibility of escape. Such depictions are seen to represent attempts to transcend the constraints of the real and realist practices by depicting ‘other’ realms and potentials.

### The Materialism and Realism of Gregor’s Transformation

It is an interesting exercise to read *Metamorphosis* and its relationship to Freudian thought in terms of the fantastic. Both novel and theory appear open to such an approach. Reading *Metamorphosis* in this fashion, moreover, allows for a number of useful connections to be drawn between it and the dominant understanding of magic realism as a critical category. Such an understanding, however, is not sufficient to encompass the full complexity of both the novel and its theoretical context.

It is one of the central arguments of this thesis that what is lacking in discussion of magic realism is the manner in which the term, despite its ties to the fantastic, may also indicate problems with, even challenges to the fantastic while also standing in closer relationship to realism. *Metamorphosis* clearly reveals the need for discussion of magic

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<sup>58</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘The Character of “Character”’, *New Literary History*, 5.2 (1974), pp. 385-386 (Cixous’ italics and parentheses).



realism in just such terms. The true complexity of Kafka's novel lies precisely in its interrogative relationship to the fantastic. *Metamorphosis* may be read in terms of a privileged fantastic, yet there is a great deal about the novel that casts doubt upon such a reading while also indicating much closer ties to realism.

It is questionable, for example, whether Gregor's fantastic transformation actually does serve to free him from his sense of oppression.<sup>60</sup> The photograph of Gregor in his officer's uniform, 'hand on sword, a carefree smile on his face, inviting one to respect his uniform and military bearing' depicts a time before Gregor's transformation and is in stark contrast to Gregor the insect (p. 21). This image of confidence and strength looks down upon a Gregor bereft of these qualities. On the few occasions when Gregor appears to assert himself, his strength soon deserts him. His opposition to figures of authority quickly dissolves into futile attempts to placate that authority. When Gregor is faced with his family and the chief clerk demanding that he accept his responsibilities, he is freed of those responsibilities only because his actions are misunderstood. While the family and the chief clerk interpret Gregor's movements as a challenge to their authority, he is in fact pleading to be allowed to comply with their demands. Gregor is desperate in his attempts to convince them of his good intentions. He declares: 'I'm loyally bound to serve the chief, you know that very well [...] I'm in great difficulties, but I'll get out of them again. Don't make things any worse for me than they are' (p. 22).

While the effect of Gregor's fantastic metamorphosis is to drive away the chief clerk and repel his family, Gregor himself refuses to view this as any sort of victory. Indeed, for much of the novel, Gregor struggles to maintain as much contact with his former existence as possible. When the family debate removing the furniture from his room,

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<sup>59</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Character of "Character"', p. 387.

<sup>60</sup> Walter Benjamin, for example, points to Kafka's depiction of humans as animals and argues 'being an animal presumably meant to him only to have given up human form and human wisdom from a kind of shame'. See: Walter Benjamin, 'Some Reflections on Kafka', in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Harold Bloom, p. 32. For similar readings of Kafka's use of the fantastic in *Metamorphosis*, see: Richard Murphy, 'Semiotic Excess, Semantic Vacuity and the Photograph of the Imaginary: The Interplay of Realism and the Fantastic in Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 65.2 (1991), p. 315; W. H. Auden, 'The I Without a Self', in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Leo Hamalian, p. 43; Lance Olsen, *Ellipse of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Post-Modern Fantasy* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp. 28-9.



Gregor is shocked at his initial willingness to divest himself of the symbols of his humanity. Gregor asks: ‘Did he really want his warm room, so comfortably fitted with old family furniture, to be turned into a naked den in which he would certainly be able to crawl unhampered in all directions but at the price of shedding simultaneously all recollection of human background?’ (p. 38). Again, Gregor’s actions at first appear as a challenge to the family’s authority when he manages to stop them from emptying his room. However, again, this is achieved only inadvertently and any challenge his actions might represent soon degenerates into frantic attempts to placate the family so they might forgive his audacity. Even after his punishment, as he lay bleeding in his room, Gregor continues to reproach himself.

Later in the novel, Gregor attempts to draw upon his transformation as a means to protect his sister. Gregor watches angrily from his room as his sister is forced to perform for the pleasure of the three lodgers. He crawls into the living room, determined to pull her back into the safety of his bedroom where ‘his frightful appearance would become, for the first time, useful to him; he would watch all the doors of his room at once and spit at intruders’ (p. 53). Gregor’s entrance, however, fails to frighten the lodgers. They appear amused by his appearance and only feign disgust so they might have an excuse for not paying their rent. Gregor’s fantastic transformation serves to shock only inadvertently, and fails him completely when he has real need of its potential.

Norman Holland argues that in privileging the novel’s ‘unrealistic elements, there is a danger that we will be dazzled and see no more’.<sup>61</sup> This is a criticism that might well be directed against much magic realist criticism and has particular relevance when discussing *Metamorphosis* as a magic realist work in the light of psychoanalytical concepts. Such an approach to the novel clearly runs the risk of ignoring Kafka’s ambiguous use of the fantastic. Gregor as fantastically transformed insect may well seem to present a challenge to authority, yet his ability to mount effective opposition to authority is clearly limited. Approaches to the novel that seek to privilege the fantastic in *Metamorphosis*, moreover, also run the risk of limiting the manner in which the novel may be understood in relation to Freudian thought. Any reading of the novel based upon

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<sup>61</sup> Norman N. Holland, ‘Realism and Unrealism: Kafka’s “Metamorphosis”’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 4.2 (1958), p. 143.



an opposition between the fantastic and realism, translated into the repressed in opposition to conscious rationality, leaves very little opportunity to discuss the flexibility of Freud's conception of the workings of the human psyche. As the second half of this chapter argues, however, Freudian thought, the manner in which it is reflected in *Metamorphosis* and magic realism as a critical category, are all best understood in terms of complicity, a more intimate exchange between supposed differences and even the erosion of such differences.

Freud refuses to present a reductive understanding of the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious in terms of a binary. His conception of the human psyche is not founded upon division, but upon a more fluid exchange between systems. Freud suggests, for example, that consciousness 'is in the first place purely a descriptive term, resting on perception of the most immediate and certain character'.<sup>62</sup> By this, Freud means that consciousness should be understood as something transitory, made up of thoughts and ideas that soon pass out of awareness into a state of latency. These thoughts retain the potential to become conscious at any time, yet until that occurs they might be accurately described as preconscious. So, not only may consciousness become unconscious, but also what is unconscious is 'certainly *capable of becoming conscious*'.<sup>63</sup>

In his later works, Freud evolves a more complicated appreciation of consciousness and the unconscious, incorporating them into a model of the human psyche founded upon the id, ego and super-ego. Within this model, the ego stands as the site of consciousness serving to 'substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id'.<sup>64</sup> Such a model seems to support a conception of the psyche emerging from oppositions, with the ego representing conscious reason and the id unconscious drives. Yet, Freud retains in this model a dynamic based upon intimacy not division. For the ego differs from the id only in so much that it 'has been modified by

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<sup>62</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>63</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Papers on Metapsychology* (1915), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 14, p. 173, (Freud's italic).

<sup>64</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 25.



the direct influence of the external world' and is not a distinctly different realm, but a modified extension of one realm.<sup>65</sup>

Though oppositional approaches to processes of censorship and repression find it convenient to locate authority within the realm of consciousness, Freud himself prefers to emphasise the preconscious as the primary site of censorship. The preconscious confounds any attempt to establish a binary between consciousness and the unconscious in terms of repression and reality testing. Freud argues that the preconscious serves to 'set up a censorship or several censorships; 'reality testing' too, and the reality principle, are its province'.<sup>66</sup> Yet, by stating that this system is not yet conscious, he is clearly describing a censoring system, a process of 'reality testing', that is only potentially conscious.

Freud applies a dynamic of intimacy even to that aspect of the ego identified as the super-ego. Though the super-ego plays a central role in the repression of the Oedipus complex, indeed owes its existence to that act of repression and so represents the 'higher, moral, supra-personal side of human nature', its relationship to consciousness is less than straightforward, confounding any temptation to simply associate 'higher' functions and their authority with consciousness.<sup>67</sup> Freud writes:

Accustomed as we are to taking our social or ethical scale of values along with us wherever we go, we feel no surprise at hearing that the scene of the activities of the lower passions is the unconscious; we expect, moreover, that the higher any mental function ranks in our scale of values the more easily it will find access to consciousness assured to it. Here, however, psychoanalytical experience disappoints us.<sup>68</sup>

Freud supports this claim by pointing to the origins of the super-ego within the Oedipus complex. He suggests that, rather than expressing the authority of consciousness, the super-ego represents an internalised set of values whose role subsequently places it in a

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<sup>65</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 25.

<sup>66</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Papers on Metapsychology*, p. 188.

<sup>67</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 375.

<sup>68</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 365.



permanent relationship to the id. While the ego may serve as representative of external reality, the super-ego exists largely in the unconscious, inaccessible to the ego that experiences its authority only indirectly as a sense of guilt.

A more complicated comprehension of Freudian thought recognises that censoring and repression operate largely outside of consciousness. Repression occurs internally, at a level beyond conscious awareness. Moreover, just as repression is founded upon intimacy, so too is the return of the repressed. For Freud, both dreams and neurotic symptoms represent the expression of the fulfilment of a wish, yet are presented to consciousness and examination in disguised form through processes of displacement and condensation.<sup>69</sup> In short, what emerges as an expression of the repressed is not actually the repressed, but a more recognisable and compromised substitute. The repressed is 'grounded', broadly in terms of the reality principle, even before coming under the scrutiny of consciousness.

For Freud, the repressed finds expression only through compromise. Such an understanding of Freudian thought is clearly at odds with readings of *Metamorphosis* that wish to privilege the disturbing potential of the unconscious, particularly those by critics wishing to privilege the fantastic by doing so. This is equally true of magic realist critics of the text who tend to conflate the repressed with the fantastic and place it in opposition to consciousness and realism as a tool of consciousness. Gregor as gigantic insect may represent a compromise between drives and instincts and their necessary condensation and displacement into a singular recognisable and acceptable substitute image. Gregor's transformation also need not be viewed simply as a manifestation of rebellion. Gregor may be viewed as a figure acting out a dynamic similar to, if not strictly analogous to, Freud's complex conception of psychic systems. Gregor's actions need not be seen simply as rebellious, but may at the same time reveal a continued allegiance to the values of the so-called 'higher' psychic systems.

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<sup>69</sup> Displacement refers to a process whereby emphasis or intensity is detached from one image or idea and attached to another related to the first through a chain of associations. Condensation may indicate the preservation, at the expense of others, of a single recurring idea or theme that may stand in for those elements exorcised or may refer to the formation of a 'composite figure' representing the combination of various different elements. See, J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books, 1988), pp. 82-83, 121-123.



All the novels examined in this thesis demonstrate that complicity and compromise are characteristic features of magic realism novels at both thematic and formal levels. Even Fevvers, who hints at her revolutionary activities and place herself squarely at odds with a patriarchy supported by capitalist exploitation, refuses for most of the novel to step completely outside the very system that has oppressed her. Instead, she appears to seize every opportunity to work it for her benefit. Gregor, however, most closely resembles Oskar and Saleem in terms of complicity. Oskar, for example, acts as witness to the rise of fascism, an authority his father fully supports by donning the brown shirt and attending party demonstrations. The father is, moreover, the representative of fascism within the family space. Yet, despite his apparent rejection of his father, Oskar is fascinated by the power of the fascists, attempts to participate in their rallies and performs for their amusement. Saleem, like Oskar, is similarly enthralled by the very forces ranged against him. As an immigrant in England, Saleem is both witness to and victim of racial prejudice and violence. Yet, in his bid to be more British than the British, he appears wilfully blind to these experiences. Instead, he formulates increasingly incoherent excuses for a system based upon cultural elitism even as he dreams of being accepted by it. Gregor's continued allegiance to the authority that has formed, damaged and discarded him is revealed through the feelings of guilt that plague him throughout the novel. For, despite his transformation, Gregor retains a great deal of pride in his ability to provide for the family. Though he is freed from the responsibilities that so oppressed him, Gregor clearly regrets his loss of position within the family. In an attempt to compensate for this loss, Gregor constructs elaborate fantasies in which he regains his authority and is able to release his family from the shame of menial labour.

Such is Gregor's allegiance to the family, so in thrall to its values is he, that he responds joyfully to the news that his father has been cheating him for years. Gregor had believed the collapse of his father's business and the family's wealth to be complete. For this reason, Gregor had enslaved himself to his employers so that his family might survive. Gregor learns, however, that not only had his father managed to salvage some of his investments, but had also been investing some of the money Gregor thought used to support the family. Faced with the evidence of such a betrayal, Gregor 'nodded his head eagerly, rejoiced at this evidence of unexpected thrift and foresight' (p. 33). It is not long, however, before this joy is once again replaced with guilt that he can no longer



provide financial assistance for his family, for ‘whenever the need for earning money was mentioned, Gregor [...] threw himself down [...] hot with shame and grief’ (p. 34).

Even such a critic as Sokel, who reads Gregor’s transformation as an expression of revolt, raises the question of Gregor’s complicity in his own punishment. Sokel asks might not Gregor’s transformation also represent a ‘treacherous appeasement’, one that ‘actually invites punishment and destruction?’.<sup>70</sup> It is not so much the father’s use of violence that is most shocking, but Gregor’s passive acceptance of it. Nowhere in the text does Gregor ever react to his punishments as though they were an injustice. Gregor consistently views the beatings he receives as merely the result of a breakdown in communication between himself and his father, as an unfortunate consequence of his transformation. Not only does Gregor accept that ‘his father believed only the severest measures suitable for dealing with him’, but he is inclined to agree with this belief, as though he actually deserved to be punished (p. 43). Such is Gregor’s continued allegiance to the authority of the family that he readily agrees with his sister’s argument that he must go: ‘The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister – if that were possible’ (p. 58). It is Gregor, obedient to the last, who executes the family’s judgement. In his obedience, Gregor finds comfort and peace and with the dawn ‘his head sank to the floor of its own accord and from his nostrils came the last flicker of breath’ (p.58).

So, it is possible to read Gregor as both rebellious and passive; Gregor both rebels against the authority of the family yet retains his allegiance to it. This ambiguity leads Albert Camus to observe:

The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to re-read. His endings, or his absence of endings, suggest explanations which, however, are not revealed in clear language, but, before they seem justified, require that the story be reread from another point of view. Sometimes there is a double possibility of

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<sup>70</sup> Walter H. Sokel, ‘Kafka’s “Metamorphosis”: Rebellion and Punishment’, *Monatshefte*, 48 (1956), p. 212.



interpretation, whence appears the necessity for two readings. This is what the author wanted.<sup>71</sup>

As this thesis argues, magic realism's relationship to the fantastic may be similarly 'reread from another point of view'. Magic realism is best conceived of as a critical category that describes texts that explore both the potential and limitations of the fantastic. This is certainly true of *Metamorphosis*. The plasticity of the fantastic as a critical term is clearly revealed in the different ways critics mobilise and reflect upon the term in their reading of the text. Sokel, for example, writes: 'By 'fantastic' I understand those narrated events in which the reader finds startling and puzzling deviations from his normal expectations, unexplained violations of what he would consider possible in the empirical world.'<sup>72</sup> Sokel locates his understanding of the fantastic in relation to theoretical discussion of the term and his reading of *Metamorphosis* in relation to Todorov's conception of the fantastic. Though he appears to disagree with Todorov's reading of *Metamorphosis*, suggesting that Todorov's conception of the fantastic fails to illuminate an understanding of the text, Sokel then presents a reading of *Metamorphosis* very much in line with Todorov's conception of the 'traditional fantastic' by arguing that the text depicts a movement away from the natural to the supernatural realm.<sup>73</sup>

Yet, Sokel fails to acknowledge that Todorov's reading of *Metamorphosis* forced him to evolve a new classification of the fantastic. Todorov's conception of the 'traditional fantastic', as described by Sokel, failed to accommodate the text. Todorov concedes that the manner in which *Metamorphosis* depicts the supernatural confounds his own studies on the subject. Central to Todorov's conception of the fantastic is the existence of hesitation between possible readings of the supernatural event. The fantastic text is, according to Todorov, suspended between the two poles of the uncanny and the marvelous, between readings of the text that provide either a natural or unnatural explanation for events within the narrative. Todorov observes, however, that any hesitation that might be generated by *Metamorphosis* is soon 'drowned in the general movement of the narrative, in which the most surprising thing is precisely the absence of

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<sup>71</sup> Albert Camus, 'Hope and the Absurd in the Works of Franz Kafka', *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 112.

<sup>72</sup> Walter H. Sokel, 'Freud and the Magic of Kafka's Writing', p. 149.

<sup>73</sup> Walter H. Sokel, 'Freud and the Magic of Kafka's Writing', p. 149.



surprise with regards to the unheard-of event that has befallen Gregor Samsa'.<sup>74</sup> The text fails to generate hesitation because the supernatural event occurs right at the beginning of the text. It is, indeed, described in the very first line. From this point until the end of the text the narrative proceeds to create 'an increasingly natural atmosphere' within which the transformation is accepted as Gregor and his family adjust to his condition.<sup>75</sup>

Yet, Todorov insists, the text does not slip into the realm of the marvellous – Gregor does not live in a world with laws so different from our own that the supernatural passes without comment. Todorov argues that 'in "The Metamorphosis" it is indeed a shocking, impossible event which concerns us, but it is an event which ends by becoming possible, paradoxically enough'.<sup>76</sup> It is at this point that Todorov's reading of *Metamorphosis* becomes somewhat contradictory; while Todorov insists upon stressing the 'natural atmosphere' of the text and its refusal to descend into the marvellous, he also describes the world of the text as 'entirely bizarre, as abnormal as the very event to which it affords a background'.<sup>77</sup> Todorov appears to be arguing that Gregor's transformation is both accepted and shocking, that the world of the text is both similar to our own, yet fundamentally different. To encompass these contradictions, Todorov classifies Kafka's text in terms of a 'generalized fantastic which swallows up the entire world of the book and the reader along with it'.<sup>78</sup> By this, Todorov means that *Metamorphosis* does not so much express a point between differences (and so give rise to hesitation) as it represents a 'coincidence of two apparently incompatible genres'.<sup>79</sup>

So different critics not only employ different understandings of the fantastic in their reading of *Metamorphosis*, but the term itself is seen to be reformulated by one of its most notable proponents so it may accommodate Kafka's novel. Christine Brooke-Rose argues that, because of its failure to anticipate a text such as *Metamorphosis*, 'Todorov's

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<sup>74</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 169.

<sup>75</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 171.

<sup>76</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 172.

<sup>77</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 173.

<sup>78</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 174.

<sup>79</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 172.



theory seems to me to be flawed'.<sup>80</sup> Todorov's reading of *Metamorphosis*, however, does reveal the text's ability to confound reductive readings and reveal a more open-ended conception of the fantastic. A more flexible conception of the fantastic, moreover, may also allow for an equally flexible understanding of its relationship to realism. Such an approach to *Metamorphosis*, moreover, may not only incorporate a more positive role for the text's mimetic qualities, but consequently also allow for a discussion of magic realism in similar terms.

A number of critics who privilege the fantastic aspects of *Metamorphosis* do, indeed, suggest such a role. Christine Brooke-Rose, though she attacks Todorov's reading of *Metamorphosis*, argues for a similar 'coincidence of two apparently incompatible genres', when she argues 'I should say at once that all types of fantastic, whether uncanny, pure fantastic or marvellous (or merged), need to be solidly anchored in some kind of fictional mimed 'reality''.<sup>81</sup> Such a view of the fantastic also appears to mirror Freud's conception of the psyche founded upon complicity, where a similar 'grounding' in terms of the reality principle is not only inevitable but also necessary. Brooke-Rose argues, however, that the text's mimetic elements do not simply lend an acceptable level of plausibility to the text, but serve to 'emphasise the contrast between the natural and supernatural elements'.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Rosemary Jackson points to an intimacy between a text's status as fantastic and its mimetic elements, and identifies it as an essential aspect of the fantastic, as a necessary prelude to the subversion of the mimetic. Jackson argues that fantastic narratives operate by first asserting 'that what they are telling is real – relying upon all the conventions of realistic fiction to do so – and then proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what – within those terms – is manifestly unreal'.<sup>83</sup>

Yet, nowhere in his writings does Kafka discuss his work in terms of an attack upon realism. In many ways, indeed, *Metamorphosis* more closely resembles a realist text than it does a work of fantasy. As Todorov observes, the narrative development of the

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<sup>80</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 66.

<sup>81</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, p. 234.

<sup>82</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, p. 234.

<sup>83</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, p. 34.



text represents a structural progression away from the unreal towards the real. The text moves on from the single fantastic event of Gregor's transformation toward a careful description of the material conditions that both precede and follow this event. So Gregor's transformation is not simply the consequence of these conditions, but serves to cast them into sharper relief. Events of the text are presented so realistically that the text's ability to shock is produced not so much by Gregor's transformation, but the realistic manner in which it is described, and the manner in which the characters respond to it as though it were real.

Christine Sizemore observes of *Metamorphosis* that 'the realistic detail, the straightforward logic, the muted tone, the ordinary characters, convince the reader that the fictive world is close to his own experience'.<sup>84</sup> Gregor's physical world is, indeed, a recognisable one. The text is steeped in detailed descriptions of familiar objects and these objects represent a value that the text, like Gregor himself, is unwilling to part with. So comprehensive is Kafka's description of the Samsa home, for example, that Vladimir Nabokov was able to incorporate a complete floor plan into his lecture on the text.<sup>85</sup> Gregor himself, moreover, despite Cixous's assertion, exhibits many of the characteristics that might be expected of a realist character. Gregor's awakening presents the reader of *Metamorphosis* with a singular fantastic event. Yet, Kafka provides a great deal of information about Gregor's life, much of which pre-dates his transformation. His life as a travelling salesman, his personal attachments, his business dealings and role within the family are all carefully plotted out in such a way as to firmly establish his status as a 'real' man with recognisable experiences, memories and motivations. Throughout most of the narrative, moreover, Gregor remains this character in all ways except his physical appearance.

Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore Gregor's fantastic transformation and the manner in which it appears to emerge from the subconscious realm of dreams. Kafka himself, however, though he suggests that the real, 'life', may equally be understood in terms of a dream, points to his desire that his dreamscapes not only retain their roots in notions of

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<sup>84</sup> Christine W. Sizemore, 'Anxiety in Kafka: A Function of Cognitive Dissonance', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 6.3 (1977), p. 380.

<sup>85</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, 'Franz Kafka: "The Metamorphosis"', in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 257.



the real, but also be expressed in such a way that reflects this connection.<sup>86</sup> In this respect, Kafka's description of his work shares much in common with Franz Roh's original formulation of magic realism as a critical category. For Roh, magic realism represented a return to the realm of the real through a form of realism. This is, however, a more fluid understanding of what constitutes the real and the manner in which art may represent it and yet still be described as realism. Roh argues that magic realism is a form of realism that refuses to take for granted the exterior world even as it seeks to represent it. He writes: 'In making what was formerly accepted as obvious into a "problem" for the first time, we enter a much deeper realm.'<sup>87</sup> These representations are, for Roh 'intuitive', their meaning is not always immediately clear. They are demanding of a second glance. Roh writes: 'We recognise this world, although now – not only because we have emerged from a dream – we look on it with new eyes.'<sup>88</sup>

This way of approaching the very real oppression of the material realm is characteristic of much early magic realist art. Artists such as a George Grosz and Otto Dix, in their attacks upon the post-war Weimar Republic (1919-1933), depict the consequences of the spiralling inflation of these years as a direct consequence of a capitalism seemingly gone mad. Such works as Dix's 'Match Seller I' (1920) and Grosz's 'Gray Day' (1921), for example, express the dejection and horror of this period. Broken and disfigured figures are placed alongside the signs and trappings of a system founded upon the production and accumulation of wealth. These images are broadly referential, yet often distorted. Perspective is disturbed, yet at the same time suggestive when, for example, Grosz depicts the broken figure of a man hovering above the shoulder of a cross-eyed and bespectacled businessman. Such a work is 'difficult'; meaning is not apparent, only alluded to. Yet, according to Roh, it seeks to explore 'a closer knowledge of what exists, of the objects he transforms and exalts'.<sup>89</sup> Grosz echoes this view himself when he declares, 'pens that drew without a purpose were like empty straws'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> See: Walter H. Sokel, 'Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Franz Kafka', p. 178.

<sup>87</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', trans. Wendy B. Faris, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 20.

<sup>88</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', p. 17.

<sup>89</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', p. 23.

<sup>90</sup> George Grosz, *A Little Yes and a Big No* (New York: Dial Press, 1946), p. 163.



What is particularly interesting about *Metamorphosis* is the manner in which it opens the door to a similar discussion of magic realism within the literary realm. Such an understanding of magic realism may clearly be linked to *Metamorphosis*. In doing so, moreover, the novel places magic realism in a relationship to psychoanalytical thought beyond the sorts of oppositions usually associated with the term. The novel need not be read only in terms of an inward exploration of the unconscious through the fantastic. It need not be seen as reductive of psychoanalytical thought inasmuch as psychoanalytical thought also offers an outward, 'world based', materialist perspective that should be viewed as inseparable from its exploration of an 'inner reality'.

That psychoanalytical and materialist perspectives might effectively be combined is demonstrated through the work of the Frankfurt school. Figures such as Erich Fromm and Max Horkheimer, for example, argued for an analytical 'social psychology' capable of accounting for unconsciously motivated behaviour in terms of material influences. As Martin Jay points out, such an approach was intended to employ psychoanalysis to 'provide the missing link between ideological superstructure and socio-economic base. In short, it could flesh out materialism's notion of man's essential nature'.<sup>91</sup>

Kafka was of the opinion that: 'In the duel between you and the world, back the world'.<sup>92</sup> Horkheimer argues for the need to understand how and why this might be so:

To understand why a society functions in a certain way, why it is stable or dissolves, demands therefore a knowledge of the contemporary psychic make-up of men in various social groups. This in turn requires a knowledge of how their character has been formed in interaction with all the shaping cultural forces of the time.<sup>93</sup>

Horkheimer goes on to describe a system, not unlike Freud's Oedipus complex, that requires obedience to an economic, rather than phallic, reality. This too is a conception of the human psyche founded upon socialisation through coercion. The forces of

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<sup>91</sup> Martin Jay, *The Dialectic Imagination* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 92.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Roland Barthes, 'Kafka's Answer', in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Leo Hamalian, p. 140.

<sup>93</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), p. 54.



coercion and many of the values through which it may be expressed are, moreover, similarly internalised.

Similarly, Kafka observes: ‘Every man lives behind bars, which he carries within him.’<sup>94</sup> Like Freud, Horkheimer points to the family as the agency through which these values are internalised. Through the family, Horkheimer argues, the growing child learns to conform to ‘a specific authority-oriented conduct on which the existence of the bourgeois order largely depends’.<sup>95</sup> The child’s will must be broken if it is to be moulded to the specifications of this order. In doing so, the family itself takes on the form of the very order that shapes it; the material conditions of the capitalist system are repeated within the family itself. This is certainly Oskar’s experience of the domestic space. His shopkeeper father does not only represent the authority of fascism, but also that of a bourgeois order obsessed with capital accumulation. Even Fevvers’ communal home, the matriarchal brothel, repeats the principles of the dominant economic system as her various mothers sell their bodies for the satisfaction of its ruling members. Saleem’s father demands of his son that he accepts the teachings and values of a colonial centre that has economically exploited their homeland for centuries. This dynamic, moreover, is equally evident in *Metamorphosis*. Alongside Gregor’s remarkable metamorphosis, the text clearly refers to and describes in detail an authority functioning beyond and through the family that will readily discard any individual no longer capable of performing as that authority demands. Despite his years of service, his spotless attendance record, Gregor rightly fears that his incapacity will immediately attract the suspicion of a system that ‘regarded all mankind as perfectly healthy malingerers’ (p. 11) and just as the chief clerk in *Metamorphosis* feels empowered to speak ‘in the name of your parents’, when the chief clerk departs the father immediately assumes the authority of Gregor’s employer (p. 17).

Freud himself stresses the importance of the material realm, arguing that the task of psychoanalysis is to bring ‘the psychological significance of the real external world into the structure of our theories’.<sup>96</sup> Throughout his work, Freud attempts to do just this. His

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<sup>94</sup> Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, p. 22.

<sup>95</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, p. 98.

<sup>96</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning*, p. 218.



work on repression and the return of the repressed as wish-fulfilment can only be fully appreciated by locating these processes within material relations. In his essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1908), Freud discusses imaginative or creative activity. In this essay, he stresses that this activity does not simply create 'castles in the air', but reflects the subject's experiences in the world and will 'change with every change in his situation, and receive from every fresh active impression what might be called a 'date-mark''.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, even the bizarre world of dreams is an expression of material relations. The composite characters that emerge out of condensation, for example, are not simply strange, but reflect a host of influences and conditions first experienced in the world.

Clearly, for all Gregor's internal turmoil, and despite his fantastic transformation, *Metamorphosis* does possess a 'world based' perspective. Time and again, the domestic space is forced to open its doors to an external realm. When the chief clerk arrives, Gregor's parents and sister fall over themselves to welcome him while Gregor keeps fearfully to his bed. The family is shown to lack any sort of authority in their own home. They abase themselves as they attempt to excuse Gregor and secure the good will of the chief clerk. Such is Gregor's fear that he pleads: 'Oh sir, do spare my parents' (p. 18).

Gregor's desperate plea reveals an authority that transcends the family, an authority the family is incapable of resisting. The family's debts require that they abase themselves before the chief clerk. They are, in effect, abasing themselves before a representative of the very system that placed them in debt. Just as Gregor retains his loyalty to the family, so the family expresses allegiance to a system that shapes them by oppressing them. Such is the intensity of this allegiance that the family readily fulfils 'to the uttermost all that the world demands of poor people' (p. 47).

In *Metamorphosis*, the Samsa family appears to falter in the proper performance of its function. Gregor's resistance to submission, though only partial and ultimately unsuccessful, indicates a failure on the part of the family. Consequently, not only Gregor, but also the father, the mother, and daughter, are punished. The family as an 'institution' remains, but their status as subjects within it is clearly threatened. So,

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<sup>97</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1908), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 9, p. 147.



Gregor willingly relinquishes his tenure on life so that the family might survive. After his death, Gregor is simply swept away with the refuse.

Following Gregor's death, the family seems reborn. After writing notes of excuse to their employers, the family ventures out into the open countryside beyond the town. There, in the bright spring sunshine, the family happily discusses their future prospects. This rebirth takes the family beyond the claustrophobic confines of the domestic space, but points to systems of authority that exist over and above that of the family itself. Just as the individual is born into the authority of the family, so the Samsa family is reborn into a system from which they must seek permission to enjoy their new-found 'freedom'. *Metamorphosis* is not a text dealing only with individual neurosis within the domestic space, but engages with a broader human experience of a realm that impacts upon and serves to shape that space.

It is precisely this engagement with the material forces surrounding and shaping the domestic space that leads a number of critics to identify *Metamorphosis* as a realist novel and allows for a discussion of literary magic realism in relation to psychoanalytical thought in similar terms. Kafka's depiction of Gregor's transformation as an expression of neurosis, moreover, in no way disturbs such an approach to the novel or the term, but actually compliments it. Alexej Kusák, for example, points specifically to Gregor as insect as a way of describing Kafka as 'a huge, monumental realist of the twentieth century'.<sup>98</sup> Kusák describes *Metamorphosis* as a form of realist parable, arguing that 'a majority of the Marxists who try to explain [*Metamorphosis*] view this as a fault, a transgression against realism. But I am of the contrary opinion: that Kafka worked with this form because he wanted to grasp more reality, because he was a greater realist than those who castigated him'.<sup>99</sup> This is a perspective borrowed from Gunther Anders, one of the most influential of Kafka's critics. Anders describes Kafka as a 'realist fable-writer' and argues that it is through distortion, and confusion, that Kafka is able to reveal the alienation of man.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Ralph Freedman

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<sup>98</sup> Alexej Kusák, "Comments on the Marxist Interpretation of Franz Kafka", in *Franz Kafka: An Anthology of Marxist Criticism*, ed. and trans. Kenneth Hughes Kenneth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1981), p. 95.

<sup>99</sup> Alexej Kusák, "Comments on the Marxist Interpretation of Franz Kafka", p. 99.

<sup>100</sup> Gunther Anders, *Franz Kafka*, trans. A. Steer and A. K. Thorlby (London: Bowes, 1960), p. 9.



describes *Metamorphosis* as a realist text performing a ‘problem solving activity’.<sup>101</sup> By this, Freedman is not trying to suggest that Kafka presents meaning as potentially comprehensible, but points to Kafka’s exploration of man’s capacity to understand the world and the material forces that shape him.

In a world where man has been degraded to the status of a thing, Kafka depicts things as though they were men. Gregor is such an alienated being. Robbed of his humanity by a system that regards man’s labour merely as one more commodity in a never ending stream of commodities, Gregor becomes a living, literal metaphor; a living ‘thing’. He is a character through which Kafka presents a view of material forces operating in the world even as he reveals the hidden, psychic, consequences of those forces. These forces are initially indicated by the fantastic, yet are depicted and explored for the remainder of the novel in a realist manner. This realism, when combined with a rigorous challenge to the fantastic as a means of opposing oppression, might also be termed magic realism.

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<sup>101</sup> Ralph Freedman, ‘Kafka’s Obscurity: The Illusion of Logic in Narrative’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 8 (1962), p. 65.



**Chapter Two**  
**History and Magic Realism in**  
**Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum***

Fantastic and Disturbing History

Bertolt Brecht suggests that the violence and oppression depicted in so much of Kafka's writing anticipates 'the future concentration camps, the future instability of the law, the future absolutism of the state *apparat*' of European fascism.<sup>1</sup> It is Günter Grass, however, who perhaps most conspicuously engages with the lived experience of these events. In a post-holocaust world, where writers such as Theodor Adorno question the capacity of art to describe the brutality of the Second World War,<sup>2</sup> the greatest significance of Grass's first novel, *The Tin Drum* (1959), may lay in the 'shock of finding a subject which we had thought virtually beyond the capacities of art treated with the freest virtuosity'.<sup>3</sup> Grass himself, however, prefers to describe the writing of *The Tin Drum* as a duty, explaining:

I was drafted into the army at the age of sixteen and fought against the Red Army for thirty minutes at the end of the war. In the battle half of my troops, most of them around my age, sixteen or seventeen years old, were killed. Since then I can not help thinking that I have been living by chance and writing about the world's madness and destructive power on behalf of the dead.<sup>4</sup>

*The Tin Drum* certainly engages with "madness". The novel depicts Oskar Matzerath's very personal experience of psychic disturbance and opens with his frank admission,

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<sup>1</sup> From an unfinished article by Bertolt Brecht. Quoted in J. P. Stern (ed.) *The World of Franz Kafka*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 180 (Stern's translation and italic).

<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to his famous line: "Man kann nach Auschwitz keine Gedichte mehr schreiben" (One cannot write poetry after Auschwitz). Quoted in Heinrich Böll, *Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1966), p. 26 (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Gelley, 'Art and Reality in *Die Blechtrommel*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 2 (1967), p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Reiko Tachibana Nemoto, 'On Two Interviews Between Günter Grass and Ōe Kenzaburō', *World Literature Today*, 67.2 (1993), p. 302.



‘granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital’.<sup>5</sup> Yet, if Oskar is mad, how much more so the world around him. So, even as *The Tin Drum* depicts the events that lead up to and result in Oskar’s incarceration, it also provides an examination of the social and political conditions that combined to give rise to one of the most horrific periods in world history. This is the madness at the centre of the novel and might explain why so many critics read *The Tin Drum* in terms of its historical engagement.

*The Tin Drum* is the personal narrative of the child-like dwarf, and later hunch-backed, Oskar. From his bed in a mental institution, Oskar recounts his life story and that of his family in pre-war, wartime and post-war Poland and Germany. Much of the novel is set in the city of Danzig which for the historian H. L. Leonhardt ‘was a German microcosm. [For] in Danzig events in the Reich were repeated in slow motion’.<sup>6</sup> As the novel unfolds, these events become increasingly dark and foreboding. The ethnically pluralistic culture of the city begins to fragment and polarise as the novel charts the rise of National Socialism.

Fractures appear in Oskar’s family. The relationships between Oskar’s Kashubian mother, her German husband and her Polish lover reflect tensions that go far beyond Oskar’s doubtful parentage. Oskar elects to halt his growth and in doing so seeks to ensure for himself a position of critical distance from the developing horror. From this perspective, Oskar beats his drum as accompaniment to his narrative. Oskar drums to the death of his mother, for whom a demonic compulsion to consume fish ultimately results in her death. Oskar drums to the death of his best friend impaled upon a cursed, yet alluring, ship’s figurehead. His insistent rhythm continues through the terror of the ‘Crystal Night’, a night that claims the life of Sigismund Markus, the Jewish toy merchant who supplied Oskar with his drums.<sup>7</sup> Even with his supply of drums limited, Oskar’s drum accompanies the outbreak of a world war, its many battles, the execution of his mother’s lover and the death of his father.

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<sup>5</sup> Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Picador, 1989), p. 11. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Irène Leonard, *Günter Grass* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1974), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> So called because on the night of 9 October 1938 National Socialists stepped up their pogrom against the Jews. During the course of many brutal and bloody attacks, thousands of windows of Jewish homes and businesses were shattered.



The narrative continues into the post-war desolation of Germany, describing its shattered cities and population. The war has had its effect on Oskar. Loneliness and a fear of the world haunt him. After brief but successful careers as an artist's model and a jazz percussionist, Oskar fabricates a rather gruesome criminal case against himself so that he might be consigned to an asylum. The narrative brings us full circle to the point where Oskar is about to be released and is attempting to prepare himself for this ordeal through the writing of his novel *The Tin Drum* – the story of the collapse of a world and the death of all those he knew.

If Oskar is to move forward, it seems he must first exorcise the past. For many critics, *The Tin Drum* serves a similar purpose for Grass. In the introduction to Grass's collection of essays, *On Writing and Politics*, Salman Rushdie identifies the profound emotional dislocation and intellectual estrangement experienced by Grass at the end of World War II. Rushdie writes of Grass: 'What an experience: to discover that one's entire picture of the world is false, and not only false, but based upon a monstrosity. What a task for any individual: the reconstruction of reality from rubble.'<sup>8</sup> *The Tin Drum*, argues Rushdie, represents Grass's attempt to reconstruct German pre-war, wartime and post-war 'reality' by first 'unlearning' it.<sup>9</sup>

Such an attempt invites a comparison with Latin American magic realism. Critics very often discuss Latin American magic realism as an attempt to reclaim, or reconstruct, Latin American selfhood out of the rubble of its colonial past. For such critics, Latin American magic realists have felt compelled to 'unlearn' a sense of self sanctioned by an official historical 'knowledge', the primary function of which was to support colonial rule. This is a magic realism, as Diana Palaversich observes, which searches for the secret history of Latin America 'hidden behind the official America' and seeks a past that might reveal the possibility of 'a different future'.<sup>10</sup> Yet, this sort of challenge to official history should not be considered the sole preserve of Latin American magic realism. Rushdie's own brand of magic realism, particularly in a novel such as *Midnight's Children* (1981), clearly performs

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<sup>8</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'Introduction', in *On Writing and Politics 1967-1983*, Günter Grass, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. xii.

<sup>9</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Diana Palaversich, 'Eduardo Galeano's *Memoria Del Fuego* as Alternative History', *ANTIPODAS: A Journal of Hispanic Studies*, 3 (1991), p. 136.



a comparable function as it explores and confronts the legacy of British colonial rule in India.

Grass appears to undertake a similar task. As Grass explains, *The Tin Drum* represents a much-needed ‘confrontation with history, with German history’.<sup>11</sup> By directly confronting the National Socialist movement’s evolution in Germany, and the German experience of the war, Grass seeks to free himself from a similarly dangerous ideological colonisation of the mind. It is, indeed, precisely Grass’s engagement with such a horrific period in world history that leads some magic realist critics to identify *The Tin Drum* as a magic realist novel. Wendy B. Faris, for example, argues that ‘in several instances, magical realist texts are written in reaction to totalitarian regimes’ and identifies *The Tin Drum* as just such a text.<sup>12</sup>

Grass’s treatment of German history is complex. *The Tin Drum* examines both the lived experience of National Socialism and its post-war consequences. In doing so, Grass confronts a post-war, reconstructed, Germanic knowledge of self and challenges what he considers to be the German people’s profound reluctance to confront its own past. So, when Grass suggests that the figure of the writer is best understood as ‘someone writing against the passage of time’, he is at the same time referring to himself as a writer who seeks to ensure that personal memories are not over-written by perhaps more palatable versions of the past.<sup>13</sup> Oskar, moreover, appears to express a similar view when he challenges his readers with the observation that ‘even wall-paper has a better memory than ours’ (p. 187).

For Timothy Brennan, the chief concern and a defining characteristic of a magic realist novel such as Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is a desire to preserve memory.<sup>14</sup> In writing his narrative, Oskar is attempting to do precisely this. Geoff

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<sup>11</sup> Salman Rushdie and Günter Grass, ‘Writing for a Future’, in *Voices: Writers and Politics*, eds Bill Bourne, Udi Eichler and David Herman (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1987), pp. 53-54.

<sup>12</sup> Wendy B. Faris, ‘Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 179.

<sup>13</sup> Günter Grass, ‘What Shall We Tell Our Children?’, in *On Writing and Politics*, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Brennan, ‘The National Longing for Form’ in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 56.



Hancock, moreover, argues that: 'Magic Realism reminds us that our memory is in a state of crisis'.<sup>15</sup> Through Oscar, Grass confronts just such a crisis in memory; a crisis rooted in a post-war anxiety to avoid complicity in wartime atrocities. Oskar suggests that this crisis takes the form of an 'ignorance which came into style in those years and which even today quite a few of our citizens wear like a jaunty and oh, so becoming little hat' (p. 242).

The death of Sigismund Markus, the Jewish owner of a toy store and chief provider of Oskar's drums, indicates the pressing need for such memories to be preserved and returned to regularly. Sigismund Markus commits suicide rather than face the violence of the fascists who attack his store. In doing so, his death mirrors that of Walter Benjamin who in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' observes that 'every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably'.<sup>16</sup> *The Tin Drum*, by returning to a German pre-war and wartime experience that many may well prefer to forget and by placing it in relation to post-war Germany, refuses to allow the memory of this historical period to disappear.

*The Tin Drum* performs a similar operation in relation to German art. Grass's novel directly confronts the unease associated with German art and culture in the years immediately following the war. *The Tin Drum*, as it attempts to stimulate memories of pre-war and wartime Germany, also revives memories of the relationship that developed between art and politics under National Socialism. During this period, there emerged a reformulated understanding of the German artist and German art itself. Under the ideological influence of National Socialism, the figure of the 'true' artist was credited with an almost divinely inspired creativity through which the soul of the German 'Volk' might find expression. As Mason observes, however, 'far from being so grandiose an affair, it simply meant that art was subordinate to political propaganda. Thus under Hitler, Nazi writers and theorists went about the propagandistic reinterpretation of their literary heritage'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Geoff Hancock, 'Magic or Realism: The Marvellous in Canadian Fiction', *The Canadian Forum*, March 1986, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin. 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 247. Rather than face arrest, Benjamin committed suicide in 1940 after failing to escape Nazi occupied France.

<sup>17</sup> Ann L. Mason, *The Skeptical Muse: A study of Günter Grass' Conception of the Artist* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1974), p. 11.



Just as the world of the artist was politicised, political life was increasingly described in artistic terms. Hitler, for example, was described as a poetic visionary. As such, he was credited with an artistic sensibility capable of expressing, and through expression capable of determining, the ‘glorious’ future of his people. Hermann Burte, for example, in *Sieben Reden von Burte* (Seven Speeches by Burte) (1943), proclaimed:

A book was written, not poetry in a low common sense, and yet a poem, a view of a new people in a new state! The man who wrote it is called Adolf Hitler! [...] Before he embarks upon his work, the great statesman of the Germans is a kind of poet and thinker, his mind clarifies for itself how things ought to be in the world of things!<sup>18</sup>

The conflation of artistic creativity with political will was designed to support the National Socialist programme for both the cultural and political domination of Europe and revealed a belief that ‘great art was peculiarly German’.<sup>19</sup> Or, as Hitler himself declared in *Mein Kampf* (1933), that the Germanic race, because of its Aryan descent, was the only truly culture-creating race.<sup>20</sup>

The effect of such ideas was to discredit German art and the German artist’s self-image in the post-war era. This was as true of the literary realm as it was elsewhere. Estranged from a language perverted by Nazi propaganda and distanced from a pre-war literary tradition, groups of writers such as those comprising Gruppe 47 struggled to re-establish the validity of their art.<sup>21</sup> Such groups introduced a new vocabulary to German literature that included terms such as ‘Kahlschlag’, referring to a literary equivalent of radical defoliation, and ‘Nullpunkt’, meaning point zero. Such terms were intended to indicate the need for German literature to somehow start over anew out of the devastation of the old.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Ann L. Mason, *The Skeptical Muse*, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Hutchinson, 1969), p. 263.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of these problems, see: George Steiner, ‘The Hollow Miracle’, in *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 117-132.

<sup>22</sup> All the novels examined in this thesis explore a sense of, or the possibility of estrangement from language. Gregor Samsa loses the ability to articulate himself to others, Fevvers is alert to Walser’s



In such a problematic context, Grass was faced with the difficult task of redefining his role as an artist, one that allowed himself a position of engagement, but one that was not evocative of the artist's role within the Reich as articulators of an authoritative, National Socialist, truth. Grass was, however, savagely attacked for the ways in which he attempted to achieve this.

*The Tin Drum* had a polarising effect on critics and public alike. Supporters of the novel argued that the novel represented an 'explosion of pent-up epic energy', demonstrating that 'obituaries on the novel as an art form were suddenly shown to be premature.'<sup>23</sup> The publication of *The Tin Drum*, however, also caused enormous consternation within Germany. The remarks of the critic Gunner Blöcker, for example, are perhaps typical of the moral indignation the novel enflamed. Blöcker condemned the work as a monument of 'immorality' attacking it for its 'perversion', its 'anti-human climate' and described himself as disgusted by the novel's 'blasphemous' and 'pornographic' content.<sup>24</sup> Such was the controversy surrounding the novel, indeed, that when an independent panel of judges awarded *The Tin Drum* the Bremen Award for Literature, the Senate of the city of Bremen, though it claimed to recognise the novel's artistic merits, withdrew the award.

Much of the criticism *The Tin Drum* received can perhaps be explained by the manner in which Grass sought to provide a solution to what John Reddick describes as:

A problem that has beset all attempts in German Literature [...] the problem of how to cope adequately with a reality that lies beyond the scope of normal concepts and of traditional categories of understanding and evaluation, a reality that is so monstrous as to be immune against direct verbal assault.<sup>25</sup>

One way Grass appears to overcome this problem is through his use of the fantastic. Many readings of *The Tin Drum*, for example, ascribe symbolic meanings to the fantastic elements of the novel. Oskar's clairaudience, his ability to control his growth and the

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attempts to write/right her story and Saladin Chamcha is the master of a thousand voices, yet for most of Rushdie's novel does not appear to possess his own.

<sup>23</sup> Irène Leonard, *Günter Grass*, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Irène Leonard, *Günter Grass*, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> John Reddick, *The 'Danzig Trilogy' of Günter Grass* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), p. 33.



power of his drum are seen to possess a symbolic fluidity that affords Grass the necessary freedom to engage with the monstrous reality of a world war. It is, moreover, precisely this use of the fantastic, as a way of confronting history that has led a number of critics to describe Grass as a magic realist writer. Robert Alter refers to Grass in such terms in his article 'Magic Realism in the Israeli Novel', and observes that 'when history becomes abysmal and drastically violates the assumptions of conventional morality, the nature of historical experience may be more adequately represented by abrogating within the fiction some of the laws of nature'.<sup>26</sup> Such an abrogation, Merivale argues, is not only a feature of magic realism but also provides Oskar with 'magical capacities for witnessing'.<sup>27</sup>

At the age of three Oskar 'decides' to stop growing and in doing so becomes the child drummer that is his character for most of the book. We gain some insight into the sort of character that Grass was aiming for when we look to Oskar's inception in Grass's poetry.<sup>28</sup> In the early 1950s, Grass tried his hand at a long poem, the central character of which was a pillar-dweller or 'stylite'.<sup>29</sup> When he tried to transfer this character to prose, however, Grass found it to be too static. His problem was how to facilitate movement without sacrificing the detached and critical perspective he was seeking. Grass describes how the solution came to him:

At friends of friends about seven years ago I saw a three-year-old boy with a tin drum round his neck, he was supposed to shake hands and say 'good day'. But he ignored the adults, refused to call the day a good day, and attended only to his drum. This little boy's perspective later became Oskar's perspective.<sup>30</sup>

For most of *The Tin Drum*, Oskar retains his child-like stature and most of the characters in the novel treat him accordingly. As a child, Oskar is allowed a detached position from which to observe events. Through the fantastic, Grass achieves a character that has maximum freedom of movement yet remains a 'stylite' in reverse – his angle of vision

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Alter, 'Magic Realism in the Israeli Novel', *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, 16.2 (1996), p. 159.

<sup>27</sup> Patricia Merivale, 'Saleem Fathered by Oskar', p. 333.

<sup>28</sup> See: John Reddick, *The 'Danzig Trilogy' of Günter Grass*, p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> The term stylite has religious connotations, referring to early Christian hermits who chose to live upon pillars of rock.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in John Reddick, *The 'Danzig Trilogy' of Günter Grass*, p. 59.



from below is essentially the same as that from above in that it allows him a similarly unhindered ability to observe the world.

Yet, this is not all that *The Tin Drum* appears to be doing. Because of its subject matter, critics often look to the fantastic elements of *The Tin Drum* to serve a more polemic purpose. Oskar's fantastic abilities are viewed not only as a means to circumnavigate the problem of coping with a horrific reality that lies beyond 'normal concepts and traditional categories of understanding and evaluation', but are frequently read as active symbols of protest against that reality.

John R. Elliot, for example, argues that Oskar's decision to halt his growth represents an 'avowed revolt against the prospect of "bourgeois smugness"'.<sup>31</sup> If Gregor Samsa's transformation serves to disturb the values and security of his bourgeois family, Oskar's refusal to grow represents a more direct and conscious challenge. Oskar says as much himself when he describes the circumstances of his birth. Oskar reveals that as Alfred Matzerath, the man described as his 'presumptive father', looked down upon him for the first time he declared: 'He will take over the store when he grows up. At last we know why we have been working our fingers to the bone' (p. 43). Oskar, however, is less than keen to follow in his father's footsteps and has no intention at all of joining what he elsewhere calls the 'musty *petit bourgeois*' world (p. 300, Grass's italic). To avoid this fate Oskar decides that from the age of three he will not 'grow by so much as a finger's breadth' (p. 56).

Elliot, moreover, detects a more profoundly political dimension in such a decision. He goes on to argue that bourgeois smugness is an 'attitude Grass finds at the root of fascism'.<sup>32</sup> Grass does, indeed, in various articles and interviews place great stress upon the role played by the petit bourgeois in supporting National Socialism. Grass describes the petit bourgeois as a class so shattered by the loss of the First World War that it was easy for Hitler to draw upon their support by promising the return of their pride and, perhaps more importantly, their prosperity. For Grass, *The Tin Drum* was his way of telling 'the story of

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<sup>31</sup> John R. Elliot Jr., 'The Cankered Muse of Günter Grass', *Dimension*, 1 (1968), p. 518.

<sup>32</sup> John R. Elliot Jr., 'The Cankered Muse of Günter Grass', p. 518.



this slow, very petit bourgeois way to go slowly with full knowledge into crime: political crime'.<sup>33</sup>

Oskar's ability to halt his growth, as a rebellion against the values and aspirations of the petit bourgeois, appears to free him from such complicity. This is certainly a view held by Leonard when she identifies Oskar's fantastically induced 'defect' as an asset removing him from the destruction the adult world is so blindly preparing for itself – one that represents a sane and surviving element 'in a crippled society'.<sup>34</sup> Leonard then goes on to suggest that Oskar's choice to resume his growth after the war symbolises post-war Germany's 'coming of age' in terms of its economic regeneration.<sup>35</sup> Oskar, however, grows into a hunchback and so may indicate Grass's belief that a promising post-war Germany, and its 'economic miracle', has itself 'developed into a hunchbacked cripple'.<sup>36</sup> The novelist and playwright George Tabori, who argues that the effect of defeat on the German people was to leave a hole in their collective psyche, holds a similar view. For Tabori, they became 'hollow men' and 'the energy required by these hollow men to fill up that hole has gone into re-building the country. In this way, the price paid for economic boom is an emotional slump'.<sup>37</sup>

Though Oskar has the stature of a child, his physical weakness is somewhat compensated for by his remarkable glass-shattering voice. With this voice, Oskar is able to defend himself when threatened by the adult world. Soon after his third birthday, for example, Oskar's incessant drumming becomes too much for his parents to bear and they attempt to take his now battered drum from him. Oskar defends his instrument by first shattering the glass face of a clock and then several light bulbs. Oskar's voice, however, is used to more dramatic and more political effect when it is directed against the institutionalised violence of the classroom.

Oskar's first day at school is a disaster. His teacher, Miss Spollenhauer, feeling her authority undermined by her young pupil's incessant drumming, attempts to separate Oskar from his beloved instrument. At first, Oskar gives her 'a harmless warning scratch on the

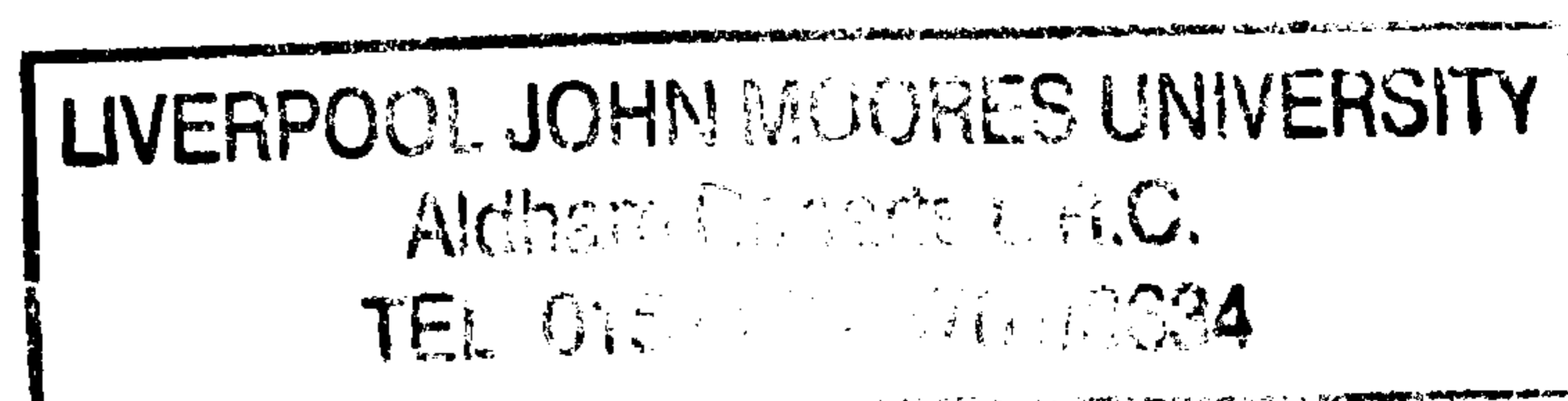
<sup>33</sup> Salman Rushdie and Günter Grass, 'Writing for a Future', p. 54.

<sup>34</sup> Irène Leonard, *Günter Grass*, p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Irène Leonard, *Günter Grass*, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Irène Leonard, *Günter Grass*, p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> G. Tabori, 'Hamlet in Blue', *Theatre Quarterly*, 5.20 (1975/6), p. 130.





lens of her right eyeglass' (p. 76). Unfortunately, Miss Spollenhauer persists in her efforts to enforce discipline. Without hesitation, she resorts to the whip. To defend himself, Oskar is forced to take drastic action and pandemonium ensues. His 'Glass demolishing scream' shatters the classroom windows one at a time. Oskar describes the 'coup de grace':

I composed a double cry which literally pulverised both lenses of la Spollenhauer's spectacles. Slightly bleeding at the eyebrows, squinting through the empty frames, she groped her way backward, and finally began to blubber repulsively, with a lack of self-control quite unbecoming an educator (p. 78).

On the way out of the school Oskar has his photograph taken against a blackboard, inscribed upon which, in Sütterlin script, are the words: 'My First School Day' (p. 79). Sütterlin script was a standardised German script taught in schools from 1915 to 1945. Oskar has this to say about a script so closely linked to the emergence of the Reich and more broadly with the nationalist movement in Germany:

The fact is that Sütterlin script is especially indicated for succinct, striking statements, slogans for instance. And there are also certain documents which, though I admit I have never seen them, I can only visualize in Sütterlin script. I have in mind vaccination certificates, sport scrolls, and hand-written death sentences. Even then, I knew what to make of the Sütterlin script though I couldn't read it: the double loop of the Sütterlin M, with which the inscription began, smelled of hemp in my nostrils, an insidious reminder of the hangman (pp. 79-80).

For Oskar, school possesses the potential to institutionalise and legitimise violence. It is clearly something untrustworthy. The power of his glass-shattering voice allows him to strike out at its authority and in this instance is sufficient to allow him to escape its influence.

Oskar's drum is the image that dominates the novel and perhaps most clearly signals the convergence of fantastic symbol and protest.<sup>38</sup> As Merivale observes, the magical power of

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<sup>38</sup> The title for the manuscript changed a number of times, each time placing greater emphasis upon this image, from *Oskar the Drummer* to *The Drummer* to *The Tin Drum*. See: Günter Grass, 'The Tin Drum in Retrospect or the Author as Dubious Witness', in *On Writing and Politics*, p. 27.



his drum endows Oskar with a ‘strange influence over crowds and individuals’.<sup>39</sup> In the summer of 1935, Oskar attends a party demonstration and conceals himself beneath the speakers’ rostrum. Oskar prefers to approach the rostrum from behind rather than face it as part of the mob. Oskar explains:

Have you ever seen a rostrum from behind? All men and women – if I may make a suggestion – should be familiarized with the rear view of a rostrum before being called upon to gather in front of one. Everyone who has ever taken a good look at a rostrum from behind will be immunized *ipso facto* against any magic practised in any form whatsoever on rostrums. Pretty much the same applies to rear views of church altars; but that is another subject (p. 114, Grass’s italic).

Just as the guests of honour are about to make their entrance, the party band begins to play its military music. The crowd before the rostrum is expectant, all wanting ‘to be present while history was being made, even if it took all morning’ (p. 115). Yet, the music is not to Oskar’s liking. In keeping with his sometimes-dramatic character, he calls out, ‘now, my people. Harken unto me’. With the magic of his drum, he manipulates the militaristic music until it becomes first a waltz, then the Charleston tune ‘Jimmy the Tiger’. The party meeting degenerates to the point that: ‘All those who were not dancing hastened to snatch up the last available partners’, until eventually the field is cleared of ‘everything but daises’ (p. 115).

Much of the controversy associated with *The Tin Drum* also arises from its alleged blasphemy against the Christian Church. Yet, as the historian Gordon Zahn observes:

In World War Two, the leading spokesmen of the Catholic Church in Germany did become channels of Nazi control over their followers, whether by their general exhortation to loyal obedience to legitimate authority or by their even more direct efforts to rally these followers to the defence of *Volk, Vaterland* and *Hiemat* as a Christian duty.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Patricia Merivale, ‘Saleem Fathered by Oskar’, p. 333.

<sup>40</sup> Gordon C. Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler’s Wars* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1962), p. 203 (Zahn’s italic).



In his essay, ‘What Shall We Tell Our Children?’, Grass reveals his bitterness against the Church, arguing that it was not ‘beasts in human form, but cultivated representatives of the religion of human brotherhood [who] allowed the crime to happen: they are more responsible than the criminal in the spotlight, be his name Kaduk or Eichman’.<sup>41</sup> Grass was himself both a church-going Catholic and a member of the Hitler Youth and he concludes this essay with a stern warning against forgetting the church’s complicity in the horror of National Socialism: ‘Take a good look at the hypocrites. Distrust their smiles. Fear their blessing.’<sup>42</sup>

Oskar appears to display similar feeling against the Church. Early in 1936, he encounters the sculpture of the child Jesus in the Church of the Sacred Heart – the very place of worship Grass attended as a child. Oskar is immediately struck by an uncanny resemblance between himself and the statue, declaring: ‘I take a good look at Jesus and recognize my spit and image. He might have been my twin brother. He had my stature and exactly my watering can’ (p. 136). More significantly, Oskar is shocked by the sculpture’s posture:

My double raised both arms and clenched his fists in such a way that one wanted desperately to thrust something into them, my drumsticks for example. If the sculpture had done that and put a red and white plaster drum on his pink thighs, it would have been I, Oskar’s very own self, who sat there on the virgin’s knee, drumming the congregation together. There are things in this world which – sacred as they may be – cannot be left as they are (p. 136).

Oskar does not leave things as they are. He attempts to encourage his double to drum, appearing to invite Jesus to take up the form of Oskar’s protest and through a ‘little private miracle’ join with Oskar (p. 138). Yet, Oskar’s attempts fail. Jesus refuses to take up the drum and so seems to indicate that Oskar is alone in his role as protester.

Near the end of the war, Oskar repeats this test, seeking to confirm Jesus’ previous failure. This time, however, the sculpture responds to Oskar’s challenge and begins to drum. Oskar takes a moment to admire the Saviour’s drumming style before anger overwhelms him. He quickly reclaims his drum lest its power be compromised by what he perceives to be an act

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<sup>41</sup> Günter Grass, ‘What Shall We Tell Our Children?’, p. 89.

<sup>42</sup> Günter Grass, ‘What Shall We Tell Our Children?’, p. 90.



of treachery. As Irène Leonard points out: ‘Whereas Jesus’ cross has proved a fraud, Oskar’s drum still has all the makings of an authentic cross in the secular sphere, and if Jesus frivolously abuses the drum, he invalidates its integrity as a symbol of protest.’<sup>43</sup>

Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris suggest that one of the characteristics of magic realism is the manner in which the fantastic or the phantasmagorical is used ‘to indict recent political and cultural perversions’.<sup>44</sup> This is true of all the novels examined in this thesis. Through Gregor’s transformation, Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1916) clearly exposes the violence and hypocrisy of a family whose morality and values have been driven and shaped by the desire to accumulate economic capital. Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1994), through the figure of the fantastically endowed Fevvers, reveals the culturally endorsed oppression and violence of patriarchal power. Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) describes and opposes the continued cultural hegemony of the former colonial centre and through the character of Saladin Chamcha, metamorphosed into a devil, mounts a direct challenge to institutionalised racism in Britain. The fantastic elements of *The Tin Drum* function to similar effect as an attack upon the political and cultural perversity of National Socialism.

Grass’s use of the fantastic in *The Tin Drum*, however, does not only function to expose and attack the violence of a specific period in German history, but also engages with the very process of recording and writing history and the values associated with such a process. History as a form of knowledge, for example, is presented in *The Tin Drum* as both alluring and dangerous. This is a knowledge that responds to the desires and insecurities of its disciples, but is capable also of enslaving them. Oskar observes: ‘I am willing to agree that the clock is probably the most remarkable thing the grown-ups ever produced [...] but being grown-ups, they have no sooner created some epoch-making invention than they become slaves to it’ (p. 63).

Grass’s use of the clock as a metaphor for history alludes to the malleability and vulnerability to appropriation of historical discourse. Oskar observes: ‘Without your grown-up it is nothing. It is the grown-up who winds it, who sets it back or ahead, who takes it to the watchmaker to be checked, cleaned, and when necessary repaired’ (p. 63).

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<sup>43</sup> Irène Leonard, *Günter Grass*, p. 21.



Such a harsh view of history invites comparison with the National Socialist Party's similarly manipulative use of history. By the middle of the 1930s, official German National Socialist historiography had largely replaced less ideologically informed historical discourse in Germany. Centrally controlled, under the aegis of the Reichsinstitut für ältere Gesschichte (The Reich Institute of Ancient History) and the Reichsinstitut für Gesschichte des neuen Deutschlands (The Reich Institute of Modern German History), Nationalist Socialist historiography placed heavy emphasis upon Germanic ancestry, nationhood, power and the glorification of its leadership. Such emphasis was intended to establish the historical dominance of Germany and was employed to justify its wartime control over other nations and peoples and the manner in which it exercised that control.<sup>45</sup>

Oskar also appears to manipulate history for his own purposes. Oskar uses his photo album as the starting point for his story and introduces the characters of his narrative as he studies its pages in the mental asylum. The pictures in the album are of his family and friends. Yet, though the photographs appear to follow a chronological sequence, and seem to offer an ordered and accurate account of the past, Oskar alone controls their relationship to one another. Oskar's use of the photo album represents an attempt to impose meaning on the past. More significantly, perhaps, Oskar is also drawing upon his version of the past to explain his present. His position as a writer of history allows him a great deal of potential power, not only to shape our perception of the world he inhabits, but also to explain, even excuse, his cruel and frequently criminal actions.

Oskar, however, makes no effort to present his version of events as authoritative. In point of fact, Oskar readily admits that his narrative has a tendency to 'exaggerate and mislead, if not to lie' (p. 240). Oskar as historian, moreover, is guilty of random, even chaotic, connections. The experiences of a world war and the events leading up to it, how they affect Oskar and how they are viewed through the shattered lens of his disintegrating family, are of such a confused nature that no methodology or ideology can make them conform to a single ordering principle. Consequently, as Mason observes, the historian as an agent capable of ordering history is parodied and the notion that the historian can sew

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<sup>44</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, 'Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> See: Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 378-385.



history together into a pattern ‘reveals that pattern as spurious, for the ‘sewing’ results in a mere collage of fragmented images rather than a unified whole’.<sup>46</sup>

Oskar’s authorship of history points beyond the novel to Grass himself as a writer of history – but one whose explicitly personal rendering of German history in *The Tin Drum* serves to address, problematise and broaden historical ‘vision’. Grass is not simply writing a historical story, but a story about writing history and by drawing attention to the artifice of his art the historical content of his writing may be cast in a similar light.

Grass’s artifice is clearly apparent in what D. G. Bond and J. Preece describe as ‘flights of fantastic imagery which leave the ground of empirical reality far behind’.<sup>47</sup> As Bond and Preece observe, even when Grass’s novels seem to refer to actual events, such reference is stretched to the very limits of credibility by an injection of the fantastic. When Oskar describes, for example, the political and military history of the city of Danzig, he initially takes great care to present a factually accurate account. Oskar even appears to draw upon historical studies, citing ‘Keyser’s History of the City of Danzig’ to support the accuracy of his account (p. 164). This academic version of the city’s past, however, is soon blended with and eventually becomes indistinguishable from the bizarre history of a magical and cursed ship’s figurehead called Niobe.

The history of Niobe is as bloody as that of Danzig itself. Indeed, Oskar’s account of this history seems to suggest that much of the strife endured by the city may in fact be directly attributed to the malefic properties of the figurehead. This power directly affects Oskar himself when the figurehead claims the life of his friend, Herbert Truczinski. In killing Herbert, it is clear that Niobe retains her fantastic power to shape or reflect the fate of Danzig. For in Herbert, a character much scarred by the blades of German, Polish, Scandinavian and Russian knives, whose body is a physical testament to the disputes between different nationalities, Grass has drawn a character who seems to represent the equally fought-over city of Danzig. Herbert’s gruesome death, his body bloodily impaled upon the wooden figurehead, as he attempted an embrace of a more sexual kind, prefigures both the death of Danzig’s status as a free city and the role played by some its own inhabitants in that death through their embrace of National Socialism.

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<sup>46</sup> Ann L. Mason, *The Skeptical Muse*, p. 73.



In *The Tin Drum*, Grass appears to display an approach to history that incorporates the imaginative possibilities of literature. Susan Anderson, for example, argues: ‘As for imagination, Grass regards it as the other side of a narrowly defined reality. Literature gives form to fantasy and makes a new reality.’<sup>48</sup> In doing so, Grass is both challenging the hegemony of historians over literary writers and asserting ‘that fiction is superior in depicting history because its very mode acknowledges the relativity of its perspective’.<sup>49</sup> Such an understanding of Grass’s approach to history is, moreover, very much in line with critical discussion of the relationship between historical discourse and magic realism inasmuch that: ‘Magic Realism reminds us that our history is a fiction existing only in the books that have been written about it.’<sup>50</sup> History is, moreover, not simply in the domain of the magic realist novelist, but the magic realist writer is primarily, according to Carpentier, a writer of history. The version of history to be found in magic realist novels is described by Richard Todd as an ‘alternative historiography that in various ways outrageously transgresses the “given facts” of history’,<sup>51</sup> and in more directly oppositional terms by Chanady as a challenge to ‘the dominant historiographic paradigm based on empiricism’.<sup>52</sup>

Through the fantastic, Grass appears to present his readers with a history that is independent of, or subverts, empirical validation. In doing so, moreover, Grass seems very much at odds with the sort of approach to history outlined in the nineteenth century by historians such as Leopold von Ranke and now broadly described as historical realism. In works such as the *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Peoples* (1824), for example, Ranke developed an approach to history that was supposed to be non-judgemental, non-artistic and non-interpretative. In the writing of this work, Ranke declared himself ‘resolved to

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<sup>47</sup> D. G. Bond and Julian Preece, ‘“Cap Arcana” 3 May 1945: History and Allegory in Novels by Uwe Johnson and Günter Grass’, *Oxford German Studies*, 20.21 (1991), p. 147.

<sup>48</sup> Susan C. Anderson, ‘Günter Grass as Historian: The Thirty Years War in Grass’ Works’, *Monatshefte*, 85.1 (1993), p. 25.

<sup>49</sup> Susan C. Anderson, ‘Günter Grass as Historian’, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Geoff Hancock, ‘Magic or Realism’, p. 26.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Todd, ‘Narrative Trickery and Performative Historiography’, p. 305.

<sup>52</sup> Amaryll Chanady, ‘The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 138.



avoid all intention and imagination' and 'to stick to the facts'.<sup>53</sup> By doing so, Ranke set out to establish historical studies as a distinct discipline separate from literature.

Though Ranke described his approach to history as an attempt to establish a formal distinction between history and literature, his version of historical realism emerged and established itself as the dominant historical discourse just as the realist novel was doing the same within the literary realm. As Linda Hutcheon observes, 'the realist novel and Rankean historicism share many similar beliefs about the possibility of writing factually about observable reality'.<sup>54</sup> If this is so, then it is perhaps little wonder that if Grass's writing may be perceived as a challenge to historical realism then such a challenge, conducted as it is within the literary realm, might also be perceived as a challenge to the conventions of literary realism.

Oskar appears to have his own reasons for distrusting the sort of rationalism that lay behind Ranke's conception of history. Early in the novel, Oskar attempts to educate himself. There are few sources available to him and he finds himself reliant upon two works: 'Something by Goethe about *Elective Affinities* and a copiously illustrated thick volume entitled *Rasputin and Women*' (p. 86). Contained within the figures of Rasputin and Goethe are the opposed forces of the fantastic and enlightened rationalism. Though Oskar fluctuates between the two, he remains deeply suspicious of Goethe's reason. Oskar's admiration for the clarity of Enlightenment does occasionally, during moments of stress, lead him to dream that like Goethe he might seem free from the confusion and ignorance of the world. Oskar cannot, however, avoid the conclusion that Goethe would have regarded him as a physical abomination As Oskar explains:

I inclined more towards Rasputin and feared Goethe's intolerance, it was because of a faint suspicion that if you, Oskar, had lived and drummed at his time, Goethe would have thought you unnatural, would have condemned you as an incarnation of anti-nature [...] would have taken notice of you, poor devil, only to hit you over the head with *Faust* or a big heavy volume of his *Theory of Colours* (p. 86).

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted in G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, 1952), p. 74.

<sup>54</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "'The Pastime of Past Time": Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction', *GENRE*, 20.3/4 (1987), p. 285.



According to Oskar, Goethe's rationalism would be unable to accept his grotesque and magical plenitude. Grass himself expresses a similar attitude to what he regards to be the limitations of a certain sort of literary realism – one that bears close resemblance to Rankean historicism in its bid to mimetically imitate the world and is just as limited by its rejection of the artistic imagination.

Grass's attitude to what he considers to be a self-limiting form of literary expression is clearly expressed in 'Writing for A Future', an article based upon a televised discussion between himself and Salman Rushdie.<sup>55</sup> It is, incidentally, interesting that Grass should have been matched with Rushdie. Not only is Rushdie frequently described as a magic realist writer, but in his introduction to Grass's own essay on *The Tin Drum*, he talks of those works that most influenced his early writing and suggests that *The Tin Drum* was the kind of novel that encouraged young writers such as himself to 'become the sort of writers they have it in themselves to be'.<sup>56</sup> In this discussion, both Rushdie and Grass discuss their use of fantasy as a refusal to conform to the literary hegemony of realism. Describing his experience of writing in post-war Germany, Grass observes:

For me realism was... I couldn't work with this short-minded kind of realism just to imitate reality. I was also from my childhood very much touched by this German romantic tradition, the fairy tales. They are telling the truth. [...] And I think to use these fairy tales is bringing us to another kind of truth. To a much richer truth than you can get by collecting the facts of this flat realism.<sup>57</sup>

The 'truth' Grass is referring to is the multiple realities of recent German history. Grass argues of the German people, 'our problem is that we don't accept that there are many realities. One side wants only this reality, and the other only their own reality'.<sup>58</sup> Because Grass's view of German reality encompasses multiplicity and ambiguity, his imaginative expression of this history is similarly multiple and ambiguous and in being so may appear at odds with the less flexible literary conventions of a strictly mimetically driven realism.

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<sup>55</sup> Salman Rushdie and Günter Grass, 'Writing for a Future', pp. 52-64.

<sup>56</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'Introduction', p. x.

<sup>57</sup> Salman Rushdie and Günter Grass, 'Writing for a Future', p. 57.

<sup>58</sup> Salman Rushdie and Günter Grass, 'Writing for a Future', p. 58.



Such a view of Grass's writing, indeed, mirrors what appears to be the dominant understanding of magic realism's engagement with historical discourse and the manner in which this engagement is formally expressed. This is an understanding clearly expressed by Richard Todd when he argues that it is through the creation of multiple and alternative histories that magic realist writers 'play confidence tricks on their readers, disavowing the more straightforward claim of the mimetic naturalist realist'.<sup>59</sup> This understanding of magic realism, moreover, is applied to *The Tin Drum*. Faris, for example, describes *The Tin Drum* as a magic realist novel that through the fantastic responds to 'totalitarian discourses of all kinds' while also representing 'a desire for narrative freedom from realism'.<sup>60</sup>

Gabriel García Márquez describes realism as 'a kind of premeditated literature that offers too static and exclusive a vision of reality'.<sup>61</sup> For Márquez, realism claims to offer clarity of vision, yet actually provides little more than an inflexible and singular view of the world. Oskar's narrative, however, does not claim to present its readers with clarity. The world around Oskar is, indeed, one of such profound instability and uncertainty that Oskar seems incapable of presenting a singular version of it. He must instead present many differing versions that offer a narrative surplus even as they reveal the incompleteness of Oskar's vision. For Oskar, each version is as much a 'preposterous fable' as the others (p. 32).

In the chapter ironically entitled 'Faith, Hope, Love', for example, Oskar tells the story of the fall from political grace of his close friend and neighbour, Mr Meyn. In a fit of rage Meyn kills his pet cats and for this act of violence is expelled from the SA 'for conduct unbecoming a storm trooper' (p. 195). Alongside this, Oskar tells the story of the death of Markus, the Jewish toyshop owner and chief provider of his tin drums. Markus kills himself rather than face the violence of men such as Meyn, who as a member of the SA received commendations for such acts. Because Oskar is unable to resolve the moral hypocrisy of Meyn's expulsion from the SA, he finds it impossible to provide a satisfactory ending to either story. Oskar's narrative becomes increasingly disjointed as the chapter progresses. Each version of events becomes shorter in an attempt to reduce them to

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<sup>59</sup> Richard Todd, 'Narrative Trickery and Performative Historiography', p. 305.

<sup>60</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children', p. 180.

<sup>61</sup> Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Gabriel García Márquez, *The Fragrance of Guava*, trans. Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1983), p. 56.



a point of clarity until as single sentences they represent statements of fact, but reveal nothing.

Oskar's narration is uncertain and lacks both the stability and confidence often associated with a realist narrator. Oskar, indeed, is not even the sole narrator of his own story. At one point in the novel, he relinquishes control of his narrative to Bruno, a nurse at the mental hospital holding Oskar (pp. 412-421). Bruno is Oskar's friend, but also acts as his gaoler. Bruno is simply supposed to perform the role of scribe, but soon intervenes in the narrative directly. He starts to pass comment upon Oskar's skill as a storyteller, even going so far as to suggest ways in which he would tell the story of Oskar's life differently. Oskar reclaims his narrative some ten pages later with the declaration: 'Without bothering to read over what Bruno my keeper has written, I, Oskar take up my pen again' (p. 421). Though he reclaims his role as narrator, Oskar's self-confidence appears misplaced for we are reminded of Oskar's circumstances as an inmate of an institution that could at any time deny him the means to express his story.

Bruno's transformation from character to narrator and back to character indicates just how fluid identity can be in *The Tin Drum*. If one of the underlying principles of realism is the construction of fully formed and stable characters, then *The Tin Drum* appears firmly at odds with such a principle. The characters of *The Tin Drum* shift between roles so often and to such a degree that it is often impossible to establish their identity at all. Oskar's grandfather, for example, begins the novel as the infamous Kashubian pyromaniac, Joseph Koljaiczek. On the run from the authorities, Koljaiczek finds sanctuary from his pursuers by first hiding beneath the skirts of Oskar's future grandmother, then marrying her. After his marriage, Koljaiczek becomes the Polish pyrophobic, Joseph Wranka. He changes not only his name, but also his personality. In effect, he becomes a completely different character, the only and increasingly tenuous point of reference being Oskar's relationship to him. This relationship becomes even more tenuous when, after the supposed death of Joseph Koljaiczek/Wranka beneath a vast raft of logs, he is reincarnated in the character of the American Joe Colchic.

Oskar possesses an equally ambiguous identity – as the resident artists of the Danzig Academy of Art discover to their lasting frustration. When his job as a stonecutter is threatened by the post-war currency reform, Oskar looks for alternative employment. Oskar explains: 'It was then that Oskar remembered his hump and fell a victim to art' (p.



453). One of the professors at the academy instructs his students: ‘I don’t want you to sketch this cripple, this freak of nature, I want you to slaughter him, crucify him, to nail him to your paper with charcoal!’ (p. 455). Yet, both students and Professor fail in their efforts. Oskar confounds their attempts to create a satisfactory representation of him. They are incapable of recognising, let alone expressing, the full potential of this profoundly ambiguous and unstable character.

Clearly, *The Tin Drum* itself is more than capable of embracing Oskar’s ambiguity and instability. In doing so, moreover, the novel engages with the equally ambiguous and unstable historical reality surrounding Oskar. Grass’s use of the multiple potential of the fantastic may be seen to reflect and also challenge the events of a truly horrific period in world history even as it appears to challenge less flexible approaches to both history and literature.

### Imagining Real Histories

Grass’s engagement with history can certainly be read in terms of his use of the fantastic. In doing so, *The Tin Drum* may be placed in opposition to both the empiricism of historical realism and the supposed rigidity of a literary realism founded upon mimetic correspondence. Such an approach, moreover, allows the novel to be linked to current discussion of magic realism. Yet, such discussion overlooks the manner in which *The Tin Drum* may actually demand a more complicated understanding of magic realism, both in terms of its formal qualities and its relationship to historical discourse, than that offered by the majority of critics. *The Tin Drum* is far too complex a novel to be explained in simple oppositional terms. A more complete conception of the category of magic realism – one that acknowledges links to the fantastic but also challenges its assumed powers of subversion while also embracing a less dismissive approach to realism – is required if the novel’s potential is to be fully embraced.

Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* starts with a singular and startling fantastic event – that of Gregor’s transformation. From then on, however, Kafka makes no further use of the fantastic preferring instead to cast into doubt its power to challenge authority. *The Tin Drum* differs somewhat from *Metamorphosis* inasmuch as it contains numerous fantastic episodes. Yet, despite this difference, Grass’s magic realism is similarly interrogative of



the fantastic. The fantastic power Oskar claims for himself, and so many critics emphasise, does not always stand up to scrutiny; despite his fantastic powers, his ability to change the course of events or even impact upon them seems very limited.

Oskar's ability to halt his growth, for example, does not always appear to function in a subversive manner. Though Oskar makes use of his fantastic ability to halt his growth, so he might stand apart from the world and rail against it, he is at the same time isolated from the world and does not appear to possess, or wish to possess, practical power for positive change. Despite the possible symbolic significance of Oskar's dwarf-like stature, his fantastic ability offers no hope of a fully formed or healthy future. Indeed, according to Reddick, Oskar ends the novel 'a passive, impotent dwarf [who] squats in the threatened refuge of his asylum bed, seeking yet further refuge by recounting the alleged magnificent feats of the past'.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, Oskar's magical glass-shattering voice might symbolically refer to the destruction of the 'Crystal Night'. His voice, however, could never compare to or oppose the very real physical violence of that night. His acts of vandalism are on a far less ambitious scale. During the winter of 1936-7, for example, Oskar uses his voice to cut holes in the glass plates of shop windows and from the shadows opposite he rather coolly notes the tormented consciences of window shoppers who find the objects of their desire magically available to them. Oskar explains: 'I was the hunter, they were my game. My work required patience, coolness and a sure eye. It was my voice that felled the victim, painlessly and without bloodshed' (p. 121).

The destruction of the crystal night was a powerful demonstration of political intent. Yet, Oskar's greatest act of destruction, his offensive against the windows and glass doors of the Stadt-Theatre, isn't politically motivated at all. It is more a playful act of artistic expression. Oskar begins by smashing only two panes of glass, but: 'Like a modern painter who, having at last found the style he has been seeking for years, perfects it and discloses his maturity by turning out one after another dozens of examples of his new manner' (p. 100).

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<sup>62</sup> John Reddick, 'Action and Impotence: Günter Grass's 'Örtlich Betäubt'', *Modern Language Review*, 3 (1972), p. 563.



Oskar successfully destroys the entire glass front of the theatre. Yet, earlier in the novel, Oskar fails completely when he attempts to raise the fantastic power of his voice against a more political target, that of the Catholic Church. When the baby Jesus refuses to take up his drum, Oskar, driven by bitter disappointment, launches his voice against the stained glass windows of the church. His voice, however, is impotent against its institutionalised authority. The power of Oskar's fantastic voice seems to reside solely in the world of artistic endeavour, apparently incapable of operating outside that sphere.

Similarly, though Oskar's drum is capable of disrupting the seriousness of a political rally by encouraging its participants to dance, for most of *The Tin Drum* it does little more than bear witness to events as they unfold and is, according to Alexander Gelley, so helplessly separated from the world that it represents 'a trivial and patently inadequate symbol' of protest.<sup>63</sup> Certainly, Oskar's drum is not shown to possess the power to actually change the course of historical events. Its effectiveness against deliberate political will is severely limited, as Oskar himself is forced to concede when it fails to resist the attack upon Marcus's toyshop during the Crystal Night. Oskar admits: 'My own drum couldn't stand up to their rage; there was nothing it could do but bow down and keep quiet' (p. 197).

So, Grass mobilises fantastic symbols of protest such as Oskar's stature, his power over glass and his tin drum only to reveal them as inadequate or even passive. Grass also appears to question the supposed ability of the artist, through use of the fantastic, to actually depict history.

Raymond Tallis writes of the fantastic: 'The point is this: we cannot read fantasy critically, in the light of our own lives or our knowledge of the world. Fantasy cannot, therefore, illuminate our own lives.'<sup>64</sup> Yet, as a magic realist writer, Grass makes use of the fantastic not so much in an attempt to illuminate a particular period in world history, but to illustrate the limited ability of the fantastic to perform such an act. Grass's use of fantastic symbols might well tantalise his readers with the suggestion of a pattern of historical reference, but as Mason observes, not only are 'the connections too profuse, but also the playful way in which the connections are made shows them to be far less significant than the brute

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<sup>63</sup> Alexander Gelley, 'Art and Reality in *Die Blechtrommel*', p. 121.

<sup>64</sup> Raymond Tallis, *In Defence of Realism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1988), p. 192.



occasion of reality'.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the closer Oskar gets to that reality, the more anxious he becomes. As the end of his narrative approaches, and so the closer he is to facing up to the actuality of his release and the reality of the world outside the hospital, Oskar's appears to lose his ability to relate his version of German history. The narrative concludes with Oskar falling into madness and incoherence.

Magic realism, when conceived of solely in terms of its relationship to the fantastic, may be seen to be equally limited in its ability to depict and usefully engage with history. Alter, for example, suggests that the fantastic symbolism might in fact give rise to serious offence and points to David Grossman's *See Under: Love* (1986) to illustrate his point. In this novel, Grossman presents his readers with the character Anshel Wasserman – a Jewish inmate of a concentration camp who, though he wants desperately to die, discovers he is invulnerable to the best efforts of the Germans to kill him. Both inmate and camp commandant become locked in a bizarrely intimate relationship in which each day, in return for a story, the camp commandant attempts to kill Wasserman. Though this relationship is intended to explore what remains of the commandant's humanity, Alter observes:

Readers have been quite offended by this invention of Grossman's, feeling that it is frivolous and perhaps even immoral to play around in this way with a moment in history when millions of Jews were in fact appallingly vulnerable to Nazi bullets, blows and poison gas.<sup>66</sup>

Patricia Merivale, while discussing Grass's status as a magic realist writer engaging with history, is not quite so damning. She privileges Grass's use of the fantastic in *The Tin Drum* by suggesting that it touches 'the historical with the marvellous'.<sup>67</sup> Yet, despite her overall celebration of Grass's use of the fantastic, Merivale also expresses certain specific reservations about Oskar's ability, as a fantastic character, to engage with history. As a consequence of his decision to halt his growth, and in doing so retain the outward appearance of a child, Oskar's relationship to history is, according to Merivale, 'strained'.

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<sup>65</sup> Ann L. Mason, *The Skeptical Muse*, p. 59.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Alter, 'Magic Realism in the Israeli Novel', p. 158.

<sup>67</sup> Patricia Merivale, 'Saleem Fathered by Oskar', p. 341.



Oskar is 'remote' from the events he attempts to depict and his belief that he is in some fashion acting upon history is the product of 'self-delusion'.<sup>68</sup>

Potentially more dangerous than the formal limitations of the fantastic, however, is the manner in which readings of the novel that privilege the fantastic as a subversive form in opposition to some more rigid or oppressive authority, may not so much identify, but rather impose an understanding of *The Tin Drum* in similarly oppositional terms. For such an approach to the novel might ignore both the thematic complexity of Grass's writing and a more fluid appreciation of historical discourse and how that discourse may be understood in relation to *The Tin Drum* and magic realism itself.

It is a feature of magic realist works that their formal ambiguity is often mirrored at the thematic level through moral ambiguity. This is certainly true of all the novels examined in this thesis. Gregor, for example, remains loyal to the very authority that has crushed him and repeatedly approves or justifies his punishments to such an extent that one can't help but wonder how he would have behaved if the roles had been reversed between himself and his father. Fevvers, despite her resistance against patriarchal capitalism, seizes every opportunity to employ her femininity for her own financial gain and advantage. Saladin Chamcha, though he is the victim of racism, never entirely frees himself of his desire to be accepted and respected by those who would oppress him. Similarly, at a thematic level, *The Tin Drum* challenges the very notion of opposition through its depiction of moral ambiguity. Grass argues that the period of world history described by *The Tin Drum* is best understood in terms of complicity, collective responsibility and a shared guilt that should be applied to all and not restricted to those few who were judged and punished for war crimes.<sup>69</sup> Grass, indeed, regards himself a party to this guilt. Though he was too young to have taken part in the atrocities of the Third Reich, Grass admits to having been a member of the Hitler Youth and goes so far as to concede: 'I could not swear that, if I had been six or seven years older, I would not have participated in the great crime.'<sup>70</sup>

The innocence Grass denies himself is also denied to the characters of his novel. Oskar's Grandfather's guilt pursues him over the years and despite numerous changes of identity it

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<sup>68</sup> Patricia Merivale, 'Saleem Fathered by Oskar', p. 341.

<sup>69</sup> Grass considers it a great error to judge the horrors of World War Two simply in terms of a demonised Nazi Party. See: Salman Rushdie and Günter Grass, 'Writing for a Future' p. 54.

<sup>70</sup> Günter Grass, 'What Shall We Tell Our Children?', p. 86.



finally catches up with him and condemns him to a watery grave. Oskar's father, Matzerath, is made to feel responsible for Oskar's 'failure' to grow. His mother's affair with Jan Bronski, who may or may not be Oskar's actual father, gives rise to a guilt that no amount of prayer can eradicate. Albrecht Greff, Oskar's neighbour and friend, hangs himself when his fondness for the young men in his scout troop leads to a court summons.

No character, however, appears more morally compromised than Oskar. He is accused of causing his mother's death. Even his grandmother, who for most of the novel remains one of his few sources of comfort and refuge, blames the death of her daughter on Oskar's incessant drumming. Oskar also causes the death of his 'presumptive father' Matzerath. After Russian soldiers break into their cellar towards the end of the war, Matzerath is desperate to hide his Nazi insignia. Oskar hands it to him and, not knowing what else to do with it, Matzerath attempts to swallow the badge. Oskar, however, has passed it to him with the clasp open and Matzerath starts to choke. The soldiers misinterpret his spluttering and violent jerking movements and he is ruthlessly murdered. Oskar's guilt is most apparent when he causes the death of Jan Bronski. Oskar accompanies Jan to the Polish Post Office as it prepares to defend itself from an attack by the German Home Guard. Oskar's reasons for being there are hardly motivated by patriotism. He is not interested in supporting the man who is probably his biological father, but is instead looking for the caretaker of the building to mend his damaged drum. When the Post Office falls, Oskar takes advantage of his child-like appearance and the innocence that is associated with it to escape punishment, but not before denouncing Jan. As a consequence of Oskar's betrayal, Jan is beaten by the outraged members of the Home Guard and later executed. Oskar's first account of these events is, in his own words, rather 'terse' and 'succinct', but inaccurate (p. 240). Oskar is soon overtaken by remorse and his rewritten version of these events represents a clear admission of his guilt and his shame.

Oskar's dubious morality is further revealed by his repeated flirtations with fascism – the death of Jan being just one example. This relationship, moreover, also serves to reveal that, despite the qualities of subversion and protest ascribed to the fantastic by many critics, Oskar's use of his fantastic abilities cannot be described as innocent. Earlier in the novel, for example, Oskar actually offers the services of his drum to the National Socialists. In doing so, Oskar is guided by the words of Bebra the dwarf, his friend and mentor, who advises Oskar 'never be a member of the audience. Never be standing out in front. The place for our kind is on the rostrum' (p. 113). When he attempts to join the party leaders on the



rostrum and his insistent offers of service become an inconvenience, Oskar is removed from the platform. Only then, after a senior officer of the party has rejected him, does Oskar take up his drum to disrupt the rally.

Bebra's advice to Oskar, that he should position himself upon the rostrum, anticipates the rise to power of fascism and reveals Bebra's intention to ally himself to that power. Bebra eventually joins the Reich Propaganda Ministry and frequents, as Oskar explains 'the privy chambers of Messrs Goebbels and Goering – a corrupt behaviour which he tried, in all sorts of ways, to explain and justify to me' (p. 301). Though he is not convinced by Bebra's arguments, Oskar does not completely dismiss them and later in the novel he joins Bebra as a member of his travelling propaganda company. So, rather than oppose National Socialism, Oskar appears to compromise himself by performing in its service. Oskar makes a spectacle of himself and the fantastic potential of his voice is employed in the most frivolous ways to entertain German troops.

Though he seems unaware of it, Oskar is not simply an entertainer. His complicity runs much deeper than that. For in becoming a member of Bebra's company, Oskar has joined what appears to be a travelling Abomination Exhibition. Such exhibitions, which attracted enormous public interest, functioned to both identify and ridicule racial, physical, artistic and cultural characteristics and qualities considered by the authorities to be degenerate.<sup>71</sup> The company to which Oscar belongs comprises dwarfs and other physical 'curiosities'. Its members quite literally exhibit a set of physical characteristics that German eugenics, driven by an image of Aryan perfection, would have found completely unacceptable.

Magic realism was itself often pilloried in such exhibitions. Artists such as Otto Dix and George Grosz were, for example, condemned for their political positions and, along with the rest of the modernist movement, regarded by Hitler's regime as Jewish, were denounced as *Kunstzwerge* (Art Dwarfs). Targeted by Goebbel's Chamber of Culture, many magic realist painters lost their teaching posts and were forbidden to continue their work. Their paintings were often burnt or publicly ridiculed as degenerate art. In 1933, Franz Roh was temporarily imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp.

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<sup>71</sup> For a discussion of such exhibitions, see: Georg Bussman, 'Degenerate Art' – A Look at a Useful Myth', in *German Art in the Twentieth Century: Painting and Sculpture 1905-1984*, eds Christos M. Joachimides, Norman Rosenthal and Wieland Schied (London: George, Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1985), pp. 113-124.



Yet, like Oscar, magic realism was not simply a victim of Nazi oppression. Though magic realist artists were persecuted in the war, it would be inaccurate to endow it with an unchallenged moral authority or innocence. Even as association with National Socialism compromises Oskar and his fantastic abilities, so too is magic realism itself similarly compromised. For not all magic realist artists were treated so dreadfully. Like Oscar, many developed intimate relationships with fascist authority. The writer, Ernst Jünger, for example, was both right wing and pro-war and Hitler himself personally agreed efforts to recruit him into the Nazi Party.<sup>72</sup> Artists such as Georg Schrimpf, Carl Grossberg, Franz Radziwill, and Adolf Ziegler, also continued to exhibit and sell their works throughout the period of Nazi rule. Ziegler, mentioned by Roh in his 1925 study of magic realist painters, was in fact Hitler's favourite artist and was named president of the Third Reich's Chamber of the Fine Arts. As Irene Guenther observes, 'certain aspects of the more conservative strains of Magic Realism – clarity, occasional sentimentality, non-political subject matter – could be, and were, appropriated by the cultural ideologies of the Nazi party'.<sup>73</sup> It is perhaps little wonder then that post-war European magic realism found itself stained by its association with such a regime.<sup>74</sup>

Just as understanding Grass's magic realism in terms of a privileged fantastic may ignore the thematic complexity of *The Tin Drum*, so might readings of the novel that describe its relationship to history in terms of an opposition between a literary, often fantastic, expression of history opposed to a singular, rigid and official historiography run the risk of ignoring the complexity of historical debate. It seems, indeed, in the nature of such an oppositional reading of the text, if it is to promote itself as multiple and subversive, to

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<sup>72</sup> See: Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 70-108.

<sup>73</sup> Irene Guenther, 'Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 55.

<sup>74</sup> In North America, however, magic realism remained a popular critical term applied to painting. The term had gained currency in the United States following the 1931 exhibition 'German Painting and Sculpture'. This exhibition, held at the Museum of Modern Art, contained works by painters such as Dix, Grosz, Oskar Schlemmer, and Schrimpf. Exhibitions such as the 1943 'American Realists and Magic Realists', moreover, demonstrated that America possessed its own body of magic realist painters. The magic realism of artists such as Paul Cadmus, Jared French, Andrew Wyeth, George Tooker, and Robert Vickney was further explored by exhibitions such as 'Romantic Realism 1930-1955' and 'The Surreal City: 1930's-1950's' held at the Whitney Museum.



actually require a conception of historiography as singular and oppressive. Such a singular historiography, however, does not exist.

Historians themselves do not possess a single and agreed understanding of what constitutes either history or the proper task of the historian. As Hayden White argues:

History remains in the state of conceptual anarchy in which the natural sciences existed in the sixteenth century, when there were as many different conceptions of ‘the scientific enterprise’ as there were metaphysical positions. [...] So, too, disputes over what ‘history’ ought to be reflect similarly varied conceptions of what a proper historical explanation ought to consist of and different conceptions, therefore, of the historian’s task.<sup>75</sup>

Neither is the distinction between literature and history so clearly established within historical debates. According to White, one consequence of the Rankean attempt to establish history as a distinctly separate discourse from literature was that: ‘History came to be set over against fiction, and especially the novel, as the representation of the “actual” to the representation of the “possible” or only “imaginable.”’<sup>76</sup> Such a separation, however, has never been fully achieved; it is one thing to declare that history should be empirically objective and free from the subjectivity associated with literature, but another thing entirely to actually accomplish such a task.

Many historians, indeed, acknowledge the impossibility of ever doing so. Carl L. Becker, for example, compares history to memory suggesting that just as memory is a subjective form of knowledge consisting only of what one needs to know, so too is history.<sup>77</sup> Becker writes that each new generation of historians ‘must inevitably play on the dead whatever tricks it finds necessary for its own peace of mind’.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, White argues that ‘facts do

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<sup>75</sup> Hayden White, ‘Introduction to Metahistory’, in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 346.

<sup>76</sup> Hayden White, ‘The Fictions of Factual Representation’, in *The Literature of Fact*, ed. A. Fletcher (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 25.

<sup>77</sup> Carl L. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays in History and Politics*, (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1935).

<sup>78</sup> Carl L. Becker, ‘Everyman His Own Historian’, p. 253.



not speak for themselves [...] the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf'.<sup>79</sup> In doing so, moreover, the historian does not directly access the past as some complete and comprehensible artefact. According to White, the past is made up of fragments and the historian fashions these fragments into a representation of the past. In doing so, history, like literature, makes use of narrative; and it is through the construction of a narrative that historians, like novelists, endow events with a structure 'and order of meaning'.<sup>80</sup> White goes so far as to argue of history and literature that 'the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same'.<sup>81</sup> Even those seeking to defend historical realism may find themselves conceding that 'the notion that it is the proper task of historians to describe past events as they actually happened – once the rallying cry of a whole discipline – has a certain naive quaintness today'.<sup>82</sup>

Such views, moreover, clearly have relevance to the subject matter of Grass's novel. They raise questions about the nature of and the relationship between 'objective' and 'subjective' historical accounts - the very sorts of questions raised by the David Irving trial and at the heart of debates about Holocaust revisionism. This trial was Irving's response to Deborah Lipstadt's *Denying the Holocaust: The Assault on Truth and Memory*, in which she refers to Irving as a Holocaust denier and points to his connections to neo-fascism.<sup>83</sup> In an attempt to defend his status as an historian, Irving took libel action against Lipstadt's publishers. This case is particularly interesting for the manner in which it seemed to be based upon an opposition between objectivity and subjectivity. Irving argues that because of a lack of documentary evidence, it is impossible to assert the organised mass extermination of the Jews or even the existence of gas chambers. In doing so, Irving claims for himself the position of objective historian, one who produces 'Real History', one whose sole concern is to establish verifiable objective historical facts by working with actual archive material. Yet, as the trial revealed, Irving is anything but objective in his accounts of German fascism. It was found that Irving was himself the most subjective of

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<sup>79</sup> Hayden White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation', p. 28.

<sup>80</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 5.

<sup>81</sup> Hayden White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation', p. 21.

<sup>82</sup> Adrian Kuzminski, 'Defending Historical Realism', *History and Theory*, 18 (1979), p. 316.

<sup>83</sup> Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 112, 162-164, 180-182, 214, 216, 233-235.



historians for the manner in which he omitted, distorted, even falsified his supposedly objective ‘evidence’.<sup>84</sup>

As a magic realist writer, Grass refuses to allow oppositions to dominate his narratives. This is especially true of his approach to history – an approach intimately connected to and reflected in the formal constitution of his novels. In a short piece – part essay, part prose and part play – entitled ‘Content as Resistance’, for example, Grass presents the relationship between fantasy and realism not in terms of opposition but in terms of a tension born out of mutual dependence.<sup>85</sup> This tension is played out in the form of an argument between two poets, Pempelfort and Krudewil. These poets present themselves as extreme literary alternatives. Pempelfort is an extravagant and romantic figure who turns to his dreams for inspiration. His poetry is imaginative and metaphoric. Krudewil, on the other hand, strictly binds himself to the realm of the real. He chastises Pempelfort for his literary excess, accuses him of artifice and suggests that his dreams are not so much a source of inspiration, but more the result of an unhealthy diet.

The figures of Pempelfort and Krudewil do initially appear opposed to one another. Neither is allowed, however, to dominate the other and the tension between the two remains very delicately balanced. Grass presents what seem to be alternatives, but then refuses to choose between them. At the end of the piece, Pempelfort and Krudewil sit down together with needles and wool to knit for themselves ‘a new Muse’.<sup>86</sup> In doing so, Krudewil finds himself participating in a metaphoric act, despite his profound distrust of metaphor. Pempelfort, despite his tendency towards flights of fancy, finds himself carefully and dutifully attending to the details required by this new and more demanding muse.

In ‘Content as Resistance’, Grass presents figures broadly analogous to the fantastic and realism and shows them working together. It is precisely this co-operation that leads Irène Leonard to suggest that the governing principle of Grass’s art is the need to ‘impose a form on his content which will enable imagination and reality, fantasy and observation to co-

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<sup>84</sup> See: Richard J. Evans, *Telling Lies About Hitler: The Holocaust, History and the David Irving Trial* (London: Verso, 2002).

<sup>85</sup> Günter Grass, ‘Der Inhalt als Widerstand’, *Akzente: Zeitschrift für Dichtung*, 4 Jahrgang 1957, pp. 229-235.

<sup>86</sup> Günter Grass, ‘Der inhalt als Widerstand’, p. 233.



exist'.<sup>87</sup> Michael Steig clearly believes this to be true of *The Tin Drum* when he suggests that its formal ambiguity is just what 'we have come to associate with much of modern literature'.<sup>88</sup> The 'modern literature' to which Steig refers includes the works of Franz Kafka and just as *Metamorphosis* may be read in terms of a formal intimacy between the fantastic and realism, Steig observes of *The Tin Drum* that its fantastic elements are 'presented in fully realistic detail [...] as events quite within the realm of the possible'.<sup>89</sup>

Such an observation allows for a more positive conception of realism in relation to Grass's writing – as a mode that can operate usefully in co-operation with the fantastic. A number of critics take a similar view and in doing so indicate how that co-operation stands in relation to Grass's engagement with history. For such critics, realism does not simply co-exist alongside the fantastic in Grass's writing but functions to restrain it and ensure its subversive potential does not become separated from an identifiable frame of historical reference. W. V. Blomster, for example, discusses the manner in which Grass employs realism in his works as a means to anchor his imaginative impulses to a concrete and objective historical reality.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, Michael Hollington suggests that though the fantastic functions in *The Tin Drum* to keep open the wound of recent world history, it is the preponderance of realistic detail that actually locates the novel 'in a firm, recognizable historical context'.<sup>91</sup>

In terms strikingly similar to Angel Flores's description of the workings of a magic realist text, Grass explains: 'I have to describe the fantastic as accurately as possible; I must weigh it down with all possible reality, in order that it doesn't simply vanish into air and fly away.'<sup>92</sup> The fantastic elements of *The Tin Drum* are not only described in the most scrupulously realistic manner, but they are also weighed down by an enormous mass of

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<sup>87</sup> Irène Leonard, *Günter Grass*, p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Steig, 'The Grotesque and the Aesthetic Response in Shakespeare, Dickens and Günter Grass', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 6 (1969), p. 178.

<sup>89</sup> Michael Steig, 'The Grotesque and the Aesthetic', p. 179. Grass, moreover, admits that in the early stages of his writing career he was greatly influenced by Kafka's writing. See: Günter Grass, 'The Tin Drum in Retrospect', p. 26.

<sup>90</sup> W. V. Blomster, 'The Demonic in History: Thomas Man and Günter Grass', *Contemporary Literature*, 10 (1969), pp. 75-84.

<sup>91</sup> Michael Hollington, *Günter Grass: The Writer in a Pluralist Society* (London: Manon Boyars, 1980), p. 28.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in W. V. Blomster, 'The Demonic in History', p. 78.



realistic detail. Yet, the value Grass places upon accurate description and reference to the real is very much at odds with those critics who emphasise the fantastic elements of *The Tin Drum* and with Flores's definition of magic realism. For Grass appears to present a very different emphasis by stressing the manner in which realistic description, and reference to the historical real, actually lend substance and validity to the fantastic that it might not on its own possess.

As a magic realist text, however, *The Tin Drum* does more than seek to lend substance to its fantastic elements. The novel repeatedly moves beyond the fantastic and is more concerned with detailing the real than distorting it. The vantage point offered by Oskar provides his readers with a scrupulously and often painfully exact description of a life contained and bound by bourgeois convention. For much of *The Tin Drum*, Oskar's life is restricted to the small grocery shop run by his parents. During the early sections of the novel, Oskar rarely moves beyond the confines of this space. When he occasionally does so, it is only to enter the equally narrow and claustrophobic world of a neighbourhood ruled by similarly petty aspirations. The domestic world Grass so carefully describes seems oblivious to the horror of an approaching world war. Yet, its selfishness, deceptions, betrayals and violence clearly reflect the political system of the time, a system deliberately preparing for war. Grass himself says that in writing *The Tin Drum* he wished to demonstrate 'how latently political petty bourgeois classes were as carriers of a world-view like that of the National Socialist regime'.<sup>93</sup>

Such is the abundance of social, geographical and historical detail contained in *The Tin Drum* that some critics go so far as to suggest that it is in fact a realist novel. Gelly expresses such a view when he argues that when first approaching Grass it is important to recognise his:

Affiliation with the nineteenth-century realist tradition, particularly as typified in novelists like Gogol, Balzac and Dickens. We find in *Die Blechtrommel* a solidly structured, clearly localized setting; a locale densely inhabited and crammed to overflowing with ordinary objects. There is a real concern with the psychology of

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<sup>93</sup> Quoted in John Reddick, *The 'Danzig Trilogy' of Günter Grass*, p. 49.



individual figures and the sociology of the group. This is the plain realistic intent, the sense of vital, detailed life we have come to expect from the traditional novel.<sup>94</sup>

Even a cursory examination of the realism of such authors, however, soon reveals it to be very different from the rigidly conventional and narrow conception of realism usually applied to the nineteenth century and called, though more often than not with pejorative connotations, ‘classic realism’. Charles Dickens and Nikolai Gogol, for example, may indeed make use of what Gelley describes as ‘the plain realistic intent’. Yet, just how plain is this intent when the London fog in Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1851-1853), and a minor official’s nose in Gogol’s ‘The Nose’ (1836), are endowed with all the qualities and status of characters? It is one thing to describe such authors as realists, but in doing so a more complex understanding of realism is required.

Grass himself does leave the door open to such a description of his work. For though he dismisses realism as ‘short-minded’, and claims he could not work with such a form, Grass is in fact dismissing realism only when it is understood solely in terms of an unswerving allegiance to mimetic correspondence. Elsewhere, moreover, Grass actually says of *The Tin Drum* that his first concern was to write a realistic novel. That Grass possesses a fluid understanding of realism, one that challenges current literary prejudice against it, is revealed when he explains: ‘I know I’m doing a rope-walking act, but you just can’t write “simply” anymore if you want your work to have more than sheer entertainment value.’<sup>95</sup>

Perhaps Grass’s writing is not so much characterised by the co-existence of imaginative and fantastic elements in a relationship of necessary tension with a ‘grounding’ realism, but stands in relation to a realism that itself comprises both the imaginative and the fabulous that may at the same time stand in relation to historical reality. A number of critics certainly take such a view. Michael Hamburger, for example, describes Grass’s writing as a ‘new realism’ – one that does not deny him access to ‘imaginative freedom and verbal invention’.<sup>96</sup> Ralph Freedman refers to Grass’s ‘historical obsession’ and discusses Grass’s treatment of history in *The Tin Drum* in terms of a ‘fabulous realism’ which is at the same time a sort of lyric realism inasmuch that it is a ‘realism induced by

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<sup>94</sup> Alexander Gelley, ‘Art and Reality in *Die Blechtrommel*’, p. 116.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in John Reddick, *The ‘Danzig Trilogy’ of Günter Grass*, p. 50.

<sup>96</sup> Michael Hamburger, ‘Moralist and Jester: The Poetry of Günter Grass’, *Dimension* [special issue devoted to Günter Grass], ed. A. Leslie Wilson (1970), p. 87.



vivid sensation, an intuitive and, finally, an artistic remoulding of the external world'.<sup>97</sup> Understanding Grass's writing in such terms, moreover, opens the door for a similar understanding of magic realism. Grass, indeed, indicates such a connection.

Though now rarely discussed in such terms, magic realism may also be understood in terms of an imaginative realism. Roh's original conception of the term magic was intended to indicate that realism was a constantly evolving form. Magic realism was, Roh argued, a 'New Realism' and as such represented a significant stage in that evolution.<sup>98</sup> Very much concerned with the real and a faithful rendering of the object of representation, Roh conceived magic realism as something 'intuitive' and capable of distortion if that distortion ultimately lead to greater clarity.

Roh barely touched upon the manner in which magic realism may be applied to literature, preferring instead to apply the term to pictorial art. Yet, Roh's conception of magic realism is linked to literature, particularly to Austrian and German literature of the early Twentieth Century. Guenther, for example, charts a literary genealogy of magic realism that starts with the works of the Austrian Alfred Kubin, but finds fuller expression in the writing of Ernst Jünger. Guenther also points to the use of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) in German criticism and its application to such writers as W.E. Süsskind and Alfred Döblin.<sup>99</sup>

Originally proposed by Gustav Hartlaub, New Objectivity is a term very closely associated with magic realism. Both terms emerged at the same time and were applied to the same artists. In fact, Roh assisted Hartlaub in his formulation of the term. Roh, indeed, later adopted the term as a replacement for magic realism. It is then, perhaps, hardly surprising then that most critics should use both terms interchangeably. So, when Guenther applies the term New Objectivity to a writer such as Döblin, she is also indicating his status as a writer of a magic realism very much in line with Roh's original conception of the term. Guenther's genealogy of magic realism in German literature, moreover, does not stop with Döblin. As she observes, 'Döblin's work made a great impact on Günter Grass, who has

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<sup>97</sup> Ralph Freedman, 'The Poet's Dilemma: The Narrative Worlds of Günter Grass', in *A Günter Grass Symposium*, ed. A. Leslie Wilson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), p. 49.

<sup>98</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', trans. Wendy B. Faris, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 24.

<sup>99</sup> Irene Guenther, 'Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic', pp. 56-62.



been labelled a Magic Realist in recent years'.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Ronald Hayman suggests that Grass's magic realism points 'the way – backwards and forwards'.<sup>101</sup> Hayman links Grass's writing to that of Gabriel García Márquez, and in doing so places *The Tin Drum* alongside a contemporary impression of magic realism as a literary category often confused with, or accused of privileging, the fantastic. Yet, inasmuch that Grass's magic realism also points 'backwards', it may also be placed in relation to the 'New Realism' described by Roh and associated with Döblin.<sup>102</sup>

In his essay, 'Döblin, My Teacher', Grass himself discusses his debt to Döblin and carefully analyses the formal qualities of Döblin's writing in terms very similar to Roh's description of magic realism. Döblin was, according to Grass, a writer 'bent close to reality'; a writer for whom the subject matter of a novel was 'untrammelled reality'.<sup>103</sup> The 'untrammelled reality' that Döblin seeks to present to his readers is, moreover, an historical reality. Grass points out that in the preparation of a novel such as *Wallenstein* (1920), for example, Döblin drew upon historical documents, personal records and works such as Schiller's *History of The Thirty Years War* (1791-1793) to ensure that the novel would stand in some sort of relation to an existing and knowable historical reality. Döblin wrote of this experience: 'I wallowed in facts. I was in love, fascinated by these records and reports. I'd have liked best to use them just as they were.'<sup>104</sup> Yet, as Grass observes, Döblin's historical account of the war was not bound by strict correspondence to the real. Döblin did not use his facts just as they were. Such facts as he was able to accumulate merely served as the starting point for an imagined version of the Thirty Years War. According to Grass, Döblin engages with history to disturb and distort it.

Döblin's treatment of the Thirty Years War invites comparison with the complex understandings of history offered by Becker and White and discussed earlier in this chapter. Becker, for example points to the subjectivity present in all historical writing. White, however, most clearly signals the manner in which Döblin's imaginative realism, or magic realism, as a combination of reference and imaginative licence, might also be linked

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<sup>100</sup> Irene Guenther, 'Magic Realism, New Objectivity', p. 59.

<sup>101</sup> Ronald Hayman, *Günter Grass: Contemporary Writers* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 75.

<sup>102</sup> Hayman points to Grass's training in the visual arts and Grass's artistic debt to those painters identified by Roh in his 1925 study. See: Ronald Hayman, *Günter Grass: Contemporary Writers*, p. 34.

<sup>103</sup> Günter Grass, 'Döblin, My Teacher', in *On Writing and Politics*, p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Günter Grass, 'Döblin, My Teacher', p. 8.



closely to historical discourse. In his essay 'The Fictions of Factual Representation', White argues that the supposed differences between historical discourse and literature are not as pronounced as many may choose to believe. To support this argument, White presents a formal understanding of history and literature that allows for the presence of both correspondence and coherence in each. White observes that historical discourse seeks to found itself upon correspondence, inasmuch that it is concerned with events that in theory are, or were, observable and that may be located within specific 'time-space locations'.<sup>105</sup> Yet, history is not simply comprised of raw data. That data must first be fashioned into a narrative. This process is, for White, a 'poetic process' that reveals history to be as dependent upon an imagined internal coherence as any literary text.<sup>106</sup> White argues of literature, on the other hand, that while it may operate in the realm of imagination and in doing so create a coherent image of reality, it is at the same time free to refer to an observable or perceivable reality beyond itself. White argues, moreover, that the most figurative of novels, even though it may seem to eschew direct reference to a world beyond itself, 'is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less "real" than that referred to by the historian'.<sup>107</sup>

*The Tin Drum* may be understood in similar terms. In fact, Grass declares that 'since writers are never self-generated, but come from somewhere, I wish to say that I come from this Döblin'.<sup>108</sup> White's description of literature as being comprised of both external correspondence and internal imaginative coherence is not one always applied to *The Tin Drum*. Oppositional readings of the novel, indeed, place these two functions completely at odds with one another. However, the imaginative realism ascribed to Grass's writing by critics such as Hamburger and Freedman, and Roh's conception of magic realism that Grass links himself to through Döblin, clearly resembles White's description of literature.

Like Döblin's *Wallenstein*, much of *The Tin Drum* is also the result of very thorough research. It too reflects a genuine desire to establish a recognisable degree of correspondence between the novel and an external, observable and verifiable historical reality. Grass reveals, for example, that when working on the final draft of the chapter 'The Polish Post Office', he found it necessary to return to his former home, now a part of

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<sup>105</sup> Hayden White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation', p. 21.

<sup>106</sup> Hayden White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation', p. 28.

<sup>107</sup> Hayden White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation', p. 22.

<sup>108</sup> Günter Grass, 'Döblin, My Teacher', p. 4.



Poland and re-named Gdansk. In Gdansk, Grass carefully researched the events surrounding the defence of the Polish Post Office. He visited the Polish Ministry of the Interior to unearth official documents relating to this event. He discovered the addresses of alleged survivors and tracked them down so he might obtain first hand accounts of the action. He spent the rest of his time in the city retracing his childhood and revisiting many of the locations described in the novel. In doing so, Grass sought to ensure the accuracy of his descriptions. So detailed, indeed, is Grass's mapping out of the geography of the city that his readers may feel able to navigate its wartime streets using *The Tin Drum* as a guide. The reader is even presented with descriptions of the routes and timetables of the tram service running through the city. Despite the passage of time, Grass claimed that he 'rediscovered everything'.<sup>109</sup>

*The Tin Drum*, however, is also comprised of imagined historical content. Yet, even at its most figuratively extravagant, the 'imaginative realism' of *The Tin Drum* may still be said to 'correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience'. When, for example, Oskar hears of the destruction of a trainload of refugees fleeing from East Prussia, and the death of four thousand children included in their number, his feverish imagination translates this horrific event into one of the most shocking and fantastic images of the novel. Oskar's narrative describes a heartless God running a merry-go-round that never ends as it transports the defenceless and screaming souls of the unfortunate children in eternal torture. Oskar begs God:

Oh our Father in heaven, we know you have lots of loose change, we know you like to treat us to rides on the merry-go-round [...] Please put your pocket book away, say stop, finished, *fertig*, *basta*, *stoi*, closing time - we poor little children are dizzy, they've brought us, four thousand of us, to Käsemark on the Vistula, but we can't get across, because your merry-go -round, your merry-go-round... (p. 405).

Such is the impact of this scene that a number of critics have attempted to establish whether such an event did in fact occur.<sup>110</sup> Their lack of success, however, does not in any way reduce the effect of either this passage or the novel's correspondence to the real. Though this particular event cannot be confirmed, such events surely did occur and remain

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<sup>109</sup> Günter Grass, 'The Tin Drum in Retrospect', p. 29.

<sup>110</sup> D. G. Bond and Julian Preece, 'Cap Arcana' 3 May 1945', p. 159.



similarly unrecorded. Grass draws upon the figurative potential of literature not so much to refer to, but to infer the reality of a past that is missing, hidden or simply forgotten. It is in the nature of such a past, indeed, that it can only be revived in this manner. Yet, despite the fact that Grass presents an imagined and inferred historical reality, it is, to employ White's terms, 'no less "real" than that referred to by the historian.'

So, by linking himself to Döblin, Grass may open the way for a similar reading of the historical engagement of *The Tin Drum*. It too may be read in terms of a fluid conception of realism, placed alongside Grass's use and interrogation of the fantastic, and comprised both of historical reference and distortion, correspondence and coherence. This formal ambiguity and complex relationship to historical discourse, moreover, clearly indicates that the category of magic realism itself may be understood in similar terms.



**Chapter Three**  
**Feminism and Magic Realism in**  
**Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*:**

Flights of the Fantastic

One of the most powerful images in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) is that of a prison constructed by women, run by women, for the incarceration of women convicted for killing their husbands. This prison is financed and controlled by the Countess P. who, having successfully murdered her own husband, is 'much possessed by the idea that other women had committed the same crime as she with less success'.<sup>1</sup> Carter warns the reader, however, against assuming the Countess has been moved to construct this institution from any sense of sisterhood. Nothing could be further from the truth – this is no sanctuary for women. Following plans that bear a striking resemblance to those set out by Jeremy Bentham and discussed by Michel Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish*,<sup>2</sup> the murderesses of Carter's novel are forced to construct 'a *panopticon*... a hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed, central courtyard, there was a round room surrounded by windows' (p. 210, Carter's *italic*). Each inmate is isolated from the others. All are contained in 'so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible' (p. 211). The power of the panopticon is clearly visible; the Countess's observation room is the dominant feature of the prison. This power, moreover, is perhaps all the more pervasive inasmuch that, in accordance with Bentham's vision, the inmates of Carter's panopticon are never sure when they are being observed. This institution is 'in the purest sense, a penitentiary – it was a machine designed to promote penitence' (p. 212).

Foucault describes the mechanisms of power represented by the panopticon in terms of a 'generalizable model of functioning, a way of defining power relations in terms of the

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 210. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Allen Lane (London: Penguin Books, 1991).



everyday life of men'.<sup>3</sup> For many critics, however, Carter's depiction of a panopticon is designed to specifically indicate patriarchal power relations that function in society towards the oppression of women. Harriet Blodgett, for example, argues that Carter employs the panopticon 'as a paradigm for the way some women have hitherto oppressed women by imposing their own male-based indoctrination on them'.<sup>4</sup> This sort of complicity is certainly present in *Nights at the Circus*. A woman, the Countess, is responsible for both the construction of the prison and its day-to-day running, and all of the warders working beneath her are women. Carter's depiction of a panopticon, however, points beyond isolated instances of complicity to the larger mechanism of patriarchy itself.

Foucault writes: 'Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used.'<sup>5</sup> Foucault's question: 'Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?' seems, moreover, to suggest that the functioning of a panopticon is a reflection of systems of power operating throughout society.<sup>6</sup> According to Foucault, such institutions draw their power from the surveillance and categorisation of their individual members 'to form a body of knowledge about those individuals'.<sup>7</sup> *Nights at the Circus* reveals similar systems of power directed against women that aim to oppress feminine subjectivity through a process of objectification or 'branding'.

Carter's panopticon indicates that such 'branding' is part of the larger project of containing and 'correcting' women. The prisoners of the panopticon are not simply incarcerated for murder, but are locked up because they are women who have killed men. They represent a direct and violent challenge to masculine authority. Before being inducted into the panopticon, the women must first undergo a physical examination, conducted by 'a French criminologist who dabbled in phrenology' to determine if they might be saved (p. 210). This examination not only serves to establish a relationship

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 205.

<sup>4</sup> Harriet Blodgett, 'Fresh Iconography: Subversive Fantasy by Angela Carter', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14.3 (1994), p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 205.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 228.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 220.



between their biology and their crimes, but points to the manner in which women who ‘pass’ male scrutiny do so because they have been identified as women who might be successfully contained. Just like Gregor’s family, Oskar during his time performing in the atrocity exhibition and Saleem’s experience as an immigrant, the women of the panopticon are offered a form of ‘redemption’ founded upon their perceived receptiveness to oppressive practices.

In *Nights at the Circus*, the criminologist does not examine the women to gain a fuller understanding of their situation, but instead applies a male ‘knowledge’ designed to disqualify and ‘brand’ women as unsuitable. Simone de Beauvoir, in her work *The Second Sex* (1949), describes the foundations upon which such authority may rest when she observes that woman ‘is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other’.<sup>8</sup> *Nights at the Circus* may be understood in relation to such an argument. It clearly engages with the othering of woman and challenges such a process.

Carter’s writing challenges the naturalisation of othering by drawing attention to the very institutions that underpin the hegemonic subjection of woman. Institutions such as marriage and motherhood are interrogated time and again in her writings. The domestic space is, for Carter, a microcosm or condensation of oppressive practices at work throughout society. In her work *The Sadeian Woman*, for example, Carter describes how marriage stands as one of ‘the central events in the lives of most women’ yet exists only as a marginal experience in the lives of men.<sup>9</sup> Carter seeks to demonstrate that these different experiences of the domestic point to deeper and more insidious mechanisms of power. One consequence of constructing the domestic as central to a woman’s experience of herself is the presence of ‘knowledges’ about women that disqualify them from a life outside the domestic sphere. As Carter argues: ‘You see, there is no word for it. No word for a ‘respectable’ woman as a heterosexual being except ‘wife’, that is by definition, a contingent being.’<sup>10</sup> Woman’s experience as wife

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<sup>8</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, ‘Author’s Introduction’, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Random House, 1993), pp. xxxix-xl.

<sup>9</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 1979), p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Angela Carter, ‘Alison’s Giggle’, *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings*, p. 194.



becomes conditional upon the existence of man as husband. Not only is this a contingent experience but an exploitative one. When Walser, attempting to demonstrate the elasticity of his New World manners, suggests that the idea of a whore as a wife does not offend him, Lizzie is vehement in her response:

‘Marriage? Pah!’ snapped Lizzie in a pet. ‘Out of the frying pan into the fire! What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many? No different! D’you think a decent whore’d be proud to marry *you*, young man? Eh! (p. 21).

Carter also makes this point in *The Sadeian Woman*, where she argues: ‘The marriage bed is a particularly delusive refuge from the world because all wives of necessity fuck by contract. Prostitutes are at least paid on the nail and boast fewer illusions about a hireling status that has no veneer of social acceptability.’<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Luce Irigaray points to how the institution of marriage represents little more than the organised exploitation and objectification of women as a currency of exchange between men. Irigaray argues: ‘The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women.’<sup>12</sup> For Irigaray, marriage signals the commodification of women whose social value lies only in their role as ‘goods’ passed from family to family, linking and reinforcing patriarchal orders and authority. Such exchanges alienate women from what Irigaray terms their ‘natural body’ since such exchanges emphasis a woman’s ‘socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values’.<sup>13</sup>

Fevvers has little inclination to find herself so ‘valued’ within the domestic space. She is not, however, unaware of her exchange value. She is, indeed, ever willing to cash in on it whenever the opportunity presents itself. Fevvers goes as far as advertising herself as ‘the “only fully-feather intacta in the history of the world”’, while dreaming of ‘the jingling of cash registers’ (pp. 294, 12). Fevvers, as virgin, presents herself, in Irigaray’s terms, as ‘pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations between men’.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Fevvers is attempting to both step outside the notion of

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<sup>11</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 170.

<sup>13</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 186.



exchange between men, in the sense that she manages herself as an asset, while simultaneously and often precariously maintaining the dynamic of that system of exchange for her own benefit.

The actual or perceived loss of Fever's virginity (like Walser, the reader is for most of the novel never sure of the veracity of this advertising ploy) would signal in Irigaray's words 'the ritualized passage from woman to mother'.<sup>15</sup> Motherhood is not, moreover, something Fevvers seeks for herself. Fevvers claims to have entered the world a hatchling, her parents as unknown to her as they are to nature. Found outside Ma Nelson's brothel, Fevvers becomes daughter to 'half-a-dozen mothers', mothers who are 'women of the *worst class and defiled*' (p. 21, Carter's italic). Carter places Fevvers outside the dynamics of institutionalised motherhood. For Carter, such a realm represents in its most dangerous aspect:

The sign of a theoretical motherhood that gives her a hypothetical pre-eminence over men who may seed the human race but cannot, in themselves, nourish it. This theory of maternal superiority is one of the most damaging of all consolatory fictions and women themselves cannot leave it alone, although it springs from the timeless, placeless, fantasy land of archetypes where all the embodiments of biological supremacy live.<sup>16</sup>

This 'theoretical motherhood' is for Carter a form of moral containment that functions to deny women a sexuality not linked to fertility. Released from the dynamics of a mother/daughter relationship that might function to reinforce and repeat this containment, Fevvers seeks for herself the freedom of a less prescribed sense of self. In doing so, she clearly refuses to conform to the subjugated position of a gendered Other.

Such an understanding of *Nights at the Circus* invites comparison between Carter's feminism and the dominant conception of magic realism as it is applied to postcolonial debate. The native as Other is a figure returned to time and again by postcolonial debate and is described by Abdul R. Janmohamed, for example, as a product of a Manichean allegory that draws upon a host of imagined or symbolic differences between the coloniser and the colonised. Underpinning these supposed differences, however, is the

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<sup>15</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 186.

<sup>16</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 106.



essential presence or selfhood of the coloniser asserted over the incidental figure of the native.<sup>17</sup> As the following chapter of this thesis demonstrates, magic realist novels are most frequently discussed in relation to postcolonial thought as works that seek to interrogate the politics of colonial domination and exploitation. For many critics, magic realist novels directly challenge the dynamics of othering. If magic realism may be linked to a postcolonial project understood in terms of a striving towards such goals, then why not to an understanding of Carter's feminism when driven by similar imperatives? Carter, indeed, often draws upon postcolonial debates and terminology to describe her feminism. In 'Notes from the Front Line' She describes herself 'as a girl, suffering a degree of colonisation of the mind'.<sup>18</sup> She also quotes Franz Fanon's: 'I/we are not the slaves of the history that enslaved our ancestors', to suggest an analogy between woman's experience of patriarchy and that of colonial slavery.<sup>19</sup> Carter declares that, as a feminist writer, she feels much in common with:

Certain Third World writers, both female and male, who are transforming actual fictional forms to both reflect and precipitate changes in the way people feel about themselves – putting new wine in old bottles and, in some cases, old wine in new bottles.<sup>20</sup>

For Carter, one such writer is Gabriel García Márquez. By placing her writing alongside that of Márquez, Carter indicates a connection between her writing and an understanding of magic realism in relation to postcolonial debates. Elsewhere, Carter is more explicit in discussing herself as a magic realist and points to the influence of Alejo Carpentier's *The Lost Steps* on her writing describing it as one 'of the great novels of my youth'.<sup>21</sup>

In linking herself and her feminism to postcolonial debates, Carter stresses the role played by language as a tool of oppression. Such a view is central to both postcolonial debates and discussion of magic realism in relation to such debates. Many

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<sup>17</sup> Abdul R. Janmohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Functions of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', *Critical Inquiry*, 12.1 (1985), p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 74.

<sup>20</sup> Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 76.

<sup>21</sup> John Haffenden, 'Angela Carter', p. 81.



commentators observe, for example, the manner in which the language of the coloniser dominates the colonial experience. Indigenous languages are marginalised, even outlawed. The language of colonial power is one that describes and contains or, indeed, simply ignores the native's experience. For Carter, language is power; it is 'the instrument of domination and liberation'.<sup>22</sup> Language is not only instrumental in oppression, but is fundamental to gaining freedom from oppression. Regarded by many critics as an authentic expression of the native experience of colonisation, magic realism is often said to offer a challenge to colonial power by providing a 'voice for the writer interested in finding a national and literary identity for his country and its people'.<sup>23</sup> Carter describes her writing in similar terms. Carter writes, 'this, of course, is why it is so enormously important for women to write fiction *as* women – it is part of the slow process of decolonising our language and our basic habits of thought'.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, and despite the similarity to postcolonial debate, Carter's magic realism represents a very different emphasis. What is so very important about Carter's magic realism is that she is addressing specifically feminist concerns. These are concerns rarely discussed within magic realist debate - even when they are raised they are placed in relation to a postcolonial context.

Annie Leclerc, in her essay 'Woman's Word', observes that in a patriarchal culture 'the world is man's world. Man is the word of the world'.<sup>25</sup> Under these circumstances, the masculine voice is invested with the authority to 'speak "of" woman, "about" woman'.<sup>26</sup> Leclerc talks of herself as a woman reduced to silence, forced into silence.<sup>27</sup> Cora Kaplan describes a woman's relationship to language in similar terms. In her discussion of Odilon Redon's painting 'Silence' (c. 1911), Kaplan argues of the central figure that her silence, and the silence she appears to demand of the viewer, emerges directly out of her status as a woman. Kaplan writes of the figure's silence that 'it has none of the illusory freedom of choice that we associate with a taciturn male. It is not

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<sup>22</sup> Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 77.

<sup>23</sup> Cynthia Duncan, *The Fantastic and Magic Realism in the Contemporary Mexican Short Story as a Reflection of "Lo Mexicana"* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Ph.D.: University Microfilms International, 1983), p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 75 (Carter's italic).

<sup>25</sup> Annie Leclerc, 'Woman's Word', in *Feminist Philosophies*, eds Janet A. Kourany, James P. Sterba and Rosemary Tong (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 362.

<sup>26</sup> Annie Leclerc, 'Woman's Word', p. 362.



the silence of chosen isolation either, for even in a painting significantly without other figures it is an inextricably social silence'.<sup>28</sup>

*Nights at the Circus* is not without its depictions of silent women. The Sleeping Beauty at Madame Schreck's museum of horrors, for example, has descended deep into the realm of dreams, unable to speak except to cry out 'of a sudden: "Oh, unendurable!"' (p. 64). Lacking any means for self-expression, the Sleeping Beauty becomes an exhibit – the passive object of male fantasy. Elsewhere in the novel, the character Mignon plays the role of silent spectral vision, impersonating dead girls for the fraudulent clairvoyant Herr M. In this role, Mignon requires no voice. She is party to a deception where she cannot be herself – she is not even supposed to be alive. Mignon joins the circus, but finds no freedom there, only more abuse. In this environment she finds expression for the misery and tragedy of her life through song. She has been taught, however, to sing in English, a language she cannot understand. Though not exactly silent: 'Mignon sang her foreign song without meaning, without feeling, as if the song shone through her, as if she were glass, without the knowledge she was heard' (p. 134). Carter is careful, however, not to depict Mignon as a completely hopeless character. She does, in time, acquire agency over her life and the songs she sings. Mignon's role as passive medium represents a period of her life 'before she became a woman' (p.247).

Fevvers is not a silent woman. She opens the narrative of *Nights at the Circus* with a voice that 'clanged like dustbin lids', a voice 'made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife. Musical as it strangely was, yet not a voice for singing with; it comprised discords' (pp. 7, 43). Fevvers' voice captivates Walser. It fills the small room above the theatre where he is attempting to interview her. It is some five pages into the novel, indeed, before Walser is allowed his first speaking moment, and then only to refuse the offer of more champagne.

Fevvers' voice has a disturbing effect upon Walser. When the novel opens, Walser occupies the role of observing journalist. He sets out to write Fevvers, but his task is also to 'right' her. Walser's goal is to 'de-bunk' Fevvers as part of a series of articles 'tentatively entitled "Great Humbugs of the World"' (p. 11). Walser's impulse to

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<sup>27</sup> Annie Leclerc, 'Woman's Word', p. 362.

<sup>28</sup> Cora Kaplan, 'Language and Gender', in *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), p.79.



explain away Fevvers' mystery, and by doing so contain the potential she might represent, appears rooted in gender politics. The very first page of the novel describes Walser interviewing Fevvers with his notebook open and his pencil poised as if erect – a sexually charged scene that draws attention to the pen as a metaphorical penis. As Gilbert and Gubar argue 'of course the patriarchal notion that the writer "fathers" his text just as God fathered the world is and has been all-pervasive in Western literary civilization'.<sup>29</sup> In a similar fashion, Walser sets out to establish his patriarchal authority over Fevvers as her author.

Fevvers denies Walser such authority. She possesses a voice that immediately assumes control. Although Walser had intended to interview Fevvers, it is soon apparent that Fevvers refuses the role of passive object. She shapes proceedings so that she is the dictating subject of her own story. Her manipulation of Walser, her control over the story-telling process, represents a fundamentally subversive appropriation of language itself. Though Walser's hand holds the pencil, Fevvers is writing herself. She also undertakes to tell the stories of other women. Fevvers' narrative, indeed, is comprised almost entirely of women's stories. Such an act mirrors Hélène Cixous' demand that: 'Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing.'<sup>30</sup> In undertaking such a task, Fevvers refuses the role of silent woman; refuses to perpetuate a silence designed to protect the patriarchal voice.

Walser is disturbed by Fevvers' voice, but much more so by the stories she tells. Fevvers describes a world unfamiliar to Walser, one where women might draw upon the power of the fantastic as a way of challenging or escaping male authority. Anne Cranny Francis argues that in response to woman's circumscribed position as inessential, peripheral or absent, the fantastic may be utilised by the feminist writer to explore 'the problems of being for a woman in a society which denies them not only visibility but also subjectivity'.<sup>31</sup> Many critics adopt such a view of Carter's feminism and in doing so privilege her use of the fantastic. Elisabeth Mahoney, for example, observes that in Carter's writing women 'exist as subjects empowered through

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<sup>29</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 316.

<sup>31</sup> Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 77.



fantasy'.<sup>32</sup> According to Mahoney, Carter employs the power of fantasy to construct alternative visions of women beyond those rooted in values of lack or absence.

Similarly, Fevvers' stories challenge Walser with images of fantastically empowered women. Fevvers herself is one such woman, representing, as Ricarda Schmidt observes, a symbol of potential liberation, 'an image of a freedom which does not yet exist in the non-fictional world'.<sup>33</sup>

For many critics, magic realist writers draw upon the fantastic as a means to challenge dominant structures of power – especially when that power is perceived to rest upon some form of oppressive 'reason'. Rushdie's magic realism as postcolonial writing, for example, may be read in terms of his use of the fantastic to counter the supposed superiority of a European reasoning that was frequently mobilised to justify the very act of colonialism. Beyond a postcolonial context, Kafka's magic realism may be read in terms of a fantastic eruption of the repressed in opposition to the overbearing incomprehensible reason of a bureaucratic system of capital exploitation. Grass's use of the fantastic may be seen to place his magic realism in opposition to the violence of National Socialism – a movement that frequently sought to justify the horror carried out in its name in rational terms, even as that reason was employed to devise ever more efficient ways to exercise its murderous brand of politics.

Characters in magic realist novels frequently appear to draw upon the potential of the fantastic to provide the means for their escape from oppression. This is a feature of even the earliest examples of magic realist writing. In Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*, for example, the brutally oppressed slaves of Haiti possess the fantastic ability to turn themselves into different animals and by doing so are able to escape first the violence of their French rulers and later the black, but equally despotic, Henri-Christoph. Fantastically empowered escapes are, indeed, depicted in all of the novels examined by this thesis. For many critics, Gregor's transformation into a gigantic beetle represents an escape from the unbearable obligations placed upon him by family and work. Oskar's decision to remain a child, and his glass cutting voice, provide him with

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<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Mahoney, '“But Elsewhere?”: The Future of Fantasy in *Heroes and Villains*', in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, eds Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London: Longman, 1997), p. 75.

<sup>33</sup> Ricarda Schmidt, 'The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction', *Textual Practice*, 3.1 (1990), p. 72.



the means to escape the responsibilities of an adult world preparing itself for a world war. In Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, though his transformation into a horned and cloven hoofed devil reveals the continuation of racial othering into the postcolonial period, Saladin Chamcha emerges as a fantastically empowered character who escapes the confinement of racial prejudice by breaking free of the detention centre in which he is being held.

In her essay, 'Love in a Cold Climate', Carter quotes Octavio Paz: 'Women are imprisoned in the image masculine society has imposed on them; therefore if they attempt a free choice it must be a kind of jail-break.'<sup>34</sup> Carter applies this quote to the life and death of Emily Brontë, and to her equally wilful and tempestuous literary creation, Catherine Earnshaw. It might also usefully be applied to Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. Imprisonment, by or for the benefit of men, and escape from such incarceration represent two of the central themes of the novel. In *Nights at the Circus*, the fantastic certainly appears to provide women with the means to escape masculine oppression when conventional forms of flight seem impossible. Early in the novel, Fevvers describes her encounter with the mystic Rosencreutz. Fevvers agrees to play, for pay, the role of May Sacrifice in a heretical ceremony. It soon becomes apparent, however, that Rosencreutz expects her to sacrifice more than her virginity. Fevvers realises that she is in very real danger as Rosencreutz approaches her armed with a blade 'more aggressive than his other weapon, poor thing, that bobbed about uncharged, unprimed, unsharpened' (p. 83). In a mocking gesture, Fevvers draws her toy sword as if to defend herself, but escapes by simply flying out of the window. As Magali Cornier Michael observes: 'The fantastic enables Carter to bypass and undermine phallic power and to posit other forms of power. Although flying away from an aggressor is not a practical solution for most women, Carter's use of the image indicates the liberating quality of strategies of empowerment that are not phallic and violent.'<sup>35</sup> Later in the novel, Fevvers encounters the fabulously wealthy Grand Duke. His offer of a diamond necklace wrapped around the throat of a carved ice statue of Fevvers excites her avarice. The Duke, however, attempts to use magic against her in an effort to imprison her within one of his collection of jewelled eggs. He is determined to own Fevvers, to reduce her to a passive object of beauty. Fevvers barely escapes with her feathers, if not

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Angela Carter 'Love in a Cold Climate', *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings*, p. 175.

<sup>35</sup> Magali Cornier Michael, 'Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*: An Engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies', *Contemporary Literature*, 35.3 (1994), p. 513.



all her dignity, intact. At the very last moment, she rejects the Grand Duke's offer of wealth, and the beautiful egg designed to imprison her with its 'cage made out of gold wires with, inside, a little perch of rubies and of sapphires and of diamonds' (p. 192). Fevvers chooses, instead, the egg containing a model of a train. As the Grand Duke ejaculates, and the ice statue collapses, Fevvers is magically transported to the safety of the circus train as it pulls out of St Petersburg.

Escape from oppression is not only achieved through flight. Another form of freedom explored by *Nights at the Circus* is that offered by spaces where women are allowed to be, in Luce Irigaray's words, 'women-among-themselves'.<sup>36</sup> Irigaray argues that in response to patriarchal subjection, women 'have had to constitute a place for individual and collective "consciousness-raising" concerning the specific oppression of women, a place where the desire of women by and for each other could be recognized, a place for them to regroup'.<sup>37</sup> The Countess's panopticon is clearly a perversion of such a space. The inmates of the panopticon do, however, gain their freedom. After their escape from the panopticon, the former inmates and warders of the prison set out into the Siberian wasteland where 'the white world around them looked newly made, a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished' (p. 218). The women debate whether to return to the world previously so completely denied to them, or whether to 'strike off by themselves and found a primitive utopia in the vastness around them, where none might find them' (p. 218).

Brian Conniff suggests that 'magic realism might allow the writer to create in his work a "minor utopia"'.<sup>38</sup> By this, Conniff means that such writers might create fictive spaces that serve to affirm hope and potential in the face of even the worst sort of oppression. Irigaray expresses certain reservations that such a space might provide a long-term solution to the oppression of women. She is also uncomfortable with the term utopia.<sup>39</sup> Some critics, however, stress the importance of such visualisations in Carter's work. Paulina Palmer, for example, particularly celebrates the utopian elements in *Nights at the Circus* and draws upon Terry Lovell's argument that utopias are key to the success

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<sup>36</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 127.

<sup>37</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 161.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Conniff, 'The Dark Side of Magical Realism: Science, Oppression, and Apocalypse in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 36.2 (1990), p.168.

<sup>39</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 161.



of political struggles, that they provide a source of hope for the future. Palmer goes on to suggest, moreover, that such hope emerges specifically out of Carter's magic realism. Palmer argues of Carter's magic realism:

In the early texts she exploited this mode to evoke the individual's experience of anxiety, estrangement and isolation [...] In the texts published recently, however, she uses it as a vehicle for the expression of emotions which have a liberating effect. These include pleasure and wonder.<sup>40</sup>

*Nights at the Circus* contains a number of other women's spaces – not exactly utopian, but spaces created through the fantastic where alternative visions of femininity might flourish. In these spaces women appear to thrive and the power relations supporting a patriarchal culture may be challenged. The novel, indeed, opens in such a space, with Lizzie's manipulation of 'Father Time.' Lizzie creates a space in which Fevvers may narrate her story, in her own time. In this space, Walser lacks any authority to influence her narrative and, as Big Ben chimes midnight time and again, he even lacks the means to measure its passing. Walser begins to lose a sense of who he is because he cannot locate when he is. While the reader is swept along by Fevvers' narrative, Walser remains becalmed.

Lizzie controls time through a French gilt clock that once stood on the mantelpiece at Ma Nelson's brothel. Its hands 'folded perpetually together as if in prayer', the clock remains fixed upon the 'shadowless hour, the hour of vision and revelation, the still hour at the centre of the storm in time' (p. 29). It is within this timeless space that the prostitutes ply their trade. The fantastic potential of this space, however, appears to allow the prostitutes the capacity to transcend the exploitation of their work. There is much more to this brothel than its patrons might suppose. For it is a house of political ferment, a sisterhood of suffragettes, where Fevvers' fantastic ability to fly serves to mirror the ambitions of her prostitute mothers, each of whom is patiently and deliberately hatching her plans for the future.

The brothel is also the space in which Fevvers' magical transformation into the mythic figure of Winged Victory occurs, where she serves as figurehead for Ma Nelson's ship

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<sup>40</sup> Paulina Palmer, 'From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight', in *Women Reading Women's Writing*, ed. Sue Rose (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), p.182.



of battle' or 'pirate ship' (p. 32). Carter's reference to myth is often discussed in relation to her feminism. Such is the mythic content of *Nights at the Circus* that Blodgett, for example, claims it is Carter's 'most overtly feminist novel'.<sup>41</sup> For Blodgett, Carter's use of myth, as an often disturbing expression of femininity opposed to patriarchal power, not only reveals her feminism, but is, indeed, fundamental to it. Many critics suggest that myths are similarly fundamental to an understanding of magic realism. Geoff Hancock, for example, argues that magic realism 'cannot exist without a complex human community of folklore and legends as a precondition'.<sup>42</sup> Critics often regard such folklore and legends as the raw material from which colonial subjects may reconstruct a sense of selfhood that pre-dates the colonial experience.<sup>43</sup> Very occasionally, critics adapt this understanding of magic realism so that it might allow for a discussion of feminine power within colonial and postcolonial contexts. Oralia Preble-Niemi, for example, suggests that the mythic elements of magic realist novels might express a pre-patriarchal, pre-colonial, femininity. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, for example, Alice Walker makes repeated reference to the figure of a Mother Goddess – a figure pre-dating patriarchal colonial power. This is a figure comprised of often-violent contradictions – a fertile mother figure, but also a harlot with the power of death and decay – a disturbing mythic representation of femininity fully capable, argues Preble-Niemi, of undermining patriarchal power within the colonial context.<sup>44</sup>

Fevvers does not present herself in quite such elevated terms, yet she does describe herself in terms of a specifically feminised mythology similarly comprised of contradictions. She is Venus or Helen from classical myth, but at the same time a cockney entertainer. She plays the figure of Cupid, but in a brothel. She describes herself as a disciple of Vesta, but the daughter of 'London, with the one breast, the amazon queen' (p. 36). Yet, though Fevvers is comprised of such apparent contradictions, the mythic references in the text seem to share a common purpose in that they appear to empower Fevvers and point to the future empowerment of women.

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<sup>41</sup> Harriet Blodgett, 'Fresh Iconography', p. 52.

<sup>42</sup> Geoff Hancock, 'Magic or Realism: The Marvellous in Canadian Fiction', *The Canadian Forum*, (March 1986), p.25.

<sup>43</sup> See: Cynthia Duncan, *The Fantastic and Magic Realism in the Contemporary Mexican Short Story as a Reflection of "Lo Mexicana"*, p. 122.

<sup>44</sup> Oralia Preble-Niemi. 'Magical Realism and the Great Goddess in Two Novels by Alejo Carpentier and Alice Walker', p. 104.



She is winged victory, a symbol of ‘the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground’ (p. 25).

Fevvers most obviously appears to leave that ground behind when she is performing. It is within the carnival atmosphere of the circus that Fevvers quite literally flies. In this she perhaps resembles Cixous’ laughing medusa – a monster to some, but one capable of flight, not from fear, not as retreat, but as an appropriation of agency (Cixous draws attention to the double meaning of the verb *voler*: to fly/to steal). Fevvers certainly appears to resemble Cixous’ description of a character who has chosen to: ‘Fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down.’<sup>45</sup> This sort of carnivalesque atmosphere, moreover, is also said to be a characteristic of magic realism. Wendy B. Faris, for example, argues that a ‘carnavalesque spirit’ is common to magic realist novels and points to the ‘songs, dances, exaggeratedly sumptuous scenarios, horrifying blood and gore’ of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* suggesting that it is ‘perhaps the most carnivalesque of all.’<sup>46</sup>

Rushdie describes Carter’s writing in similarly carnivalesque terms. Rushdie writes of Carter that she was a ‘thumber of noses, a defiler of sacred cows [...] Her books unshackle us, toppling the statues of the pompous, demolishing the temples and commissariats of righteousness. They draw their strength, their vitality from all that is unrighteous, illegitimate, low’.<sup>47</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising then that a number of critics should read Carter’s feminism in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque.<sup>48</sup> Fevvers is, as Nicole Ward Jouve observes, ‘Queen Carnival. Belching,

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<sup>45</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 326.

<sup>46</sup> Wendy B. Faris, ‘Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p.185.

<sup>47</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘Angela Carter, 1940-92: A Very Good Wizard, A Very Dear Friend’, *New York Times Book Review*, 8 March 1992, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> See: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Carter had not actually read Bakhtin at the time of writing *Nights at the Circus*. See: Lorna Sage ‘Angela Carter Interviewed by Lorna Sage’, in *New Writing*, eds Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke (London: Minerva, 1992), p. 188.



farting, drinking, dyeing, flying, dancing, fucking'.<sup>49</sup> Fevvers dominates a fantastic space, the circus ring, within which all things seem possible. In doing so, she appears to challenge the containment represented by the panopticon as a model for oppressive patriarchal culture by presiding over an arena of festivity that by its very nature is opposed to culturally sanctioned hierarchies and binaries. As such, Fevvers' realm exists in a perpetual state of revolution. Bakhtin places the carnival in tension with the growth of official and repressive practices that emerged from the cultural restructuring of the Renaissance. Similarly, Fevvers' carnival is a world founded in opposition to the official. It offers a space within which those excluded from the official may thrive. It is a world where the fantastic appears to erupt into, and cut across, a real founded upon patriarchal values and the conventions born out of those values.

In Fevvers' circus, a pet pig named Sybil makes all the important decisions. Following in the footsteps of her classical namesake, Sybil acts as oracle for the official circus owner colonel Kearney. Sybil is responsible for the hiring of Walser, who joins the circus disguised as a clown so he might expose Fevvers as a fraud. Walser, however, is soon distracted from his task. He has entered a fantastic world where performing chimps within the magic circle of the circus ring demonstrate qualities of intelligence, sensitivity and compassion far exceeding those of their human master. The enlightened divide between human and animal is transgressed. The chimps appear to mimic the rituals of the classroom, but Walser soon suspects he is witness to no act of mimicry. Within moments, indeed, his role as observer is taken from him and he becomes the object of their study. He becomes the object of their humour and is relegated to the position of class dunce, though not before attracting admiring glances from one of the female chimps.

Elsewhere in the text, Walser fulfils the expectations suggested by his name and acts as gigolo to a tigress. Walser is quite literally swept off his feet by this dancing cat. Enthralled by the music produced by the princess's piano, the tigress adopts the lead and steers Walser through the dance. Within the circus ring, the female of the species is both dangerous and dominant. As Walser and the big cat follow the ever-quickenning tempo of the dance, the fantasy of the moment suggests the possibility of release from

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<sup>49</sup> Nicole Ward Jouve, "Mother is a Figure of Speech...", in *Flesh and the Mirror*, p. 149.



the confines of a reality circumscribed by iron bars. As Walser is whirled around the circus ring, the bars of the arena resolve:

Themselves into a single blurred bar, a confinement apprehended but no longer felt, until that single bar itself dissolved and all that remained was the limitless landscape of the music within which, while the dance lasted, they lived in perfect harmony (pp. 164-5).

For Bakhtin the carnival represents ‘a gay parody of official reason, of the seriousness of official “truth”’.<sup>50</sup> Walser’s experience of the carnival is of a fantastic space where his reason and trust in ‘truth’ is repeatedly undermined. This is, moreover, a reason and a truth pressed into the service of masculine authority inasmuch as they are drawn upon by Walser to explain away Fevvers’ fantastic abilities and the notoriety and freedom she represents. As Walser observes Fevvers’ aerial performance at the Alhambra theatre, for example, he draws upon what might be considered traditionally masculine resources of reason and scientific objectivity to unravel the mystery of her act. As Fevvers glides through the air at a leisurely twenty miles per hour, instead of the sixty miles per hour required by the laws of physics, Walser feels compelled to deny the evidence of her fantastic abilities. He attempts to convince himself that an invisible wire suspends Fevvers and that her act is little more than an elaboration upon the Indian rope trick. Walser, however, is amazed by Fevvers’ performance. His reason becomes ‘whimsical’ as he finds himself entertaining the possibility that Fevvers’ performance might be no illusion, but a fantastic reality presented as illusion. Walser is confused, not only by the fantastic impossibility of Fevvers’ act, but by the limitations she places upon herself; Fevvers’ act goes no further than that of a gravity-bound human trapeze artist, except that it is performed at a third of the pace. Walser finds himself faced with the paradox that ‘in a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world’ (p. 17). Though Walser sets out, in true Cartesian fashion, to see everything and believe nothing he finds himself slipping into the realm of suspended disbelief.

Walser’s appeals to reason fail. His attempts to expose Fevvers serve only to expose his own vulnerability. Repeated throughout *Nights at the Circus* is an ironic play upon

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<sup>50</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 39.



Hamlet's famous declaration: 'What a wonderful piece of work is man!' Just as this line signals Hamlet's growing uncertainty, perhaps even paranoia, so Carter employs it to signal Walser's eventual collapse into madness. Walser is a 'piece of work' undergoing a dramatic deconstruction. Fevvers' fantastic abilities undermine his sense of himself as a reasoning being. In the Siberian tundra, Walser completely loses his sense of self – only then may he be reconstructed, or 'hatched', by Fevvers, the mythic Winged Victory.

For Susan Rubin Suleiman, conflict between reason and the fantastic is a characteristic of Carter's writing. Her discussion of Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), for example, points to just such a conflict between the overly oppressive rationalism of the Minister of Determination and the fantastic and anarchic terrorism of Doctor Hoffman.<sup>51</sup> Yet for Suleiman, Carter's use of the fantastic to challenge reason also has a formal literary aspect, for she writes of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* that it may be understood in terms a 'celebration of dream and the imagination and its indictment of "real life" and the "realist attitude" to life'.<sup>52</sup> *Nights at the Circus* may also be described as a challenge to realism. According to Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, Carter has 'gradually divorced herself from realist convention' and novels such as *Nights at the Circus* reflect 'a distinct interest in anti-realist forms'.<sup>53</sup>

As this thesis has demonstrated, magic realism is most frequently discussed in just such terms. For the vast majority of critics, magic realism represents a direct challenge to the conventions and dominance of literary realism. Such an understanding of magic realism, moreover, is linked to *Nights at the Circus*. Richard Todd, for example, describes the novel as a magic realist work and suggests that it allows for narrative options that question 'traditional realism in a variety of ways, and in doing so present

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'The Fate of the Surrealist Imagination in the Society of the Spectacle', in *Flesh and the Mirror*, pp. 98-116.

<sup>52</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'The Fate of the Surrealist Imagination in the Society of the Spectacle', p. 102.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, 'Introduction', *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, pp. 4, 6.



themselves as genuinely different from those of traditional realism'.<sup>54</sup> For Suleiman, however, Carter's challenge to realism should also be recognised as a significant and integral part of her feminism inasmuch that realism has become 'codified as male: unitary, phallic, teleologically moving towards a single meaning, a single story'.<sup>55</sup> Suleiman is not, of course, alone in making such an observation. Laura Marcus for example, in her essay 'Feminist Aesthetics and the New Realism' writes that for many feminist writers "'literary realism" has come to be associated with crude, simplistic and [...] even "sinister" critical approaches'.<sup>56</sup> Cranny-Francis points to just how realism might be regarded as 'sinister' in that it may naturalise gender inequality even as it obscures its ideological content. Cranny-Francis argues that 'the most important role and task of feminist discourse is to challenge this naturalization, this obviousness, this common sense. And to challenge it, feminist discourse has to make it visible'.<sup>57</sup> Carter denies that her fiction may act as 'agit-prop'.<sup>58</sup> Yet her use of the fantastic in a novel such as *Nights at the Circus* does appear to make visible the naturalisation of gender oppression and, as an 'anti-realist' one, challenge the very form that according to one feminist perspective is responsible for such naturalisation. As Carter herself observes, *Nights at the Circus* is a novel that makes 'space for certain kinds of discussion'.<sup>59</sup> By this, she refers to the manner in which the novel's formal elements may be linked to feminist thought. Yet the space Carter describes is one that also allows for a discussion of her novel as a magic realist work in terms of a similar formal relationship to such thought.

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<sup>54</sup> Richard Todd, 'Conventions and Innovation in British Fiction 1981-1984: The Contemporaneity of Magic Realism', in *Convention and Innovation in Literature*, eds Theo L. D'haen, Rainer Grübel and Helmut Lethen (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1989), p. 365.

<sup>55</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 40.

<sup>56</sup> Laura Marcus, 'Feminist Aesthetics and the New Realism', in *New Feminist Discourse: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction*, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> John Haffenden, 'Angela Carter', *Novelists in Interview*, p. 93.

<sup>59</sup> John Haffenden, 'Angela Carter', *Novelists in Interview*, p. 93.



## The Fantastic Tethered to the Real

Carter's use of the fantastic may be read as a challenge to patriarchal power. It may also be placed in opposition to a literary realism understood to be in service to such power. Approaching the text in this fashion, moreover, shares much in common with the dominant conception of magic realism and, as Todd illustrates, such an understanding of the category may be applied to *Nights at the Circus*. Yet, understanding magic realism in terms of a privileged fantastic and applying such an understanding to *Nights at the Circus* and Carter's feminism, clearly runs the risk of ignoring the full formal and thematic complexity of Carter's writing and politics. Of all the novelists studied so far in this thesis, Carter most clearly signals the potential dangers of privileging the fantastic by placing it in opposition to realism. Carter is not dismissive of realism, or its relationship to feminist writing. In *Nights at the Circus*, indeed, Carter explores a more fluid set of relationships between the fantastic and realism. In doing so, moreover, she also signals the need for a more complex conception of magic realism if the term is to be usefully applied to her work and linked to feminist discourse.

Although the majority of critics privilege the fantastic in their understanding of magic realism as a literary category, as this thesis has already demonstrated, such a position is not unquestioned. Robert Wilson, for example, describes magic realism as a mode of fantasy yet cautions against an uncritical appreciation of magic realism in such terms. According to Wilson, there are two fundamental risks associated with the use of fantasy. Firstly, that of creating 'a kind of self-contained imaginative sequence that [...] appears to refer to some actual place and to contain characters that, by name, location or dialect, seem to belong to that place but fail utterly to inspire belief that they do'. Secondly, that 'the practitioner of fantasy may deform local reality (he must, in fact) but he may seem to have done so gratuitously'.<sup>60</sup> For Wilson, magic realist literature, when too closely linked to the fantastic, is potentially both unbelievable and gratuitous.

Anne Cranny-Francis, though she broadly celebrates the fantastic as a tool for feminist writers, issues a similar warning. Cranny-Francis argues that fantasy may challenge gender inequality by revealing seemingly objective, natural or common-sense perspectives on the world that support such inequality to be little more than ideological

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Wilson, 'On The Boundary of The Magic and The Real: Notes on Inter-American Fiction', *The Compass*, 6 (1979), p. 43.



constructions. For Cranny-Francis, fantasy allows the feminist writer to play with the conventions by which the real is described and by doing so provides the freedom to construct other realms of feminine possibility. She warns, however, that such play ‘may alienate, rather than estrange, some readers. The secondary world may become a kind of compensatory dream or wish-fulfilment which enables readers to avoid engagement with the real’.<sup>61</sup>

Just such a view of the fantastic has, in fact, been applied to Carter’s writing. Kathy Stephen’s review of *Nights at the Circus*, for example, concludes with the suggestion that:

*Nights at the Circus* is the sort of book that is more enjoyable to read – and very enjoyable it is – than to reflect upon. It is rather like a violent dream: all-encompassing at the moment but somehow forgotten upon awakening, as though the mind could not bear the effort of holding it.<sup>62</sup>

While Stephen’s review of *Nights at the Circus* damns through faint praise, Robert Clark is rather more direct in his attack upon Carter’s use of the fantastic. For Clark, Carter’s use of the fantastic represents an actual lack of engagement. He argues that Carter’s ‘commitment to the imagination’ points to a ‘suspicion of analytical reason’, and that such an approach, central to ‘the present cult of the fantastic, is dangerously naive’.<sup>63</sup> It is, according to Clark, naive inasmuch that Carter’s fictions, operating at the level of imaginative abstraction, may appear to touch upon the politics of gender, but in fact represent little more than ‘empty stylization’.<sup>64</sup> He argues: ‘Consequently, her texts become a sequence of broken reflections – an image of which they are particularly fond – in which the reader captures momentary and fugitive awareness of the social system that engenders him/her.’<sup>65</sup> For Clark, these ‘broken reflections’, lacking the ability to establish direct reference to a realm of real political action, drain away any potential for feminine significance in terms of political and social struggle towards affirmative

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<sup>61</sup> Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction*, p. 78.

<sup>62</sup> Kathy Stephen, ‘Fitful Glimpses: A Review of Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*’, *Books and Bookmen*, October 1984, p. 16.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Clark, ‘Angela Carter’s Desire Machine’, *Women’s Studies*, 14 (1987), pp. 151-2.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Clark, ‘Angela Carter’s Desire Machine’, p. 155.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Clark, ‘Angela Carter’s Desire Machine’, p. 154.



alternatives to patriarchal oppression. Carter's fictions, according to Clark, are fragmented, comprised of reflections and open-ended, but in being so may unwittingly confirm woman's position as marginal to established power and assure the continued authority of the patriarchal centre. As Sneja Gunew argues:

The marginal has always constructed the center; the center speaks by virtue of the marginal. That there should be a marginal allows the center to explain itself. The textual productions of marginal minorities exist to confirm hegemonic textualities. And these minority writings have been in general homogenized as the area of plurality, disruption, non-closure, deferred meaning and process; in other words, as affirming the dynamism of the center and its ability to accommodate change – change which is safely contained.<sup>66</sup>

Yet, Carter's use of the fantastic and supposed opposition to realism not only risks confirming the 'hegemonic textualities' of the patriarchal centre, but also of alienating a significant strand of feminist thought. Bristow and Broughton, for example, observe of Carter's writing that it 'stands in serious opposition to the austerity of social realism, the traditional genre for representing the grinding oppression of women, workers and minorities'.<sup>67</sup> They then go on to suggest that in 'many ways, her resistance to realism puts her at odds with both contemporary feminist fiction and politics'.<sup>68</sup> Carter herself was clearly aware that the formal qualities of her fictions might appear to set her apart from many other feminist writers. In interview with Amanda Smith, she observed: 'There's a lot of discussion in the women's movement about the idea of bearing witness and describing women's lives absolutely specifically. And I think that's all fine. But the snag is that my life just wasn't like that.'<sup>69</sup> Carter is referring to her experiences as a young writer developing a writing style during the social and artistic flux of the 1960s. For Carter, 'non-naturalist forms' simply seemed the most appropriate way to express

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<sup>66</sup> Sneja Gunew, 'Framing Marginality: Distinguishing the Textual Politics of the Marginal Voice', *Southern Review*, 18 (1985), pp. 142-143.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, 'Introduction', p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, 'Introduction', p. 11. Bristow and Broughton are referring to an influential strain of Anglo-American feminist literary criticism exemplified by Elaine Showalter. Showalter points to the importance of Georg Lukács' discussion of realism and argues that 'true' feminist writing should adopt a similarly realist form. For a fuller discussion of this, see: Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen and Co., 1985), pp. 1-8.

<sup>69</sup> Amanda Smith, 'Angela Carter: An Interview', *Publishers Weekly*, 4 January 1985, p. 74.



her experience of the world during this time and ‘I got more and more into it as I got older, because it’s a genre with its own rigorous logic.’<sup>70</sup>

Despite her apparent rejection of realism, Carter claims to be ‘a bit nervous about the word “fantasy”’.<sup>71</sup> She is aware that the fantastic content of her writing might attract criticism.<sup>72</sup> Yet, the manner in which Carter makes use of the fantastic in *Nights at the Circus* confounds such criticism by demonstrating a clear awareness of the potential dangers associated with the fantastic. It also places her writing at odds with the dominant usage of the category magic realism. *Nights at the Circus* draws attention, for example, to the manner in which the fantastic may serve to reinforce woman’s experience of marginalisation. Though for much of the novel Fevvers celebrates her fantastic body, she is also deeply aware that her gifts set her apart from the rest of humanity. Just before leaping from the brothel for her maiden flight, Fevvers hesitates. She is not only afraid of failing, but, more significantly, she reveals: ‘I feared the proof of my own singularity’ (p. 34). Fevvers is concerned that such ‘singularity’, such ‘irreparable difference’, would transport her to a realm beyond the experience of other women (p. 34). The novel points to this potential by contrasting Fevvers’ intimate relationship to the fantastic with the life experienced by the poor Russian baboushka. The baboushka enjoys none of Fevvers’ fantastic abilities. For her, the fantastic represents a privileged realm. She simply does not possess the energy or means to access its potential.

As Fevvers’ experiences with the Grand Duke and the mystic Rosencreutz illustrate, the fantastic is not only a tool of liberation or a means of escape, but may also be employed to oppress or give rise to that oppression. The Grand Duke attempts to employ magic as a means to imprison Fevvers within one of his priceless eggs, to rob her of her agency, to marginalise her by exiling her from the world. Earlier in the novel, her encounter with Rosencreutz is similarly perilous. Rosencreutz is drawn to Fevvers for the fantastic potential she represents. His is a more subtle form of oppression, one that first seeks to celebrate her fantastic qualities so that she might more suitably fulfil her role as sacrifice. Rosencreutz celebrates Fevvers as Flora, goddess of spring, as the angelic Azrael, as Venus, the goddess of love. Indeed, his rather fevered description of Fevvers

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<sup>70</sup> Amanda Smith, ‘Angela Carter: An Interview’, p. 74.

<sup>71</sup> Amanda Smith, ‘Angela Carter: An Interview’, p. 74.

<sup>72</sup> See: John Haffenden, ‘Angela Carter’, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 85.



as ‘Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species’ (p. 81) resembles that of many critics wishing to privilege the fantastic in Carter’s novel. Fevvers’ fantastic potential for becoming, for transcendence, however, is precisely what Rosencreutz wishes to exploit. He stresses her fantastic qualities so that he may then go on to dominate her.

If *Nights at the Circus* casts doubt upon the liberatory potential of the fantastic, it also casts doubt upon the spaces for empowerment that emerge from or are associated with such potential. Ma Nelson’s brothel, for example, appears to represent a fantastic space for women to operate with agency through community. Yet, Carter’s novel demonstrates clear reservations about such a space. Not only does the brothel remain a brothel, but also the protection provided by the fantastic for political activism proves rather unreliable. With Ma Nelson’s clock seeming to halt time and with the curtains of the house ever closed against the outside world it is ‘as if the house were dreaming its own dream’ (p. 26). Following the death of Ma Nelson, however, and the arrival of her moralising elder brother, the dream collapses. When the curtains are drawn back and daylight enters, the brothel is exposed as a temporary and worn-out illusion. As Sarah Bannock observes, the brothel is revealed to be a place of self-deception, not only for the men who frequent it, but also for the women who work there. Bannock argues: ‘For Carter, there is nothing utopian about the brothel, despite the radical possibilities of co-operative mothering. The house in which Fevvers grows up is something of a fool’s paradise.’<sup>73</sup>

*Nights at the Circus* offers up a number of different fantastic spaces for the potential empowerment for women, not least of which is that of the carnival. Here again, Carter demonstrates an awareness of some of the problems associated with such a space. In an interview with Lorna Sage, Carter observed that ‘the carnival has to stop. The whole point about the feast of fools is that things went on as they did before, after it stopped’.<sup>74</sup> If the carnival is a temporary experience, however, then how effective can it be as an expression of struggle? Terry Eagleton, can find no positive response to this question, but argues that: ‘Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and

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<sup>73</sup> Sarah Bannock, ‘Auto/Biographical Souvenirs in *Nights at the Circus*’, in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, p. 210.

<sup>74</sup> Lorna Sage, ‘Angela Carter Interviewed by Lorna Sage’, p. 188.



relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art.’<sup>75</sup> Buffo the Great, the Master Clown who presides over some of the most chaotic scenes from the novel, seems to echo such a view of the carnival when he declares: ‘The beauty of clowning is, nothing ever changes’ (p. 117). Though the clowns may appear to parody high official rituals and may seem to represent carnivalesque transgression, they possess no lasting agency. As little Ivan observes, as he considers joining the clowns, they ‘terrify, enchant, vandalize, ravage, yet always stay on the safe side of being, licensed to commit license and yet forbidden to act’ (p. 151).

*Nights at the Circus* indicates that instead of serving to destabilise institutional power, the carnival may in fact reinforce it. As a ‘permissible rupture of hegemony’ the carnival does not so much subvert power as it reveals the authority it must eventually submit to. The carnival is, moreover, a dangerous place. Never more so than when it repeats the oppressive practices of that which it might at first seem to oppose. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White observe, the carnival ‘often violently abuses and demonises weaker, not stronger, social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who ‘don’t belong’’.<sup>76</sup> There are clear examples of this oppressive aspect of the carnival to be found in *Nights at the Circus*. Rosencreutz’s medallion of gold depicting a phallus ‘in the condition known in heraldry as rampant’ is no celebration of lower stratum fertility, but a clear symbol of masculine aggression against women acted out in the name of fertility (p. 70). Fevvers escapes, but she is unique in her ability to simply fly away. A character such as Mignon, for example, does not possess that option. Her terrible experiences at the hands of masculine carnival characters serve as a clearer demonstration of carnival violence against women. Repeatedly and violently sexually abused, Mignon only fully escapes the oppression of the carnival when it is destroyed in a rail crash in the Siberian tundra.

Like all the authors described as magic realist and examined in this thesis, Carter clearly makes use of the fantastic, but she does so cautiously – seeming to draw upon its potential, yet at the same time also indicating the problems associated with it. *Nights at the Circus*, however, is interesting not only for the manner in which Carter undermines

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<sup>75</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 148 (Eagleton’s italic).

<sup>76</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 27.



the fantastic, but for the ways in which the novel's characters are seen to possess agency despite the presence of the fantastic in their lives.<sup>77</sup> Nowhere is this more apparent than in the ways the women in Carter's novel challenge and disturb the 'branding' or objectification of women as discussed in the very opening of this chapter.

Because of her fantastic physiognomy, Fevvers plays first the role of Cupid, then that of Winged Victory, at Ma Nelson's brothel. Fevvers reveals, as Cupid: 'I served my apprenticeship in *being looked at* – at being the object of the eye of the beholder' (p. 23, Carter's italic). In doing so, Fevvers appears to present herself as a passive object of the male gaze. As the 'gilded *sign* of love', she reflects back to the patrons of the brothel an image that seems intended to disguise their exploitation of the prostitutes. As Fevvers matures into a woman, she becomes aware of her ability to return and challenge the authority of the male gaze. The patrons of the brothel are not as disturbed by her fantastic appearance as they are simply by her presence as a woman who draws upon the very human capacity to simply look back and in doing so looks down upon their revels.

Later in the novel, Fevvers joins Madame Schreck's museum of women monsters. Fevvers is again, because of her fantastic form, called upon to act as an object for the male gaze. In Schreck's brothel, the 'branding' of women as objects for male pleasure is more obviously oppressive. There is no attempt to disguise this institution as a house of love. As Fevvers explains, the inhabitants of this brothel are 'prodigies of nature, such as I' (p. 59). They include Fanny Four-Eyes, Sleeping Beauty, the diminutive Wiltshire Wonder, the bipartite and bi-sexed Albert/Albertina and the girl they call Cobwebs. Though these women are chosen and imprisoned for their fantastic appearance, it is as women that they expose masculine insecurity. To contain this potential, and to reassure Schreck's customers, the women are placed within a mock dungeon, complete with rattling chains. The women are each allotted their own pedestal and are curtained off from one another. Even then, the customers of the brothel enter

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<sup>77</sup> In this respect, *Nights at the Circus* differs in emphasis from *Metamorphosis* and *The Tin Drum*, yet is very similar to *The Satanic Verses*. For, without or despite their fantastic potential, both Gregor and Oskar are essentially powerless characters. Saladin, on the other hand, perhaps more closely resembles Fevvers inasmuch as his ultimate salvation or victory, his reconciliation with his father and homeland, occurs after his metamorphosis has been reversed.



the dungeon in disguise, sometimes hooded to shield themselves from gazes that might be returned.

Like Oskar and Saladin, Fevvers is a performer. *Nights at the Circus*, however, is a novel founded upon the very notion of performance. Characters whose livelihood depends upon them displaying themselves populate the text and Fevvers is no exception. Yet, though Lizzie's informs Fevvers that she must 'give pleasure of the eye, or else you're good for nothing' (p. 185), Fevvers' participation in the dynamic of spectator/spectacle is a complicated one. Fevvers not only demonstrates an ability to challenge by simply looking back, but also clearly possesses the ability to turn her gaze upon herself. Just as Carter discusses the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo in terms of a woman 'looking at *herself*, subjecting herself to the most intense scrutiny, almost to an interrogation', so Carter depicts Fevvers as a woman who places herself under a similarly intense scrutiny. *Nights at the Circus* contains a number of descriptions of Fevvers studying her image in the mirror.<sup>78</sup> Emerging from this conflation of spectator and spectacle is an interrogation of her subjectivity as a woman. Carter writes: 'One lash off, one lash on, Fevvers leaned back a little to scan the asymmetric splendour reflected in her mirror with impersonal gratification' (p. 8). As Fevvers strips back the layers of her make-up, she exposes a woman beneath the woman. There is no suggestion, however, that this process of unmasking is a simple one and no suggestion that the face she reveals is any more authentic than the one she discards.<sup>79</sup>

By depicting Fevvers as a woman scrutinising herself, Carter appears to challenge any temptation for the reader to simply accept Fevvers' reflection in the mirror as a true or complete representation of her being as a woman. The image reflected back to Fevvers is that of a fantastic being, yet it is an interrogated image. Through this sort of scrutiny, Fevvers appears to resist the glamour of the fantastic, and in doing so demonstrate an ability completely lacking in her audiences who find themselves utterly enthralled by her fantastic appearance.

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<sup>78</sup> Angela Carter, 'Frida Kahlo', in *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings*, p. 101 (Carter's italic).

<sup>79</sup> In this respect, Carter's exploration of Fevvers' femininity is clearly very different from the manner in which the dominant understanding of magic realism as a form of postcolonial writing is supposed to explore and reveal some sort of pre-colonial cultural authenticity.



Carter is not simply aware of the problems associated with the fantastic, or conscious that her use of it might attract criticism, but does, herself, express serious misgivings about its use, particularly when it is employed to express or define femininity. Carter argues that images of fantastically endowed women, rather than challenge patriarchy, may act to flatter women into submission.<sup>80</sup> This is precisely what Rosencreutz attempts to do to Fevvers, and after celebrating her fantastic qualities he intends to kill her. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter describes the somewhat less bloody, but still dangerous fate that awaits women who choose to describe themselves in such terms. For Carter, locating womanhood in the fantastic realm of the ‘occult priestess’ or that of ‘mother goddesses’, serves little purpose except as a consolatory nonsense.<sup>81</sup> Beyond reason and beyond ‘the real conditions of life’, such a realm, argues Carter, simply reinforces the marginalisation of women.<sup>82</sup> From such a realm, Carter observes:

I am indeed allowed to speak but only of things that male society does not take seriously. I can hint at dreams, I can even personify the imagination; but that is only because I am not rational enough to cope with reality.<sup>83</sup>

Yet, *Nights at the Circus* is a novel that should not be understood in terms of a simple rejection of such images. For Carter, despite her doubts, clearly mobilises such images herself. Lorna Sage argues, however, that in doing so, Carter takes great care to place such images in relation to ‘a real, blow-by-blow life-story, a *history* [for] there is no world but the world’.<sup>84</sup> In a similar vein, Elaine Jordan argues of Carter ‘who is politically committed, if she is not’ and observes that this commitment underpins even her most extravagant use of the fantastic and is clearly in evidence in *Nights at the Circus*.<sup>85</sup>

The readings of Carter’s fictions offered by both Sage and Jordan imply that her fiction may best be understood, not in terms of a simple opposition between the fantastic and

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<sup>80</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p.5.

<sup>81</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p.5.

<sup>82</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p.5.

<sup>83</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p.5.

<sup>84</sup> Lorna Sage, ‘Introduction’, in *Flesh and the Mirror*, p. 13 (Sage’s italic).

<sup>85</sup> Elaine Jordan, ‘Enthralment: Angela Carter’s Speculative Fiction’, in *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, ed. Linda Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), p. 27.



the real, but in terms of a more intimate relationship between the two whereby the fantastic content of a novel such as *Nights at the Circus* remains firmly rooted in the realm of the real and the very pressing political concerns of that realm. Such a view of Carter's fiction, however, seems somewhat at odds with magic realism discussed in terms of a privileged fantastic simply placed in opposition to the real. Such a conception of magic realism, if applied to Carter's writing, moreover, runs the risk of ignoring the complex manner in which Carter makes use of her fantastic characters.

Literary magic realism is occasionally discussed in terms of intimacy between the fantastic and the real.<sup>86</sup> Angel Flores, for example, even as he describes magic realism's assault upon the limitations of the real, argues that magic realists 'cling to reality' to ensure that their works do not 'fly off' into other realms.<sup>87</sup> While P. Gabrielle Foreman makes a similar claim in her discussion of Isabel Allende as a magic realist writer writing about women. Foreman argues of Allende that her writing seeks to establish 'a bridge to a history recoverable in the political realm, a history she will ultimately constitute in her text as distinct from the magical'.<sup>88</sup> Foreman claims that Allende, by remaining in the realm of 'political realities', is able to subvert 'the potential apoliticalism of magic realism'.<sup>89</sup>

Jeanne Delbaere-Garant discusses magic realism in similar terms in relation to British fiction and in doing so links this version of the category to Carter's writing. He refers to John Fowles' observation, that there is a 'problem with magic realism in this country' inasmuch that 'the British will not accept that magic realists can have their cake and eat it – both 'bend' reality *and* be serious'.<sup>90</sup> Delbaere-Garant's contribution to magic realist debate is largely overlooked yet nevertheless significant in terms of this thesis, in that he identifies no such inhibition in Carter's writing. Though Carter clearly makes

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<sup>86</sup> It should be remembered, however, that when this discussion occurs it is usually as a prelude to a privileging of the fantastic and the suggestion that magic realism is fundamentally opposed to and subversive of the real.

<sup>87</sup> Angel Flores, 'Magic realism in Spanish American Fiction', *Hispania*, 38 (1955), p. 191.

<sup>88</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman, 'Past-On Stories', p. 286.

<sup>89</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman, 'Past-On Stories', p. 294.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, 'Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 252 (Delbaere-Garant's italic). He is quoting from an unpublished letter to Delbaere-Garant dated 10 March 1980.



use of the fantastic, he observes that her writing retains its seriousness by ‘heightening the real, rather than doing away with it’.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, while suggesting that the term magic realism might have been invented to describe Carter’s work, Haffenden argues that her ‘gift of outrageous fantastication’ is employed primarily as a means to create worlds ‘which have close designs upon the ways and means of real men and women, and upon the institutions that condition their responses and contests’.<sup>92</sup> Such observations are rare within discussion of the critical value of magic realism. Carter, however, seems to demand that the category be discussed in just such terms; while agreeing that her writing might be described as magic realist, she adds the rider: ‘there’s a materiality to imaginative life and imaginative experience which should be taken quite seriously’.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, despite the presence of the fantastic in a novel such as *Nights at the Circus*, she is keen to point out: ‘I do like to reduce everything to its material base.’<sup>94</sup>

This is, according to Carter, true of all aspects of her use of the fantastic, including her use of myth. Carter claims to be ‘in the demythologising business’.<sup>95</sup> Yet, she does not simply dismiss mythic images of femininity, but mobilises such images in a bid to reveal their material roots. Carter writes: ‘I believe that all myths are the products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice.’<sup>96</sup> Such a view shares much in common with Roland Barthes’ discussion of myth. For Barthes, myth operates in much the same way as language. Like language, it is made up of a signifier and signified. Yet, Barthes argues, what is signified by myth can in no way be considered factual. For an intentional force drives the very process of myth making, motivated by political and cultural imperatives that then seek to conceal themselves by naturalising myth as a form of knowledge of the world. According to Barthes, myth is a ‘semiological system which has the pretension of transcending itself into a factual

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<sup>91</sup> Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, ‘Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism’, p. 261.

<sup>92</sup> John Haffenden, ‘Angela Carter’, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 76.

<sup>93</sup> John Haffenden, ‘Angela Carter’, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 85.

<sup>94</sup> John Haffenden, ‘Angela Carter’, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 92.

<sup>95</sup> Angela Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, p. 71.

<sup>96</sup> Angela Carter, ‘Notes from the Front Line’, p. 71.



system'.<sup>97</sup> It is 'a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things'.<sup>98</sup>

Carter's depiction of Fevvers appears to reveal a similarly sophisticated appreciation of myth. Fevvers is more than aware of what Roland Barthes describes as myth's 'buttonholing character'.<sup>99</sup> She is, moreover, aware that as a mythic figure she often serves material interests other than her own. Despite this, however, Fevvers actively participates in the myth-making process. She is a mythic character largely because throughout her narrative she consistently presents herself in such terms. Yet, it is precisely Carter's awareness of the material foundations and intentional force behind myth that allows her to endow Fevvers with an authority beyond that of a passive mythic character. If the myth-making process does indeed operate like language, and the product of such a process is, like the sign, comprised of signifier and motivated signified, Carter might be seen to exploit such a process to her own ends. Perhaps she presents Fevvers as a mythic figure only to inject into such a figure her own subversive intentional force – creating a new signified or what Barthes describes as a 'second order myth'.<sup>100</sup> If this is so, Carter's actions mirror Barthes' suggestion that: 'Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn and to produce an *artificial* myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology'.<sup>101</sup> Hence, Carter transforms the Winged Victory, traditionally depicted as armless, from a fantastic yet disarmed symbol of victory into an active and engaged:

Perfection of, the original of, the very model for that statue which, in its broken and incomplete state, has teased the imagination of a brace of millennia with its promise of perfect, active beauty that has been, as it were, mutilated by history (p. 37).

Carter presents Fevvers as a character who refuses to be mutilated by history – the myth-producing history described in Barthes' arguments. In one of the novel's many puns, Fevvers takes up the Ma Nelson's gilt ceremonial sword; she arms herself. It is

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<sup>97</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (St. Albans: Granada, 1973), p. 134.

<sup>98</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 110.

<sup>99</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 124.

<sup>100</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 135.

<sup>101</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 135 (Barthes' italic).



not long before business at the brothel starts to decline. As Fevvers points out, ‘a *large woman* with a *sword* is not the best advertisement for a brothel’ (p. 38, Carter’s italic).

The need for the fantastic to remain in close relation to the material realm is perhaps most explicitly indicated through Lizzie. Lizzie, with the help of her bag of magical tricks and Ma Nelson’s clock, assists in the creation of fantastic spaces in which she and Fevvers operate their political will. She is, however, clearly the most pragmatic character within the novel. She does not permit the fantastic to act as a substitute for her politics. She refuses to allow her abilities to remove her from the realm of the real. Even at the end of the novel, when the Shaman appears in awe of her, Lizzie refuses to yield to ‘the temptation to take – just this once, just for the night – a little holiday from rationality and play at being a minor deity’ (p. 293). Lizzie refuses to yield to this temptation because she wishes to maintain clarity of vision. This is a clarity the text shows to be lacking in the Shaman, whose understanding of the world coincides with ‘real reality only inadvertently’ (p. 253). Lizzie is scrupulous in retaining what Susan Bordo describes as the ‘still vital tools for critique’.<sup>102</sup> Lizzie strives to maintain a practical analytical perspective on the world, a perspective she encourages in Fevvers. When Lizzie and Fevvers visit the opera, for example, they do so to watch ‘Marriage of Figaro’ for its class analysis and ‘Carmen’ for its depiction of the ‘spirit of the heroine’ (p. 54). Art is depicted as a means to gain insight into a material world and *Nights at the Circus* and magic realism should be approached in a similar fashion. For as Carter argues: ‘If nobody, including the artist, acknowledges art as a means of *knowing* the world, then art is relegated to a kind of rumpus room of the mind.’<sup>103</sup>

The narrator of *Nights at the Circus* claims that the novel’s narrative does not belong to ‘authentic history’ (p. 97). Yet, Carter clearly provides each of the women characters of her novel not only with a ‘life-story, a *history*’, but also, particularly in the case of Fevvers and Lizzie, an acute awareness that they are the products of a specific historical context. This context may, in no small part, be understood in terms of the historically determined economic circumstances of their class. In her essay, ‘Notes From the Frontline’, Carter describes ‘the sense of limitless freedom that I, as a woman, sometimes feel [...] that of a new kind of being’. Carter explains ‘I simply could not

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<sup>102</sup> Susan Bordo, ‘Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism’, in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. L. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 136.

<sup>103</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 13 (Carter’s italic).



have existed, as I am, in any other preceding time or place. I am the pure product of an advanced, industrialised, post-imperialist country in decline'.<sup>104</sup> Yet, and like so many of the women in *Nights at the Circus*, neither Fevvers nor Lizzie can make such a claim.

In confronting the politics of gender, *Nights at the Circus* examines issues of economic exploitation and class. Carter, indeed, refuses to discuss these as isolated or unrelated issues. *Nights at the Circus* describes a number of spaces where these issues are seen to co-exist and where their relationship to one another is clearly in evidence. These issues cannot, moreover, be separated from the manner in which the women of Carter's novel find themselves the objects of the male gaze.

One such space is Madame Schreck's brothel. The women within Madame Schreck's dungeons are offered up as objects of male sexual fantasies. The power sustained by this objectification is not, however, founded solely upon gender. It is also rooted in class and economics. The patrons of the brothel are all very rich men. They can afford to pay so that they may feel reassured of the power they represent. The prostitutes are not only women, but are poor women who find themselves incarcerated because of their poverty. In this respect, Fevvers is no different from the rest. Like them, she finds herself being exploited.

Overseeing this exploitation is the character of Madame Schreck. Her status as woman appears secondary to her status as an agent of class exploitation. She imprisons the women. She 'owns' them and rents out their use to those who can afford her prices. She benefits from their labour. She provides just enough food and shelter to keep them operating at an efficient level, but the women do not control either the manner in which their labour is employed, nor the wealth generated from it. In a Marxist sense, the women of the dungeon have undergone a process of reification. Bereft of their full humanity, they are caught up in an economy over which they have no control. They are exploited because they are women, but are vulnerable to exploitation, in the first place, because of a class structure, supported by a capitalist system, that requires exploitation for its continued existence. The exploitation of Schreck's brothel is intolerable to Fevvers. She revolts by hanging Schreck from her own curtain rail. The system that

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<sup>104</sup> Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', p. 73.



supports the exploitation of the women is overthrown. Schreck's corpse reveals the true poverty of the system she was such a loyal servant to. Toussaint, who finds the body, writes: 'it came to me that there was *nothing left* inside the clothes and, perhaps, there never had been anything inside her clothes but a set of dry bones agitated only by the power of an infernal will' (p. 84, Carter's italic).

If *Nights at the Circus* does not represent authentic history, it is simply because characters such as Fevvers and Lizzie refuses to accept the authenticity of a history founded upon exploitation and suffering. Fevvers and Lizzie wish to shape history not be shaped by it. Unlike Oskar, and despite their fantastic abilities, both characters actively engage with the world around them. As members of an international revolutionary movement, they refuse to adopt passive roles, refuse to be 'forged on the anvil of history' (p. 240). They are presented as alternatives to the character of the poor Russian baboushka. The baboushka is a character broken by her economic and social conditions. She submissively prays for a respite, one that she believes impossible. Fevvers and Lizzie represent a more active response to this historical context. Lizzie declares: 'the anvil itself must be changed' (p. 240).

So, *Nights at the Circus* may be understood in terms of a less oppositional relationship between the fantastic and the real. Carter takes care to ensure that Fevvers and Lizzie, and their fantastic abilities, are placed in direct relation to the material conditions that underpin their oppression as women and as a consequence are in a position to challenge those conditions. Carter's emphasis upon the materialism of her writing and the manner in which she depicts in detail the social and economic circumstances of her characters not only indicates an intimacy between the fantastic and the real, but also the presence of a formal intimacy between the fantastic and realism in magic realism. Michael, for example, argues of *Nights at the Circus* that it represents a weaving together of elements of the 'fantastic with those of harsh material realism', and that this weaving together of supposed opposites serves as 'as a means of securing her novel's feminist political edge'.<sup>105</sup> In effect, Michael seems to be arguing that Carter's depiction of the material realm in *Nights at the Circus* equates to a form of realism that can be seen to be operating alongside and grounding the 'extraordinary and fantastic elements' of her novel.<sup>106</sup> In this fashion, *Nights at the Circus* clearly requires an understanding of magic

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<sup>105</sup> Magali Cornier Michael, 'Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*', pp. 492, 493.

<sup>106</sup> Magali Cornier Michael, 'Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*', p. 493.



realism as a critical category that might describe a similar degree of intimacy between a text's fantastic and realist elements. Such an understanding of the term is, moreover, fleetingly applied to *Nights at the Circus* by Palmer when she describes Carter's writing in terms of an 'intermingling of fantasy and realism, known as "magic realism", which is Carter's favourite mode'.<sup>107</sup> Yet, for Carter, her writing is not so much comprised of elements of the fantastic alongside realism, but is in itself a form of realism.<sup>108</sup>

To read *Nights at the Circus* as a realist text, however, requires both a rather fluid conception of the term and a more complicated conception of magic realism. Guido Almansi, for example, describes Carter's novels as works of 'visionary realism'. This is a realism which, according to Almansi, evokes the reality of sensual experience, that of 'smells and tastes and colours', but as they might be experienced 'in a dream'.<sup>109</sup> This is a realism that seeks to describe the reality of even the most personal of experiences, where even dreams might be regarded as real as the physical world. Such a conception of realism, moreover, bears a striking resemblance to the "'subjective" form of realism' described by Rita Felski as a significant characteristic of much feminist writing.<sup>110</sup> This too is a realism of experience, not necessarily bound to describe only the physical or social world, but also the individual subjective experience of the world and may also 'incorporate the depiction of dreams, fantasies, flights of the imagination as part of its conception of the real'.<sup>111</sup> Although Felski does not say so explicitly, such an experience might also involve an imaginative remoulding of the world.

Magic realist works may be discussed in comparable terms – as works that treat reality as the product of subjective experience. Cynthia Duncan, for example, suggests that a defining characteristic of Latin American magic realism is the manner in which it explores the multitude of responses generated by the sheer physical landscape, cultures, and beliefs of the Latin American continent. Duncan argues that through magic realism

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<sup>107</sup> Paulina Palmer, 'From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman', p. 182.

<sup>108</sup> It should be noted that far fewer critics discuss Carter's writing in relation to realist debates than is the case for either Kafka or Grass. It is, however, important for an understanding of her magic realism that Carter's writing be examined in relation to such debates.

<sup>109</sup> Guido Almansi, 'In the Alchemist's Cave: Radio Plays', in *Flesh and the Mirror*, p. 217.

<sup>110</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 82.

<sup>111</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 82.



‘we are reminded that the very concept of reality is a relative one which varies greatly according to one’s point of view’.<sup>112</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, in his discussion of the Latin American ‘Boom’ writers, presents a similar but perhaps more specifically literary view of magic realism. Llosa argues:

The conception of reality is more ample so far as the new authors are concerned, in as much as it embraces not only what men do, but also what they dream and invent. All themes are real if the novelist is capable of giving them life, and all are unreal, even those relating to the most trivial human experience, if the writer lacks the power of persuasion.<sup>113</sup>

Though with somewhat less frequency, critics also offer such an understanding of magic realism while at the same time indicating a relationship between it and realism. Amaryll Chanady, for example, discusses Julio Cortázar’s *62: A model Kit* (1962) as a magic realist work and argues that in this novel ‘reality is not an empirical given but a constantly changing “constellation” or group of figures that is the product of the individual imagination’.<sup>114</sup> Yet Chanady also argues that magic realism cannot be seen simply as an ‘indictment of traditional forms of mimesis’, and that ‘magic realism does not occupy a distinct area of literary production separate from that of mimetic writing’.<sup>115</sup> Chanady’s conception of magic realism is particularly useful in relation to this thesis. Although she does not claim to do so explicitly, Chanady also appears to suggest that magic realism might be identified with a more complicated conception of realism – one endowed with the capacity to depict multiple and alternative realities through the introduction of ‘poesis into mimesis’.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Cynthia Duncan, *The Fantastic and Magic Realism in the Contemporary Mexican Short Story as a Reflection of “Lo Mexicana”*, p. 539.

<sup>113</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, ‘Primitives and Creators’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 67 (14 November 1968), p. 1288.

<sup>114</sup> Amaryll Chanady, ‘The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 139.

<sup>115</sup> Amaryll Chanady, ‘The Territorialization of the Imaginary’, p. 130.

<sup>116</sup> Amaryll Chanady, ‘The Territorialization of the Imaginary’, p. 130.



Franz Roh is more forthcoming in linking magic realism to such a conception of realism. For Roh, magic realism is a ‘New Realism’.<sup>117</sup> Yet, the number of artists identified as magic realists, and the sheer volume of their works, clearly indicate the flexibility of these terms for Roh. Despite Roh’s assertion that such artists are concerned first and foremost with reality, the manner in which they may seek to treat this realm reveals an underlying subjectivity. Roh illustrates this by describing a magic realist response to even the most mundane physical object in terms of an ‘extremely complex sensation’ comprised of a ‘much wider amalgam of colors, spatial forms, tactile representations, memories of smells and tastes; in short, a truly unending complex that we understand by the name of *thing*’.<sup>118</sup> Magic realism, for Roh, is a realism that does not halt at the surface of the object, but seeks to incorporate into the act of representation a subjective response to it. It is through such a response, argues Roh, that the magic realist ‘can generate new views of reality’.<sup>119</sup>

For her part, Carter not only acknowledges that *Nights at the Circus* may be referred to as a magic realist work, but also describes her novel in terms of a similarly fluid conception of realism. She describes *Nights at the Circus* as ‘social realism of the unconscious’, indicating that though she considers it to be realist, realism need not always be understood in relation to a singular observable physical realm.<sup>120</sup> It may, however, depict other possible realities. Perhaps it was in this respect that Carter considered herself a realist – seeking to depict the world as it might be. Elaine Jordan offers such a view when she argues that ‘Carter’s stories do not replace realistic experience with literary fantasy, but offer other scenes, other imaginations of what could be made real’.<sup>121</sup>

Although Carter provides no simple solutions to the political issues her texts engage with, her work is not without hope. Her last two novels, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* (1991), in particular, both possess endings that suggest a potentially hopeful future based not upon conflict, but the creation of something new. Carter’s last novel,

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<sup>117</sup> Franz Roh, ‘Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism’, trans. Wendy B. Faris, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 19.

<sup>118</sup> Franz Roh, ‘Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism’, p. 19 (Roh’s italic).

<sup>119</sup> Franz Roh, ‘Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism’, p. 25.

<sup>120</sup> Amanda Smith, ‘Angela Carter: An Interview’, p. 74.

<sup>121</sup> Elaine Jordan, ‘Enthralment: Angela Carter’s Speculative Fiction’, p. 29.



*Wise Children*, is a novel that appears to be founded upon the notion of oppositions. It depicts a family divided along lines of legitimacy and illegitimacy. The celebrated theatrical Hazard family, presided over by the patriarchal twins Melchior and Perry Hazard, represent legitimacy. The music hall performing twins, Dora and Nora Chance, represent illegitimacy. The novel examines a Britain obsessed with the distinctions between high and low, both in terms of class and culture. It examines a host of binary oppositions, and reveals how they are employed to mitigate oppression and exclusion, not least along gender lines. Yet, out of this family of conflicting twins there emerges a new dynamic. A new set of twins is born, but, as Dora points out, they ‘were boy and girl, a new thing in our family’.<sup>122</sup> The novel ends with Dora and Nora drunk in charge of the pram, celebrating the potential break down of sexual division, previously so much a feature of their family, represented by the birth of the twins.

*Nights at the Circus* ends in a similarly exuberant fashion, but not before Walser demonstrates the extent to which his experiences have served to reshape him. The novel ends with two versions of Walser’s story. In the first version Walser exhibits all the confidence and agency associated with his role as journalist. He first states quite categorically his name and status. He then proceeds to recount his tale, placing himself as central protagonist of the novel. To conclude this version of events he presents Fevvers as his wife, as: ‘Mrs Sophie Walser, who formally had a successful career on the music-hall stage under the name of –’ (pp. 293-294). Just as he is about to conclude this version, however, the new century is born. The old Walser, and with him the values he represented, dies and the new Walser is born. Walser presents us with another version of the novel. He describes himself as a child running away to the circus. He describes Fevvers as a woman who dominates his life. This Walser does not present a form of masculinity founded upon the fantasy of male reason and agency, but reveals himself to be vulnerable. He exposes the paucity of his former self, and mourns the manner in which it alienated him from his own experience as experience. Walser tells us: ‘I watched it but did not live it. And now, hatched out of the shell of unknowing by a combination of a blow on the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy, I shall have to start all over again’ (p. 294).

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<sup>122</sup> Angela Carter, *Wise Children* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 227.



The novel ends with Fevvers' laughter rolling out beyond the confines of their bedroom, spreading its effects across Russia until it eventually encompasses the globe. Fevvers' status as 'feathered intacta' is revealed as nothing more than a confidence trick. The last line of the novel reads: "'To think I really fooled you!" she marvelled. "It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence"' (p. 295). Fevvers is not only laughing at the joke, but revels in a confidence that empowers her to enact change. As Carter observes, moreover, the ending of the text does not so much seek to expose Fevvers' fictionality, her ability to fool the world, 'but makes you start inventing other fictions, things that might have happened – as though the people were really real, with real lives.'<sup>123</sup>

Carter's magic realism should be understood in similar terms. By describing herself as a magic realist writer, Carter clearly demonstrated a sophisticated appreciation of its value as a complex critical category able to encompass the range of debates generated by her writing and engagement with feminist thought. Carter's magic realism, as a form of realism that also makes rather ambiguous use of the fantastic, represents a literature of reference and invention; one that not only engages with the material realm of the real, but one that also offers alternative visions of the real.

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<sup>123</sup> John Haffenden, 'Angela Carter', *Novelists in Interview*, p. 91.



## Chapter Four

### Postcolonial Debate and Magic Realism in

#### Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*

#### The Fantastic Potential of the Other

In his essay 'In Good Faith', Rushdie claims that in writing *The Satanic Verses* he did not 'conspire against Islam; or write – after years and years of anti-racist work and writing – a text of incitement to racial hatred; or anything of the sort'.<sup>1</sup> Never before, however, has the publication of a novel resulted in such vehement academic debate, political manoeuvring, religious debate and terrible acts of violence. Indeed, 'The Rushdie Affair', as it is now called, seems a rather inadequate description of the extreme range of reactions to Rushdie's novel. Though over a decade has passed since its publication, as Catherine Cundy observes, *The Satanic Verses*, retains its reputation as 'a byword for trouble, trouble within and between cultures, religions, different sections of society'.<sup>2</sup>

This sort of 'trouble' was not exactly new to Rushdie. Controversy also surrounded the publication of his earlier novels. Rushdie's depiction of Indira Gandhi in *Midnight's Children*, for example, as a witch-like figure responsible for false imprisonments, violent acts of slum clearance and programs of compulsory castration, resulted in a successful libel action against Rushdie. Rushdie was forced to make a public apology to Indira Gandhi. Perhaps more important than the ruling, however, was that Gandhi's accusation of libel reached the law courts at all. Such legal action suggests that an author can, and on occasion will be held responsible for the work they produce.<sup>3</sup> The issue of authorial responsibility, moreover, lies at the very heart of the controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses*. If this chapter is to argue the value of applying the term magic realism to *The Satanic Verses* in relation to postcolonial debate, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 410.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Cundy, *Salman Rushdie: Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller account of this action, see: Katherine Frank, 'Mr Rushdie and Mrs Gandhi', *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 19.3 (1996).



important that space be allocated to the charges of Orientalism and in more extreme instances blasphemy that have been levelled against it.

The very title of the novel is a source of potential offence to Muslims. As Marlena G. Corcoran point out, ‘the willingness of devout Muslims to condemn a book of which they have only read the title is easier to understand if one realizes that the novel is itself named after a banned text’.<sup>4</sup> Corcoran is referring to an incident described by a ninth-century historian who alleged that certain verses were removed from the Qur’an because of their satanic origins. According to Islamic belief, Mohammed received the verses of the Qur’an from God through the angel Gabriel. The satanic verses, however, are said to have originated from the devil seeking to undermine Muslim monotheism by suggesting accommodation for three ancient Arab goddesses so they might serve as intermediaries between man and God.<sup>5</sup> In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie seems to suggest that that such an accommodation was also driven by a financial imperative, to ensure that the revenues of the established pagan temples would not be lost.

Rushdie appears to cast into doubt the divine origins of the holy text. The role of Gabriel, God’s messenger to Mohammed, is taken by the dreaming central character of Gibreel Farishta, a twentieth century human actor. Gibreel declares: ‘*Mahound comes to me for revelation, asking me for revelation, asking me to choose between monotheist and henotheist alternatives, and I’m just some idiot actor having a bhaenchud nightmare, what the fuck do I know, yaar, what to tell you, help. Help.*’<sup>6</sup> Gibreel’s is not, moreover, the only voice at work in this chapter of the novel. There is also the voice of Satan himself, intruding and thereby exposing himself as narrator of the novel. The reader is unsure who is speaking the words of revelation, is it Gibreel in a dream or is Satan directing the actor?

In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie depicts the Prophet’s doubts concerning the validity of the satanic verses and the place they allow for the goddesses. The Prophet returns for fresh guidance and wrestles a new set of verses from the angel, a recitation that now

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<sup>4</sup> Marlena G. Corcoran, ‘Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Narration’, *The Iowa Review*, 20.1 (1990), p. 156.

<sup>5</sup> See: A. G. Mojtabai, ‘Magical Mystery Pilgrimage: *The Satanic Verses*’, *New York Times Book Review*, 95.5 (1989), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, (Delaware: The Consortium, 1992), p. 109 (Rushdie’s italic). Further references are given after quotations in the text.



denies any place for the goddesses. So, it is not simply reference to the censorship of the satanic verses that may cause offence. Nor is it the doubt as to whose voice is revealing the verses to the Prophet, Satan or the actor Gibreel. Perhaps the most fundamental source of offence is the suggestion that the Prophet received his revelation by wrestling for it – that through a contest of wills the prophet is seen to manipulate the divine voice of revelation. This voice tells us that the Prophet ‘started weeping for joy and then he did his old trick, forcing my mouth open and making the voice, the Voice, pour out of me once again, made it pour all over him, like sick’ (p. 123). This suggestion strikes at the very core of Muslim belief that the source of every word in the Qur’an is God himself, not Mohammed.

Much of the subsequent debate surrounding Rushdie and his novel has focused upon issues of blasphemy. A particular cause for protest has centred upon the protection against blasphemy afforded by British law to the Christian faith, yet denied to other religions. In 1976, for example, successful action was taken against the magazine *Gay News* for publishing a poem depicting Christ within a homosexual context. Recourse to similar legal action, however, is denied those of Muslim faith. Calls to extend the blasphemy laws have so far been unsuccessful.

Rushdie also offends by choosing to name the character of the Prophet Mahound. Though this might simply be regarded as an archaic name for Mohammed, Amin Malak argues that ‘the choice of this name is anything but innocent [...] “Mahound” signifies, especially for Western medievalists, four meanings, all offensive: “false prophet”; “a false god”; “a hideous creature”; and “a name for the devil”’.<sup>7</sup> Rushdie’s depiction of the character Mahound as a manipulative and opportunist businessman serves only to compound the sense of outrage.

Rushdie’s irreverence is also directed at the wives of the prophet. He names the prostitutes of Jahilia’s most popular brothel after the prophet’s wives. Such an act may, as Malak observes, be regarded as a direct attack upon those women who are known to Muslims as ‘Mothers of the believers’. That the brothel should also be called the Curtain or ‘Hijab’, also meaning ‘veil’ in Arabic, signals for Malak the suggestion that

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<sup>7</sup> Amin Malak, ‘Reading the Crisis: The Polemics of Salman Rushdie’s “The Satanic Verses”’, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 20.4 (1989), pp. 177-178.



Muslim men regard their wives as little more than prostitutes.<sup>8</sup> Malak argues, ‘believers would legitimately consider such a wantonly contrived episode as the most vicious of Rushdie’s offences. To them Rushdie’s blend of blasphemy with quasi-pornography tastelessly verges on the obscene’.<sup>9</sup>

A full five months passed, however, before Rushdie’s perceived attack upon Islam gained the attention of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the government of Iran. Perhaps it was Rushdie’s depiction of an imam, a Muslim religious leader regarded by his followers as divinely inspired, in exile in London, that attracted the attention of the Iranian establishment. This figure appears in the chapter entitled ‘Ayesha’. The Imam waits and prepares for his confrontation with the corrupt Empress Ayesha who has forced him into exile from his homeland. Such a figure might be taken to represent Khomeini himself. Khomeini also spent time in exile before returning to power following the overthrow of the Shah of Iran. As Feroza Jussawalla observes, Rushdie refers to the character of the Imam as ‘the great Haramzada in person’. Jussawalla explains that to a Western academic the word Haramzada itself may seem harmless, for ‘*haram* may simply mean “canonically forbidden” or even worse may simply be confused with *haram*, the hallowed area around the monuments of Mecca. Only the Indian audience knows the full import of the abuse. In richshawallah parlance it simply means “bastard”’.<sup>10</sup> If this character is, indeed, intended to refer to Khomeini, then Rushdie’s novel takes on a prescient quality when his imam thunders the words ‘apostate, blasphemmer, fraud’ (p. 209) – the very accusations Khomeini was to level against Rushdie, soon followed by the issuing of the fatwa against Rushdie’s life on 14 February 1989.

The American novelist Ralph Ellison responded to the issuing of the fatwa by observing that ‘a death sentence is a rather harsh review’.<sup>11</sup> Many authors rallied to Rushdie’s defence. Hanif Kureishi, for example, declared himself ‘shocked and ashamed by what

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<sup>8</sup> Amin Malak, ‘Reading the Crisis’, p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> Amin Malak, ‘Reading the Crisis’, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> Feroza Jussawallah, ‘Resurrecting the Prophet: The Case of Salman, the Otherwise’, *Public Culture*, 2.1 (1989), p. 107 (Jussawallah’s italic).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Susan Sontag in her testimony before the Subcommittee on International Terrorism, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 March 1989. An extract from this testimony is contained in *The Rushdie File*, eds Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (London: Fourth Estate, 1989), p.167.



my fellow Muslims were saying'.<sup>12</sup> On 15 February 1989, the playwright Harold Pinter, supported by a group of writers, literary agents and publishers delivered a letter of protest to Margaret Thatcher. Pinter demanded that the government 'should confront Iran with the consequences of its statement and remind the Islamic community that it cannot incite people to murder'.<sup>13</sup> In America, organisations such as Article 19, PEN (a world-wide association of writers) and the Author's Guild arranged public readings of *The Satanic Verses* and voiced their protest against the fatwa outside the Iranian Mission to the United States. They also staged a number of demonstrations outside selected bookshops that had chosen to remove copies of the novel from their shelves. On 1 March 1989, a statement of support for Rushdie, containing the names of thousands of literary figures, was released to the press. One week later, Susan Sontag, on behalf of the 2, 200 members of PEN American Centre, testified before the Subcommittee on International Terrorism, Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In this testimony, Sontag urged the Senate, and the President of the United States, to take firm action against Iran. Sontag argued that 'the matter of Salman Rushdie has made him the world's best known endangered writer, but he is far from the only one. In all too many parts of the world, to take up one's pen is to risk violence'.<sup>14</sup>

Some important members of the literary establishment, however, responded very differently to the fatwa. Auberon Waugh, for example, asked 'just how much we should exert ourselves, as deeply stained white imperialists, to protect him from his own people'.<sup>15</sup> In a letter to *The Times*, Roald Dahl described *The Satanic Verses* as an indifferent book and Rushdie himself as 'a dangerous opportunist'.<sup>16</sup> Germaine Greer attributed Rushdie's predicament to his own megalomania and said 'I refuse to sign petitions for that book of his, which was about his own troubles'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Madhu Jain, 'Salman Rushdie: Satanic Storm', *India Today*, 14.5 (1989), p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Peter Murtagh, 'Writers Rally to Rushdie as Publishers Rethink', *The Guardian*, 16 February 1989, p. 2. It should be noted that the religious leadership of British Muslims expressed strong opposition to any attempt to murder Rushdie. Dr Mughram Ali Al-Ghamdi, chairman of UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs stated 'we do intend to fully abide by the law. We are not above the law. We do not condone violence of any kind by anyone under any pretext.' Quoted in *The Rushdie File*, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *The Rushdie File*, p. 168.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Wheatcroft, 'Foreign Affairs: The Friends of Salman Rushdie', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 273.3 (1994), p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Roald Dahl, 'Letter', *The Times*, 28 February 1989, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Wheatcroft, 'Foreign Affairs', p. 27.



According to Kazuo Ishiguro, much of the criticism Rushdie received from his peers was rooted in feelings that pre-dated the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. This resentment, Ishiguro suggests, emerged from Rushdie's growing status as a public personality combined with the perception of Rushdie as a sort of unofficial spokesman for the Third World. Ishiguro says of Rushdie:

He appeared on television and gave his views on this and that. English people like to meet in little societies on Sunday afternoons and discuss the merits of G.K. Chesterton [...] thus the literary and cultural backlash, the attacks on his personality disguised as attacks on his book.<sup>18</sup>

Before the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie had taken advantage of his position as a prominent literary figure to engage with a host of political and social issues ranging from the partition of India and its ethnic communalism to the politics of Thatcherism and racial oppression in Britain. Rushdie, indeed, had been an important figure in anti-racist debates, often making use of his high media profile to champion the causes of ethnic minorities abroad and in Britain. Following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, however, Rushdie's ability to pass political commentary on such issues appeared seriously compromised. Michael Dummett, for example, declared 'you were a hero among members of the Ethnic minorities [...] you can never again credibly assume the stance of denouncer of white prejudice. For now you are one of us. You have become an honorary white'.<sup>19</sup> Edward Said seemed to adopt a similar position when he asked:

Why must a Moslem, who could be defending and sympathetically interpreting us, now represent us so roughly, so expertly and so disrespectfully to an audience already primed to excoriate our traditions, reality, history, religion, language, and origin? Why, in other words, must a member of our culture join the legions of Orientalists in Orientalizing Islam so radically and unfairly?<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Madhu Jain, 'Salman Rushdie: Satanic Storm', p.20.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Wheatcroft, 'Foreign Affairs', p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, 'Rushdie and the Whale', *The Observer*, 14 February 1989, p. 14.



By using the term ‘Orientalizing’, Said is referring to a process he describes elsewhere as a means of ‘dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it’.<sup>21</sup> In short, Orientalism is a descriptive project that not only assumes a fundamental difference between the East as ‘Oriental’ and the West as ‘Occidental’, but also from such an assumption there emerges ‘a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’.<sup>22</sup> Said’s description of Rushdie in relation to such a process, moreover, appears reminiscent of his earlier comments on V. S. Naipaul, a writer whom he accused of allowing ‘himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution and by doing so denied himself the capacity to operate within Third World literary discourses’.<sup>23</sup>

Said’s observation that *The Satanic Verses* might be regarded as an example of Orientalism clearly complicates any discussion of it as a magic realist work in relation to postcolonial debate. For it appears to place Rushdie’s novel firmly at odds with the claims made by Carpentier, Flores, Allende and, indeed, Rushdie himself that magic realist works might usefully and positively engage with colonial and postcolonial experience.<sup>24</sup> For many critics, however, *The Satanic Verses* is a magic realist novel that sets out to do just this. The very criticism directed against *The Satanic Verses*, moreover, may unwittingly indicate the manner in which a magic realist text may make such engagement. Rushdie is careful to point out that much of the thematic content that causes offence in the novel actually occurs during a fantastic dream sequence of one of its characters.<sup>25</sup> Yet, many of those who attack *The Satanic Verses* do so by responding to the novel’s imaginary or fantastic elements as if they referred to real political or historical contexts – in effect, they transgress the distinction between the real and the fantastic. In doing so, they reveal the potential of the fantastic to disturb the real that for the majority of critics is the central and defining characteristic of magic realism itself. As the previous chapters of this thesis have illustrated, it is through such transgression that magic realist works often appear to challenge institutions and practices that might otherwise remain undisturbed. Reading *The Satanic Verses* as a magic realist novel in terms of such transgression may allow for a re-reading of the novel’s thematic concerns

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<sup>21</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Said, ‘Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World’, *Salmagundi*, 70/71 (1986), p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist’, in *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘In Good Faith’, p. 398.



– a re-reading that may in fact counter many of the accusations levelled against both Rushdie and his novel.

A number of critics do indeed discuss *The Satanic Verses* as a magic realist novel in terms of the disturbing potential of the fantastic. Rawdon Wilson, for example, discusses magic realism and *The Satanic Verses* in terms of ‘antinomies between natural and supernatural, explicable and inexplicable’.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Steven F. Walker argues that the novel’s magic realism may be understood in terms of an ‘inspiredly absurd supernaturalism’.<sup>27</sup> Both critics suggest that the manner in which the fantastic elements of *The Satanic Verses* function is key both to an understanding of the novel as a magic realist work and the manner in which it usefully and positively engages with colonial and postcolonial experience. For Wilson, *The Satanic Verses* is a novel that mobilises the fantastic as it explores ‘the abrupt entrance of postcolonial subjects into the former imperial center’.<sup>28</sup> Walker suggests that in doing so, the novel examines ‘the power of racist definitions of the Other, as experienced by the Third World immigrant community in the United Kingdom’.<sup>29</sup> Such critics clearly offer a more positive reading of *The Satanic Verses*, as a magic realist novel that through the fantastic directly challenges the Orientalism that Rushdie is elsewhere accused of.

Magic realism is a critical category that has migrated across artistic, theoretical and geographical boundaries. It is also a term closely associated with transformation. Not only does the term continue to transform as critics offer different definitions, but as Wendy B. Faris observes, transformation itself is a common theme in magic realist works.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, all the novels explored in this thesis contain fantastically transformed central characters that appear to reveal and represent resistance to oppression. In this respect *The Satanic Verses* is no different. In this novel, however, Rushdie combines

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<sup>26</sup> Rawdon Wilson, ‘The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 223.

<sup>27</sup> Steven F. Walker, ‘Magical Archetypes: Midlife Miracles in *The Satanic Verses*’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 347.

<sup>28</sup> Rawdon Wilson, ‘The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space’, p. 221.

<sup>29</sup> Steven F. Walker, ‘Magical Archetypes’, p. 351.

<sup>30</sup> Wendy B. Faris, ‘Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 178.



both migration and transformation. The fantastic transformations experienced by the characters of the novel are intimately linked to their status as migrants.

The two central characters of *The Satanic Verses* make a rather ‘abrupt entrance’ into the heart of former colonial power. The novel opens with Gibreel and Saladin Chamcha falling ‘from a great height, twenty-nine thousand and two feet, towards the English Channel, without benefit of parachutes or wings, out of clear sky’ (p. 3). Gibreel and Saladin are the only survivors of a mid-air explosion caused by a terrorist suicide-bomber. In what is described as ‘an ‘angelicdevilish fall’, Gibreel and Saladin fall helplessly from their aircraft, the ‘Bostan’, to what seems like certain death (p. 5). It is an interesting coincidence that a novel so instrumental in its author’s fall from grace should itself open with a similar fall. As the narrator of *The Satanic Verses* observes, ‘the 747 was named after one of the gardens of Paradise’ (p. 31).

As they fall, Gibreel and Saladin begin rather dramatic transformations. Gibreel starts his metamorphosis into the rather un-angelic angel Gabriel, while Saladin begins the more immediately obvious change into a devil-like figure. Yet, rather than view such characters as indicators of his Orientalism, Rushdie claims that his use of the fantastic should be understood in terms of a response to the very authority to describe assumed by Orientalism. Rushdie describes such depictions as a way of ‘turning insults into strengths’.<sup>31</sup> Rushdie points to the act of reclaiming the power of description from one’s opponents as an important stage in freeing oneself from oppression – unless one wishes to ‘succumb to the pictures they construct’.<sup>32</sup> Rushdie argues:

The very title, *The Satanic Verses*, is an aspect of this attempt at reclamation. You call us devils? it seems to ask. Very well, then, here is the devil’s version of the world, of ‘your’ world, the version written *from the experience* of those who have been demonized by virtue of their otherness. Just as the Asian kids in the novel wear toy devil-horns proudly, as an assertion of pride in identity, so the novel proudly wears its demonic title. The purpose is not to suggest that the Qur’an is written by the devil; it is to attempt the sort of affirmation that, in the

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<sup>31</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘In Good Faith’, p. 402.

<sup>32</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘In Good Faith’, p. 402.



United States, transformed the word *black* from the standard term of racist abuse into a ‘beautiful’ expression of cultural pride.<sup>33</sup>

The image of the alien and demonic Other is, Rushdie claims, an image repeatedly exposed and ‘reclaimed’ throughout *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie seeks to draw our attention to the persisting efficacy of images of Asia and the Asian in terms of otherness, and how these images retain the power to persecute long after the collapse of Britain’s colonial authority. Rushdie argues that ‘the point about stereotypes is that, in spite of their banality, in spite of their seemingly evident wrongness, they work. They have effects. They are at work in Britain today’.<sup>34</sup>

Saladin experiences this power soon after ‘landing’ in Britain. Saladin is shocked by the impossible yet undeniable fact of his continued existence after falling from a height equal to that of Everest. Events soon take on a dark aspect when he is arrested as an illegal immigrant. The police officers refuse to believe his status as a British citizen. Saladin, moreover, appears to justify their brutal treatment of him when he attempts to demonstrate complicity with the prejudice the police represent in this scene. Saladin pleads: ‘There’s been some mistake [...] I’m not one of your fishing-boat sneakers-in, not one of your Uganda-Kenyattas, me’ (p. 140). Saladin despairingly offers his theatrical career and his role as Maxim Alien in a popular television series as proof of his claim. Yet, for the police, Saladin is an alien in a very real sense. Their prejudices form a template violently pressed upon Saladin. Saladin raises his hands to his head, as if to surrender, and is struck by a realisation as terrible as that experienced by Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis*. Just as Gregor emerges from uneasy dreams into the waking nightmare of his transformation into a gigantic insect, so Saladin discovers ‘that he had woken into the most fearsome of nightmares, a nightmare that had only just begun, because there at his temples, growing longer by the moment, and sharp enough to draw blood, were two new, goatly, unarguable horns’ (p. 141).

Saladin suffers a brutal, violent and degrading attack at the hands of the police.<sup>35</sup> As the violence and insults gather pace, so too does Saladin’s metamorphosis. The resultant

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<sup>33</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘In Good Faith’, p. 403 (Rushdie’s italic).

<sup>34</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘Home Front’, in *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 146.

<sup>35</sup> All the novels examined in this thesis present authority in terms of violence. Gregor suffers at the hands of his father as head of the household. Oskar encounters the brutality of an education system in service to



bestial image of the Other becomes all the ‘proof’ they need of his ‘guilt’. Even when Saladin’s identity as a British citizen is established, it is not enough to reverse the process. He is, after all, still alien; the colonial image of the native as Other retains its power in the postcolonial world. After being attacked, Saladin is taken to a medical facility at a detention centre. There he discovers his experience is not an isolated one. The hospital is full of similarly metamorphosed humans, part tiger, part water buffalo, and part snake. Saladin needs to know how this could happen and is told ‘they describe us, [...] that’s all. They have the power of description and we succumb to the pictures they construct’ (p. 168). As Michael Wood observes in his review of *The Satanic Verses*, ‘this is how Britannia still nervously rules’.<sup>36</sup>

Saladin does, indeed, succumb to the image of himself as a devil. Yet, perhaps this need not be seen in terms of the Orientalism Rushdie has been accused of. Perhaps Rushdie’s depiction of Saladin as a monster is not so much the act of a ‘witness for the Western prosecution’, as it is an attempt to draw attention to what might be a symptomatic aspect of the defence mechanism of postcolonial subjectivity. Such is the view of Ashis Nandy in her work *The Intimate Enemy* where she describes the psychic division of ‘self’ and ‘not self’ that can occur as a result of the colonial experience. Others define Saladin’s Indianness. Following Nandy’s argument, Saladin might appear as Other even to himself in an effort to ‘disaffiliate the violence and the humiliation he suffers from the essential constituent of his self’.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, Saladin’s world becomes ‘partly dream-like or unreal’.<sup>38</sup>

From such a perspective, *The Satanic Verses* appears to expose the consequences of othering; Rushdie’s depiction of magical transformations reveals an Orientalism still in force today. Seeking to expose processes of othering, however, represents only the first step towards a more clearly oppositional stance in his writing. In a more aggressive manner, Rushdie claims to employ the imaginative potential of the fantastic as a means for freeing oneself from oppressive imperial practices. Rushdie argues:

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National Socialist ideals. Fevvers’ experiences leave her acutely aware of the violence and exploitation underpinning patriarchy.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Wood, ‘The Prophet Motive: The Satanic Verses by Salman Rushdie’, *The New Republic*, 6 March 1989, p. 29.

<sup>37</sup> It would be interesting to apply a similar reading to Gregor within the context of family.

<sup>38</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: OUP, 1983), p. 109.



This idea – the opposition of imagination to reality, which is of course the opposition of art to politics – is of great importance, because it reminds us that we are not helpless; that to dream is to have power [...] unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may be subsequently reconstructed.<sup>39</sup>

Rushdie's comment touches upon the dominant position held by critics who discuss magic realism as postcolonial literature – that of the potential for fantasy to oppose imperial authority. Helen Tiffin, for example, argues that the project of decolonisation, a feature of so much magic realism, is necessarily oppositional since it represents a 'dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between European or British discourses and their post-colonial dis/mantling'.<sup>40</sup> Tiffin, by referring to the critical works of J. Michael Dash and Stephen Slemon, goes on to position magic realism's use of allegory and fantastic or magical transformations as an important means for such counter-discursiveness. Stanley E. Mullin, in his essay 'Magic Realism as Hinterland experience', offers a similar argument when he suggests that it is through the fantastic, the uncanny, and eccentricity, that the magic realist writer is most clearly in opposition to an imperial centre's attempt to dominate through a singular world-view.<sup>41</sup>

The notion of a singular imperial world-view is perhaps most clearly parodied within *The Satanic Verses* with Rushdie's depiction of the character Eugene Dumsday. This is a character based upon Rushdie's encounter with an American creationist scientist lecturing in Southern India.<sup>42</sup> Eugene Dumsday, self-styled member of the Christian Guard, has taken upon himself the missionary task of 'educating' India against the 'most pernicious devilment ever got folk's brains by the balls [...] the evolutionary heresy of Mr Charles Darwin' (p. 75). Although Rushdie depicts Eugene Dumsday as a rather comical figure, the pun upon his name, suggesting the stupidity or doom of racial

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<sup>39</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'The Location of *Brazil*', in *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 122.

<sup>40</sup> Helen Tiffin, 'Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse', *Kunapipi*, 9.3 (1987), p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley E. McMullin, "'Adam's Mad in Eden": Magic Realism as Hinterland Experience', in *Magic Realism and Canadian Literature*, eds Peter Hinchcliffe and Ed Jewinski (Toronto: University of Waterloo Press, 1984), p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'The Divine Supermarket', in *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 368.



purity, is a clear indication that Dumsday represents a dangerous blend of imperial colonial qualities. Dumsday's task is to spread the 'truth', or more precisely, his version of the truth. He believes his is a 'truth' that can be argued through reason. To this end, he employs the support of a fifty-seven-slide presentation. Dumsday's truth, however, is clearly founded upon moral and racial prejudice. His is an educational task, yet he reveals a complete lack of interest in and comprehension of the culture he sets out to 'educate'. By depicting these qualities as comic, even ridiculous, Rushdie is attacking a western authority that still feels empowered to rationalise prejudice and present it as truth.

Having parodied and destabilised the concept of a singular, imperialist, world-view Rushdie goes on to explore the possibilities of fantasy to depict a directly oppositional character. Rushdie quite literally turns 'insults into strengths' as he charts the rise of Saladin, in the form of demonised Other, as a figure of resistance for the London community sheltering him. He enters the thoughts of the local community through their dreams. Though Saladin resists this new role, the image of a fearful devil possessing apocalyptic powers of revenge becomes a symbolic image of redress. Rushdie goes so far as to quote Frantz Fanon within the novel to make his point, when he observes that the 'native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor' (p. 353).<sup>43</sup> The image of the revengeful devil unsettles the white community which begins to dream of 'a sulphurous enemy crushing their perfectly restored residences beneath his smoking heel', while, 'nocturnal browns-and-blacks found themselves cheering in their sleep' (p. 286). This mythic figure is not confined to the world of dreams. The power of this fantastic image erupts into the waking world. Fantasy intrudes upon the territory of the real to establish the horned figure with clenched fist as an extremely potent figure of opposition. The image is emblazoned on T-shirts, badges and banners. Children wear rubber horns in the streets. As the character, Mishal Sufyan, attempts to explain to Saladin:

You're a real hero. I mean, people can really identify with you. It's an image white society has rejected for so long that we can really take it, you know, occupy it, inhabit it, reclaim it and make it our own. It's time you considered action (p. 287).

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<sup>43</sup> Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 53.



In *The Satanic Verses*, the image of the horned devil is one of reclamation, but might also be viewed as a symbol of protest and of action. So dominant does this image become in the realm of the real that the forces of law and order within the novel, the police community relations officers, condemn the image as witchcraft or Satanism in an attempt to relocate the protest to the realm of the supernatural; to drain it of tangibility by returning it to the status of dream.

Rushdie appears to employ the figure of the devil, and the inability of the police to effectively counter its influence, to reveal instability at the heart of a former colonial power. Even after the collapse of empire, London, as the former centre, cherishes memories of itself as powerful, dominant and stable. It is depicted, however, as a city powerless to resist a dream. Rushdie depicts London as a city plagued by doubt:

Revealing its true, capricious, tormented nature, its anguish of a city that has lost its sense of itself and wallowed, accordingly, in the impotence of its selfish, angry present of masks and parodies, stifled and twisted by the insupportable, unrejected burden of its past, staring into the bleakness of its impoverished future (p. 320).

The centre of former colonial power is unstable. It is also vulnerable to magical transformation. Gibreel, the archangelic opposite to Saladin's devil, finds himself wielding this fantastic power as he flies high above the streets of London. Gibreel is a deeply tormented character. He is powerless to resist his transformation into the divine figure of Gabriel. The ghost of a former lover, who with each appearance mocks his increasing distress, also haunts him. Caught between these two impossibilities, Gibreel appears to the other characters to be losing his mind. Gibreel disagrees: 'The doctors had been wrong, he now perceived, to treat him for schizophrenia; the splitting was not in him, but in the universe' (p. 351). For Gibreel, the universe is in a state of flux, old orders and relations of power have collapsed and it simply requires will and imagination to make the once seemingly impossible now possible.

Gibreel is both haunted and haunting. According to Zamora, ghosts are not only a characteristic of magic realist novels, but 'are crucial to any definition of magic realism



as a literary mode. [...] Ghosts make absence present'.<sup>44</sup> In this scene, Gibreel clearly signals the return of the oppressed native: 'Native and settler, that old dispute, continuing now upon these soggy streets, with reversed categories' (p. 353). Just as Gibreel's former lover returned from the dead with the power to judge Gibreel, so he has returned to the heart of British colonial rule with the power to pass judgement upon London. Gibreel declares that 'the problem with the English was their: Their: *In a word, [...] their weather*' (p. 354, Rushdie's italic). The 'endless drizzle of greys' of the English weather symbolises the confusion and moral ambiguity of a once powerful nation. To increase 'moral definition' and add vitality to the now ailing city, Gibreel's thunderous voice pronounces his judgement: 'I am going to tropicalize you' (p. 354). The city immediately experiences a heat wave. The city is, indeed, revitalised, but nerves fray and tensions mount as London's inhabitants struggle to cope with an alien climate. Such a fantastic reconstruction of the city serves to undermine its location as a centre of cultural superiority. It provides an environment where repressed conflicts re-emerge and relations of power are reversed.

Both Saladin and Gibreel appear to signal the fantastically empowered return of the repressed native. The fantastic content of *The Satanic Verses* clearly appears to serve a political function as a means of articulating resistance to colonial authority and its postcolonial legacy. For many critics, moreover, Rushdie's use of the fantastic in his novels also represents an expression of resistance to the singularity of cultural and artistic dominance of the former colonial centre. It is, indeed, a feature of magic realist texts that they draw their ability to disturb from a diverse host of different cultural, philosophical, religious and literary sources that of themselves and in their variety may possess the potential to disturb any authority founded upon singularity. Slemon, for example, argues that by drawing upon such sources magic realist writers seek 'the recuperation of lost voices and discarded fragments, those elements pushed to the margins of consciousness by imperialism's centralizing cognitive structures'.<sup>45</sup> Both Saladin and Gibreel, as figures that appear to signal the fantastically empowered return of the repressed native, may be understood in just such terms.

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<sup>44</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, 'Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, pp. 497-450.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Slemon, 'Magical Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', p. 16.



Rushdie himself points to the different ways in which his writing may be seen to draw upon such voices and fragments. He acknowledges, for example, that the fantastic and dream-like elements of his works may be understood in relationship to the Hindu concept of *maya*. Rushdie explains that *maya* refers to ‘the veil of illusion that hangs before our limited human eyes and prevents us from seeing things as they really are – so that we mistake the veil, *maya*, for reality’.<sup>46</sup> Aruna Srivastava suggests that by placing his work in relation to such a concept, Rushdie seeks to speak from a position pre-dating and therefore untainted by colonial rule. By regaining this voice, Rushdie might then be able to turn it against the former colonial centre. Srivastava argues that such acts of conceptual reclamation represent an important aspect of liberation from the colonial legacy and that Rushdie’s use of the concept of *maya* is a world-view at odds with western reason and imperial mimetic codes inasmuch that ‘only foreign sensibilities (or those of the colonized, completely estranged from their original cultures) find it alien, nihilistic, and frightening’.<sup>47</sup>

If systems of order, reason and authority are illusions then they may be challenged. Time and again, Rushdie’s characters return to the central question raised by *The Satanic Verses*: ‘what kind of idea are you?’ This question is asked of both individuals and movements. It challenges the relationships between families and lovers, the impulses driving political movements and the faith upon which religions ultimately depend. It is the freedom with which Rushdie asks this question that has fuelled so much of the controversy surrounding his novel. For this is an irreverent question. It is turned not only against colonial oppression, but scrutinises every aspect of the novel’s subject matter. When turned against the idea of British cultural superiority, critics rarely find cause to fault Rushdie’s work. When applied to religious faith, however, it is regarded as a source of potential offence. Yet, if Rushdie is seeking to question fixed notions of reality and foreground the potential force of imagination and ideas to disturb and re-shape the world, perhaps such a project cannot be selective. In his essay, ‘In Good Faith’, Rushdie argues just this point when he defends both *The Satanic Verses* and his right to freedom of expression. Rushdie argues that the novel ‘dissents most clearly from imposed orthodoxies *of all types*, from the view that the world is quite

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<sup>46</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘In God We Trust’, in *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 378 (Rushdie’s italic).

<sup>47</sup> Aruna Srivastava, “‘The Empire Writes Back’: Language and History in “Shame” and “Midnight’s Children””, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 20.4 (1989), p. 66.



clearly This and not That. It dissents from the end of debate, of dispute, of dissent'.<sup>48</sup> Rushdie appears to argue that if the postcolonial writer is to undertake any sort of imaginative reconstruction of power relations then an important aspect of this process derives from the freedom to question; that inflexible systems of order and oppression can only be undermined by dissent.

Another fertile source drawn upon by Rushdie is that of myth and much of the fantastic content of his writings and its potential to offer dissent may be discussed in relation to Rushdie's numerous mythic references. Magic realist novels, moreover, are often said to draw upon myth to similar effect. Duncan, for example, argues just this point in her examination of the use of myth by Latin American magic realist writers. Like many critics, Duncan argues that myth is a vital ingredient of magic realism. Through it, the magic realist writer may challenge the notion of a singular objective truth and in doing so 'explore all levels of reality'.<sup>49</sup> Dash discusses this exploration of reality in terms of a 'counter culture of the imagination'.<sup>50</sup> While Slemon more clearly places the use of the fantastic in magic realist works in relation to myth and suggests that through myth, a magic realist writer may 'thematize a kind of post-colonial discourse involving the recuperation of silenced voices as axial to a "positive imagined reconstruction of reality"'.<sup>51</sup>

In *Metamorphosis*, Kafka clearly draws upon the oedipal myth in his depiction of Gregor. Grass, in *The Tin Drum*, makes repeated reference to the myths and legends associated with the city of Danzig. Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is a novel overflowing with mythic images, many of which are directly referred to by Fevvers herself. Similarly, fantastically empowered mythic figures occur throughout Rushdie's fiction. *Midnight's Children*, for example, makes numerous references to mythical figures found within the Hindu religion. The novel's central character, Saleem, with his magical nose, clearly refers to the elephant-headed god Ganesha. His powers of telepathy and his moon-faced appearance are associated by Saleem himself with Sin, the Arabian moon-god who is capable of extending his powers over great distances.

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<sup>48</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p. 396 (Rushdie's italic).

<sup>49</sup> Cynthia Duncan, *The Fantastic and Magic Realism in the Contemporary Mexican Short Story*, p. 194.

<sup>50</sup> J. Michael Dash, 'Marvellous Realism – The Way Out of Negritude', *Caribbean Studies*, 13.4 (1973), p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> Stephen Slemon, 'Magical Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', p. 20.



Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction, also appears within the text as a character of the same name to act as Saleem's alter ego. Shiva's mythical partner, Parvati, provides us with the character of The Black Witch within the novel. Likewise, *The Satanic Verses* is a novel full of references to myth. Gibreel, for example, is described as a character for whom everyday existence barely manages to keep at bay a more fabulous realm of 'angels, demons, afreets, djinns', (p. 22). Disturbed by the proximity of this realm, Gibreel becomes an 'omnivorous autodidact', plunging himself into the study of 'the metaphoric myths of Greece and Rome, the avatars of Jupiter, the boy who became a flower, the Spiderwoman, Circe, everything' (pp. 23-24). Gibreel's obsession with myth is carried into his career as a Bollywood actor. He becomes an enormously successful star of theological movies, first playing Ganesha then taking on the role of Hanuman the monkey king. His transformation into the Angel Gabriel, a transformation that eventually drives him insane, is the most recent metamorphosis of a life already characterised by transformation and coloured by a deep belief in the power of myth to erupt into and disrupt consciousness and reason.

Saladin's metamorphosis into what Walker describes as a 'pop mythology devil (horns, cloven hooves, and enlarged phallus)', and the host of mythical figures he encounters in the detention centre possess a similar potential for disturbance.<sup>52</sup> What is interesting about Saladin and his fellow inmates is that, though on one level they might represent the stereotyping of the imperial centre, they may also represent figures of power, capable of breaking free of the confines of racial discrimination. When Saladin and his fellow inmates escape from the confines of the detention centre to range across the English countryside, Rushdie seems to be suggesting that the fantastic potential power of myth is something that cannot be permanently denied. When Saladin the devil emerges as a figure of resistance, so myth is presented as a powerful tool to oppose the colonial legacy.

Rushdie's use of the fantastic in his novels, moreover, may also represent an expression of resistance to the dominant literary form of the former colonial centre, namely that of realism. Arun P. Mukherjee, for example observes that "'realist" fiction and drama is riddled with ideology [...] a tool in the hand of the ruling class to maintain the *status quo*', and discusses Rushdie's novels as a challenge to realism as a tool of authority

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<sup>52</sup> Steven F. Walker, 'Magical Archetypes: Midlife Miracles in *The Satanic Verses*', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 351.



within the context of postcolonialism.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Keith Wilson locates Rushdie's fictions within the context of postcolonial debate and describes his writing in terms of a 'willingness to confront, shape and communicate the inevitable compromises of illusory fictional realism'.<sup>54</sup> Rushdie himself, in a discussion of the political potential of fiction and his preoccupation with postcolonial issues such as migration, describes his long-held assumption that by telling stories in a 'marvellous way, you could actually tell a kind of truth'.<sup>55</sup> Rushdie then suggests that his career as a writer might be characterised as a refusal to accept that:

A novel should be mimetic, it should imitate the world, obey the rules of naturalism or of social realism. So I find myself constantly struggling with the fact that my assumptions are opposite to the assumptions of many people in the West, for whom fantasy or the use of the imagination is exceptional. For me it seems to be normative.<sup>56</sup>

Mukherjee, Wilson and, indeed, Rushdie himself link resistance to realism to postcolonial debate. Such resistance is, of course, central to the prevailing conception of magic realism and might appear to confirm *The Satanic Verses* as a magic realist novel. Duncan, for example, describes Latin American magic realism as postcolonial literature that aims to 'explore new points of view and unusual facets of reality overlooked by traditional realism'.<sup>57</sup> As Zamora and Faris observe, 'realism functions ideologically and hegemonically. Magical realism also functions ideologically but [...] less hegemonically, for its program is not centralizing but eccentric: it creates space for interventions of diversity'.<sup>58</sup> Faris not only suggests that magic realism represents a 'desire for narrative freedom from realism, and from a univocal narrative stance', but clearly links realism to colonial oppression observing 'that realism has been a European,

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<sup>53</sup> Arun P. Mukherjee, 'Characterization in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: Breaking Out of the Hold of Realism and Seeking the "Alienation Effect"', in *The New Indian Novel in English*, ed. Viney Kirpal (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1990), p. 111 (Mukherjee's italic).

<sup>54</sup> Keith Wilson, 'Midnight's Children and Reader Responsibility', *Critical Quarterly*, 26.3 (1984), p.36.

<sup>55</sup> Salman Rushdie and Gunter Grass, 'Fictions are Lies that Tell the Truth', *The Listener*, 27 June 1985, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Salman Rushdie and Gunter Grass, 'Fictions are Lies that Tell the Truth', p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> Cynthia Duncan, *The Fantastic and Magic Realism in the Contemporary Mexican Short Story*, p. 537.

<sup>58</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, 'Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 2.



or first world, export, in conjunction with its mimetic program, its claims to fashioning an accurate portrait of the world, has in some instances tended to ally it to imperialism'.<sup>59</sup>

Such an understanding of magic realism may be applied to Rushdie's fiction. Linda Hutcheon, for example, refers to Rushdie while defining magic realism as a postcolonial literature of resistance that in formal terms enacts that resistance through a challenge 'to genre distinction and to the conventions of realism'.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, Slemon refers to Rushdie in his examination of magic realism's relationship to postcolonial debate and suggests that 'in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working towards the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other'.<sup>61</sup> For Slemon, the two different systems are those of the fantastic and realism. Wilson offers a similar understanding of magic realism and describes magic realism as an alternative to 'realism's typical limpidity [which] arises from the muscular suppression of narrative potential'.<sup>62</sup> Wilson, moreover, directly links such a conception of magic realism to Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

Clearly, for many critics *The Satanic Verses* represents an important site of struggle between different world-views. This struggle is not only evident at the thematic level of the novel. For such critics, and despite the many accusations directed against the novel, *The Satanic Verses* mounts a challenge through the fantastic to both the cultural authority of the former colonial centre and a literary realism regarded as the dominant and primary literary expression of that authority. Such a challenge, moreover, appears to confirm Rushdie's status as a magic realist writer very much in line with the dominant conception of the term.

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<sup>59</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children', p. 180.

<sup>60</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "'Circling the Downspout of Empire": Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 20.4 (1989), p. 151.

<sup>61</sup> Stephen Slemon, 'Magical Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', *Canadian Literature*, 116 (1988), pp. 10-11.

<sup>62</sup> Rawdon Wilson, 'The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space', p. 226.



## Migrancy and Cultural Hybridity

By his own admission, Rushdie is a writer of dissent. He describes his novels, and in particular *The Satanic Verses*, as a clear and direct challenge to oppressive systems of authority seeking to impose a singular view of the world.<sup>63</sup> Yet, reading a novel like *The Satanic Verses* in terms of some sort of simple opposition between centre and margin, or the fantastic and realism, runs the risk of ignoring the full complexity of postcolonial debate and the manner in which the novel might be seen to engage with such debate. Applying a similarly simple understanding of magic realism to Rushdie's work may compound such a risk, while also failing to appreciate both the range of debates associated with the term and the manner in which Rushdie's treatment of migration in *The Satanic Verses* might in fact offer a more complex understanding of the way the category may be linked to postcolonialism.

Magic realism, as a form of postcolonial literature, is almost invariably discussed in oppositional terms – as a body of literature operating from the margins challenging the authority and the forms of centralised power. Cynthia Duncan, for example, suggests that magic realist works may offer resistance from the margins to the authority of the colonial centre by providing a 'voice for the writer interested in finding a national or literary identity for his country and its people'.<sup>64</sup> *The Satanic Verses*, however, does not easily conform to such a view. For a number of postcolonial critics, moreover, celebrating marginality simply confirms existing relations of power. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, for example, argues:

The margins, our sites of survival, become our fighting grounds and their site for pilgrimage. Thus, while we turn around and reclaim them as our exclusive territory, they happily approve, for the divisions between margin and center should be preserved, and as clearly demarcated as possible, if the two positions are to remain intact in their power relations.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p. 396.

<sup>64</sup> Cynthia Duncan, *The Fantastic and Magic Realism in the Contemporary Mexican Short Story*, p. 122.

<sup>65</sup> Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 17.



A number of critics, moreover, discuss magic realism in terms of a similar self-consciously cultivated marginality. In reference to the critical usefulness of magic realism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points to the Eurocentricity of choosing ‘only such writers who write in the consciousness of marginality and christen them ‘Third World’’.<sup>66</sup> From such a compromised position, according to Spivak, magic realism fails to successfully narrativise decolonisation. For Spivak, magic realism, when understood and celebrated as some sort of paradigmatic Third World literature of the margins, simply serves the interests of the centre inasmuch that ‘the centre wants an identifiable margin’ and by providing it with such it in turn receives ‘validation from the centre’.<sup>67</sup>

Clearly, such an understanding of magic realism questions its value as postcolonial literature and also casts doubt upon the usefulness of applying the term to *The Satanic Verses* as an example of such literature. Rushdie himself, moreover, is not at all keen for his work to be regarded simply as a product of a marginal experience. In his essay, ‘‘Commonwealth Literature’ does not Exist’, for example, Rushdie describes his disappointment that a literature don should suggest ‘you probably find, don’t you, that there’s a kind of liberty, certain advantages, in occupying, as you do, a position on the periphery?’.<sup>68</sup> According to Rushdie, such thinking, though intended to indicate an ability to express an important and shared marginal experience, may have the far less positive effect of ‘creating a ghetto, and that, in turn, does lead to a ghetto mentality amongst some of its occupants’.<sup>69</sup> In many respects, however, *The Satanic Verses* is a novel that dissents from the very notion of centre and margin and perhaps never more clearly than in the manner in which it complicates concepts such as voice and national identity. In *The Satanic Verses*, voice and identity are presented as ambiguous and uncertain.

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<sup>66</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value’, in *Literary Theory Today*, eds Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 223. For a similar view, see: Stephen Slemon, ‘Cultural Alterity and Colonial Discourse’, *Southern Review*, 20 (1987), p. 102.

<sup>67</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value’, p. 221.

<sup>68</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist’, p. 61.

<sup>69</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist’, p. 63. It is interesting to note a similarity here between Rushdie’s reference to a ‘ghetto mentality’ and Carter’s discussion of the self-conscious marginalisation of women’s experience of motherhood in terms of ‘consolatory fictions’. See: Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 1979), p. 106.



Throughout *The Satanic Verses*, the narrator teases the reader with the question ‘who am I?’ (p. 4), but never commits to a definitive response. At times, it seems to be the devil himself who is relating a contemporary version of the Fall. At other times the narrator enters the world of the text manifesting himself as God. Yet, whether Devil or God, we are told: ‘I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and -potence, I’m making no claims at present’ (p. 10). Though the narrator has access to the thoughts of the characters, may intrude upon the narrative and the reading process itself, it does not claim for itself a position of complete authority. The narrator does seem to claim access to the truth, but trust in this claim is undermined by the preface ‘Once upon a time – *It was and it was not so*, as the old stories used to say, *it happened and it never did* – maybe, then, or maybe not’ (p. 35, Rushdie’s italic). This is a ‘truth’ confused by the telling. Elsewhere in the novel, the prophet recites the verses of the Qur’an to his scribe Salman. Salman, however, like his namesake the author, begins to question the validity of the recitation and so introduces minor changes to the text. When these go unnoticed his amendments become more audacious until Salman asks the question: ‘But, good heavens, if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelations by God’s own Messenger, then what did that mean? What did that say about the quality of the divine poetry?’ (p. 367). So rather than offering a ‘true’ or authentic voice, the act of narration serves to confound any expectation for such a perspective.

What then of Rushdie’s choice of the English language to construct his narratives? In this too, Rushdie challenges the notion of centre and margins. Rushdie’s use of English is a source of some division among critics. English was the language imposed upon Indian Bureaucracy as a means to both monitor and control its functions. It was a means for overcoming the difficulties of managing a colony that used some fifteen different major languages by seeming to fulfil the practical function of a lingua franca. As the language of the oppressors, however, it was also the vehicle for communicating the superiority of the coloniser’s culture over that of the indigenous population. As the language of bureaucracy, of power, it was something to which the ambitious colonial subject might aspire. So, language itself is both a tool of oppression and a possible source of native complicity.



For this reason, the writer and critic Ngugi Wa-Thiong'o has called for a rejection of the languages of colonial power in favour of suppressed indigenous languages. Wa-Thiong'o argues that 'our languages were suppressed so that we, the captives, would not have our own mirrors in which to observe ourselves and our enemies'.<sup>70</sup> In a similar vein, Srivastava argues that Indian writers such as Rushdie who employ the language of colonial authority are in danger of displacing their own rich literary tradition, 'that they are, to put it bluntly, not only working in, but also valorizing, the language of their (former) colonisers to the detriment of others'.<sup>71</sup> For his part, Rushdie describes himself as somewhat bemused by Wa-Thiong'o's insistence upon addressing an audience in Swahili, when no one in the audience was familiar with the language. Wa-Thiong'o himself, indeed, is aware that insistence upon suppressed indigenous languages may restrict both scope of expression and audience reception.<sup>72</sup> Rushdie is also aware of the dangers of valorising the language of oppression. For Rushdie, however, use of the English language is not so much about disloyalty or complicity, but part of an ongoing project of problemising the very notion of English and what it means to be English. It is not, however, about perpetuating oppositions, but about the blurring of boundaries. Rushdie argues:

As for myself, I don't think it is always necessary to take up the anti-colonial – or is it post-colonial? – cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.<sup>73</sup>

Any attempt to understand *The Satanic Verses* as a magic realist novel in terms of a tension between centre and margins is further complicated by Rushdie's depiction of migrant characters within the novel. Migrancy is an area untouched by magic realist debate that tends to focus instead upon the experience of the colonised subject within an oppressed national context. Yet, perhaps by engaging with migrancy, *The Satanic*

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<sup>70</sup> Ngugi Wa-Thiong'o, *Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (London: James Curry, 1983), p. 32.

<sup>71</sup> Aruna Srivastava, "The Empire Writes Back", p. 73 (Srivastava's parentheses).

<sup>72</sup> Ngugi Wa-Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre*, p. 21.

<sup>73</sup> Salman Rushdie, "Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist", p. 64.



*Verses* not only indicates a fuller range of postcolonial debates than is usually associated with magic realism, but may also stretch the manner in which the category might be linked to such debates.

When Rushdie writes of a migrant sensibility, ‘whose development I believe to be one of the central themes of this century of displaced persons’, he is expressing a very real political and social concern from a perspective forged from personal experience.<sup>74</sup>

Rushdie was born in Bombay, in the year of Indian independence from British rule (though not quite one of ‘midnight’s children’), and was sent to study in England aged just fourteen. Since that time, he has spent most of his life studying and working in England. It is the effect of migration, upon both the individual and upon cultures, that Rushdie’s work returns to again and again. *The Satanic Verses*, indeed, is a text almost entirely composed of migrations of one sort or another.

Vijay Mishra argues, ‘the idea of “home” has indeed become a “damaged” concept. The word “damaged” forces us to face up to the scars and fractures, to the blisters and sores, to the psychic traumas of bodies on the move’.<sup>75</sup> *The Satanic Verses* is full of migrant characters who have made Britain their home. Not home in the sense of origins, but home as a space to be negotiated if it is to be inhabited. It is a space darkened by conflict and abuse.<sup>76</sup> Rushdie never fails to foreground the difficulties faced by the immigrant. The act of negotiation, however, indicates a degree of intimacy that may be overlooked by readings based upon simple oppositions of centre and margin. This sort of intimacy, moreover, is completely ignored by current discussion of magic realism, yet is clearly present in all the novels examined in this thesis. In *Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum* and *Nights at the Circus*, intimacy broadly equates to complicity with authority. Yet, in *The Satanic Verses*, the emphasis appears to be slightly different; alongside complicity with oppressive power there is also a genuine sense of affection. For his part, Rushdie discusses his ‘intimate knowledge of, and even sense of friendship with, a certain kind of England’.<sup>77</sup> This, he admits, is a dream England, one of test

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<sup>74</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘The Location of *Brazil*’, p. 124.

<sup>75</sup> Vijay Mishra, ‘Postcolonial Differend: Diasporic Narratives of Salman Rushdie’, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 26.3 (1995), p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> This is clearly true of Gregor’s experience of home, but also equally true of Oskar’s and Fevvers’ experiences.

<sup>77</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘Imaginary Homelands’, in *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 18.



matches and the BBC. Such dream-making is of course an aspect of the colonial project, but these are images that have clearly influenced Rushdie as, indeed, they influence the character of Saladin Chamcha with his whole-hearted embrace of all things English. Rushdie asks:

What does it mean to be an “Indian” outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from ones that came with us?<sup>78</sup>

Yet, *The Satanic Verses* engages with these questions to argue against the advisability, or even possibility, of either assimilation or rejection of Western culture by the immigrant. Despite his attempts to be more British than the British, Saladin cannot forget nor is he allowed to forget his relationship with India. He attempts to assimilate a culture that is often violently resistant to his presence, while he struggles to reject an Indian past that refuses to release its hold on him. Because of his denial of India, and Britain’s denial of him, Saladin is a character often left confused, angry, unsatisfied and bereft.

Saladin is not the only character in *The Satanic Verses* to deny a relationship with India. The sisters Mishal and Anahita Sufyan, unlike Saladin, know no home except Britain. As the children of immigrants their experience of India is one formed through stories told to them by their parents. Consequently, their rejection of India is the rejection of an idea, of an imaginary place dismissed as such. So, when Saladin describes himself to them as British, he receives this passionate response:

‘What about us?’ Anahita wanted to know. ‘What do you think we are?’ – and Mishal confided: ‘Bangladesh in’t nothing to me. Just some place Dad and Mum keep banging on about.’ – And Anahita, conclusively: ‘Bungleditch.’ – With a satisfied nod. – ‘What I call it anyhow’ (p. 259).

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<sup>78</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘The Indian Writer in England’, in *Eye of the Beholder: Indian Writing in English*, ed. Maggie Butcher (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1983), p. 81.



Both sisters refuse to speak in their parent's language, though they understand it perfectly well. Both prefer to embrace British youth culture, its language, codes of dress and behaviour. Yet, there always exists the threat of racial prejudice and physical violence – neither Saladin nor the sisters can ensure acceptance in Britain simply by rejecting India. Moreover, as Saladin refuses to accept the sisters as truly British, 'not in any way he could recognize' (p. 259), there emerges from this exchange the realisation that neither can agree on what it means to be British. Not only are they rejecting a different India, but they also aspire to a different Britain.

Those characters that feel compelled to reject British cultural values, even as they live in that culture's capital, experience a similar sense of dislocation and confusion. The most extreme example of this in the novel is the character of the Imam in exile who dreams daily of a triumphant return to his homeland. His existence in Britain is a perpetual struggle to remain free of its contaminating influences. Yet the Imam is dependent upon the sanctuary provided by a culture he despises. His presence in Britain is based upon an uneasy compromise, an expedient intimacy between profoundly rigid morality and political necessity.

For the character of Hind Sufyan, mother of Mishal and Anahita, Britain is not a place of temporary exile. She is as confused and alienated by her daughter's behaviour as she is by the country they must call home. For Hind, London is a 'demon city in which anything could happen, your windows shattered in the night without any cause, you were knocked over in the street by invisible hands' (p. 250). Like the Imam she feels her only hope is to stay home 'lock the door, say your prayers, and the goblins would (maybe) stay away' (p. 250, Rushdie's parentheses). Yet, unlike the Imam, her attempt to shut out this world of horrors ultimately fails. She cannot remain in total isolation when her home, both cafe and boarding house, is such a public space. The 'alien' world outside intrudes through her daughters, her customers, boarders and most dramatically through the demonic Saladin Chamcha. The fantastic world of London with its demons and goblins impacts upon her life in a very real way. While her attempts to stay in touch with the 'real' world of India are conducted through an 'endless supply of Bengali and Hindi movies [...] (along with her ever increasing hoard of Indian Movie magazines)' (p. 250, Rushdie's parentheses). Hind cannot deny the impact British culture has upon her life, just as she cannot maintain an unmediated relationship with India.



Emerging from the experiences of these characters is the impossibility of either the full assimilation, or total rejection, of British culture. *The Satanic Verses* seems to indicate the inevitability of a more ambiguous set of relations arising from contact between cultures than straightforward centre and margin models would suggest – though these relations may be neither sought nor appreciated by characters within the novel. The thematic complexity of *The Satanic Verses*, moreover, is mirrored in the novel's formal construction – Rushdie's depiction of cultural ambiguity is matched by an equally ambiguous set of relations between the fantastic and realism. Though it is possible to read *The Satanic Verses* as a magic realist novel in terms of a privileged fantastic, for example, and in terms a challenge to the authority of realism regarded as the literary tool of the former colonial centre, such a reading fails to present a full appreciation of either the novel or, indeed, Rushdie's understanding of its formal make-up. In an interview with John Haffenden, Rushdie revealed:

What I didn't like about Grimus was that it was too easy to use a fantasy that didn't grow out of the real world, a kind of whimsy. I don't even like the word fantasy as a description of the kind of non-naturalistic material of my books, because fantasy seems to contain that idea of whimsy and randomness.<sup>79</sup>

Rushdie clearly has reservations about the fantastic. These reservations, moreover, are very evident within *The Satanic Verses*, particularly in its depictions of migrancy. The story of Gibreel in India, for example, begins with a migration from the isolated town of Poona to the city of Bombay. This depicts an internal migration that Rushdie suggests can be as traumatic as any migration between countries, when the movement is from a rural experience to that of life in an overwhelmingly urban environment. Such a movement also signals a major difference between Rushdie's use of magic realism and that of Latin American magic realists such as Márquez, who, Rushdie argues, adopt a more stable, perhaps even nostalgic 'village view of the world'.<sup>80</sup> Rushdie's novels tend to focus upon urban environments.<sup>81</sup> He writes that 'a villager travelling a hundred

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<sup>79</sup> John Haffenden, 'Salman Rushdie', *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 246.

<sup>80</sup> Chandrabhanu Pattanayak, 'Interview with Salman Rushdie', *The Literary Criterion*, 18.3 (1983), p. 20.

<sup>81</sup> This is equally true of all the novels examined in this thesis. By focusing upon urban and industrial environments, they all represent a fundamental point of departure from the dominant conception of magic realism as it is applied to a Latin American, largely rural, context.



miles to town traverses emptier, darker, more terrifying space' (p. 41). Gibreel's early experience of city life is all of this as he struggles to earn a living as one of Bombay's dabbawallas, or lunch porters. Gibreel's experience of the city is fraught with the conviction that the visible world around him represents little more than a fraction of a larger and barely concealed supernatural reality. It is little wonder then that Gibreel the actor should shift so easily between characters and that the supernatural and mythical should feature so significantly in his work. The act of migration, the resulting sense of dislocation, makes it possible for him to become such an actor. Yet, it is only the character's perception that locates this experience within the realms of fantasy. This is not simply an example of magic realism's ability to represent the fantastic as real as a means to subvert oppressive notions of the real. Rather, it may reveal a more complex relationship between the real and the fantastic – one where fantasy is tested in terms of its ability to respond to the real. Gibreel experiences the city as a fantasy world because his notion of the real does not correspond to the very different reality of the city. The real is revealed as something variable, not easily comprehended. Fantasy is not, in this particular instance, something positively liberating, but is exposed as a failure to comprehend the real.

Elsewhere in the novel, other migrations reveal a similar relationship between the real and the fantastic. The character Ayesha, the butterfly girl, inspired by visions of Gibreel as the Angel Gabriel, convinces her entire village to make holy pilgrimage to Mecca. The pilgrims journey by foot through a countryside devastated by drought. It is a journey that tests both religious faith and the pilgrim's sense of self. It is a tale about journeys – the imagination that is needed to fuel them and the very real hardships experienced along the way. This is also a journey from the rural to the city. This is, moreover, a mass migration, an entire community is on the move and it is as much about how that migration is received by the communities it passes through as it is about the effects upon those participating. During their journey, the pilgrims are met with varying degrees of interest, amusement, support and derision. As the pilgrims pass from rural to more urban environments, so reaction to their passing begins to polarise. Their pilgrimage unwittingly enters the sensitive realm of political and religious division. It is no longer simply received as an act of imagination rooted in an individual's vision of salvation, but becomes an event to be exploited by very real rival communal factions. In reaction to the mounting reality of communal violence, Ayesha's visions become increasingly oppressive, demanding of the villagers ever-greater sacrifices. Fantasy



must make ever more desperate efforts if it is to deny the real world of political conflict. Upon reaching the Indian Ocean, the villagers are told they must cast themselves into the waves. While police officers collect the bloated bodies of the drowned and witnesses describe the mass suicide, it is only the emotionally disturbed survivors of the pilgrimage, those too scared to sacrifice themselves, who are able to describe the villager's seabed journey towards Mecca. Again, Rushdie presents the fantastic as a personal inability to comprehend the enormity or horror of the real.

For Rushdie, it is precisely the dislocation and instability of the migrant experience, the lack of a stable or reliable perspective, which makes the experience and world-view of the migrant so important. Yet, as many critics observe, this 'confusion' is not ungrounded in the real. Syed Amanuddin, for example, argues that 'Salman Rushdie's novels may be read as socio-political fiction [...] he is a master craftsman who knows how to combine fact with fantasy'.<sup>82</sup> Booker discusses Rushdie's use of the fantastic, but argues that 'Rushdie's self-consciously literary fiction engages in direct and intense dialogue with the social and political issues of the real world'.<sup>83</sup> Gerald Marzorati points out that Rushdie 'has a way of keeping us in the crowded, gritty here and now, even in the book's most phantasmagoric pages'.<sup>84</sup> For Amanuddin, Booker and Marzorati, dislocation need not mean disengaged. Similarly, Rushdie argues of his novels that first and foremost they seek to refer to a recognisably real world and 'because they are so precisely rooted in a recognizable real world the fantasy works'.<sup>85</sup>

The formal ambiguity of *The Satanic Verses* allows for a positive reading of the novel in terms of both its use of the fantastic and its referential grounding in the stark reality of the postcolonial experience. *The Satanic Verses* indicates, for example, how migration has been exploited within this country for political purposes. One only has to recall Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' Speech to witness just how powerful images of

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<sup>82</sup> Syed Amanuddin, 'The Novels of Salman Rushdie: Mediated Reality as Fantasy', *World Literature Today*, 63.1 (1989), p. 42.

<sup>83</sup> M. Keith Booker, 'Beauty and the Beast: Dualism as Despotism in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie', *ELH*, 57 (1990), p. 990.

<sup>84</sup> Gerald Marzorati, 'Salman Rushdie: Fiction's Embattled Infidel', *New York Times Magazine*, 29 January 1989, p. 27.

<sup>85</sup> Chandrabhanu Pattanayak, 'Interview with Salman Rushdie', p. 20.



migration can be, and to what political ends these images might be used.<sup>86</sup> Yet, for Rushdie, the migrant is a powerful figure. It is not by accident that the novel employs a migrant, the temperamentally nervous martial arts instructor and secretive poet, Jumpy Joshi, to subvert the racism of Powell's speech. Jumpy reclaims the metaphor. In a poem entitled 'The Rivers of Blood' Jumpy writes: 'a street is a river and we are the flow; humanity is a river of blood [...] In our bodies, does not the river of blood flow?' (p. 186). Rushdie's novel, however, is for the most part unable to describe such an easy confluence of flowing humanity. The migrant characters of *The Satanic Verses*, including the ever-thoughtful Jumpy, do not gain comfort from fantasies of salvation but, even as they are suspended between India and England, are more likely to find themselves suspended between such fantasies and the bitterness of actual experience. For Rushdie this is at the core of the migrant experience, he writes: 'Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, we fall between two stools'.<sup>87</sup> This is not simply an image drawn from the imagination, but a very real experience of demographic and cultural dislocation.

Dislocation, moreover, is not only experienced by the migrant. *The Satanic Verses* presents migration as an act capable of dislocating cultural unity. Saladin's presence in England polarises prejudice, gives it a target, but also reveals the vulnerability those prejudices seek to disguise. The nervous hilarity of the police officers as they beat Saladin, and their attempts to hide the evidence of their crime, expose these officers of British law and order as fractious and incapable of wielding the power invested in them. Though this is a brutal scene, it is also farcical. Even as Saladin desperately seeks to affirm his allegiance to their authority, his very presence casts the imagined values associated with that authority into doubt by exposing the real insecurities upon which they are constructed.

Rushdie's determination to keep his writing firmly grounded in the real, moreover, may also allow for a discussion of Rushdie's writing in terms of a less oppositional

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<sup>86</sup> Powell gave this speech in Birmingham on 20 April 1968. In it, he warns against the dangers of large-scale immigration. Drawing upon violent imagery, Powell warns against impending conflicts between the growing immigrant population and the indigenous (white) population of Britain. The line 'Like the Roman, I seem to see "the River Tiber foaming with much blood"' refers to the Sibyl's prophesy of war uttered in Book VI, l. 86, of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

<sup>87</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', p. 15.



relationship to realism. Rustom Bharucha, for example, while acknowledging the fantastic content of Rushdie's writing, suggests that 'there is yet another kind of literature that Rushdie encapsulates in his *magnum opus*: a "realistic" literature that contemporary Indian writers first supported during the Thirties'.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Mishra examines the manner in which the fantastic elements of *The Satanic Verses* may appear to disturb 'old realist modes of writing', but argues of the novel that 'it also keeps its realist nose sharply in focus'.<sup>89</sup> Rushdie himself, though he clearly expresses reservations for a realism conceived solely in terms of strict mimesis, is also prepared to discuss his works in relation to a more fluid conception of realism.<sup>90</sup> He suggests, for example, similarities between his writing and that of Dickens. Rushdie very much admires the manner in which Dickens' novels draw upon a wealth of referential detail from which to construct highly realistic settings. Rushdie observes 'he uses a kind of backdrop or setting for his works which is completely naturalistic, down to the tiniest details. And on top of this completely naturalistic background he imposes totally surrealistic images'.<sup>91</sup> Rushdie claims that, like Dickens, he also seeks to build his novels upon realist foundations 'so that the fantasy could be rooted in that kind of reality'.<sup>92</sup>

Clearly, *The Satanic Verses* need not be read simply as a novel built upon either thematic or formal oppositions. It may, indeed, be more fruitfully discussed in light of the ways in which it interrogates such oppositions and presents a more sophisticated relationship between form and content. Just as *The Satanic Verses* presents the migrant as a figure 'suspended' between cultures, the novel itself may be seen to be similarly suspended between formal differences – disturbing both the fantastic and realism, yet drawing upon both. Such an understanding of the novel, however, appears to cast further doubt upon the usefulness of describing it as a magic realist work inasmuch as it places the novel squarely at odds with the dominant usage of the term.

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<sup>88</sup> Rustom Bharucha, 'Rushdie's Whale', in *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*, ed. M. D. Fletcher (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), p. 163 (Bharucha's italic).

<sup>89</sup> Vijay Mishra, 'Postcolonial Differend: Diasporic Narratives of Salman Rushdie', p. 15.

<sup>90</sup> For example, see: Salman Rushdie and Gunter Grass, 'Fictions are Lies that Tell the Truth', p. 15.

<sup>91</sup> Chandrabhanu Pattanayak, 'Interview with Salman Rushdie', p. 20.

<sup>92</sup> Chandrabhanu Pattanayak, 'Interview with Salman Rushdie', p. 20.



Yet, the true value of applying the term magic realism to *The Satanic Verses* lies precisely in the manner in which it challenges current usage of the term. *The Satanic Verses* clearly requires a more complex conception of magic realism - not only in terms of the formal relations described by this critical category, but also in terms of the ways in which the category might be subsequently linked to postcolonial debate. For what is perhaps most interesting about *The Satanic Verses* is the way in which Rushdie employs the figure of the migrant to explore cultural hybridity. This is a postcolonial concept barely touched upon by discussion of magic realism. Although critics may occasionally and indirectly suggest that magic realism may indicate formal hybridity, the category's potential relationship to hybridity as a postcolonial concept remains almost completely unexplored. Enrique Anderson Imbert, for example, describes pictorial magic realism in terms of a synthesis between 'a thesis: "impressionism"; an antithesis: "expressionism".<sup>93</sup> Imbert locates magic realism between formal oppositions, between impressionist painters who 'painted what they saw' and expressionists 'painting objects that were either non-existent or so disfigured as to appear extraterrestrial'.<sup>94</sup> Yet, although Imbert's description of pictorial magic realism appears to point towards the formal hybridity of magic realism, he observes that within the literary context of Latin American fiction the category is most frequently linked to those writers who are 'committed and nationalist'.<sup>95</sup>

*The Satanic Verses* is a magic realist novel that could never be described as a 'nationalist'. Rushdie argues:

*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotch-potch, a bit of this and that, is how *newness enters the world*. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-co-joining. It is a love song to our mongrel selves.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Enrique Anderson Imbert, "Magical Realism" in Spanish-American Fiction', *The International Fiction Review*, 2.1 (1975), p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> Enrique Anderson Imbert, "Magical Realism" in Spanish-American Fiction', p. 1.

<sup>95</sup> Enrique Anderson Imbert, "Magical Realism" in Spanish-American Fiction', p. 7.

<sup>96</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p. 394 (Rushdie's italic).



Rushdie's vision of a century dominated by mass migration is ultimately a hopeful one. Hybridity, he suggests, offers the potential for genuine newness. By describing *The Satanic Verses* as 'a love-song to our mongrel selves', Rushdie warns against the temptation to read his depiction of migrancy in *The Satanic Verses* simply in terms of cultural integration or assimilation. One only has to read his essay 'The New Empire Within Britain' to appreciate his distrust of these terms. For Rushdie, integration means little more than the migrant performing as mimic.<sup>97</sup> Rushdie argues:

A language reveals the attitudes of the people who use it and shape it. And a whole declension of patronizing terminology can be found in the language in which inter-racial relations have been described inside Britain. At first, we are told, the goal was 'integration'. Now this word rapidly came to mean 'assimilation': a black man could only be integrated when he started behaving like a white one.<sup>98</sup>

For much of the novel, Saladin is such a mimic. He is an actor and perfects his craft so that he is able to adopt any persona required of him. His abilities as an actor are a direct consequence of his desire to be accepted within Britain. His chameleon skills on stage, television and radio reflect his striving for assimilation. Saladin, however, is a character comprised of contradictions. He also desires to lead a less compromised life. This is a desire that 'wanted nothing to do with his pathetic personality, that half-reconstructed affair of mimicry and voices, it intended to bypass all that' (p. 9).

On a theoretical level, *The Satanic Verses* signals a desire to bypass mimicry as a form of postcolonial intervention. For Bhabha, mimicry by the colonial native represents a process incorporating both resemblance and disturbance of colonial authority. It is both reaffirming of its authority and at the same time menacing. Bhabha illustrates this set of relations by describing native reaction to the Bible – one of the great symbols of colonial expansion.<sup>99</sup> Bhabha refers to a missionary register of 1818 that describes the

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<sup>97</sup> It is worth noting that, for Bhabha, mimicry is related to hybridity inasmuch as they are both aspects of the colonial and postcolonial experience.

<sup>98</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'The New Empire Within Britain', in *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 137.

<sup>99</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817', in *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 102-122.



excitement experienced by natives upon encountering the printed word of God. The natives enthusiastically engage with the text's ideas and adopt many of the expressions of belief. Contained within these expressions of belief, however, are significant differences. The natives literally re-write the bible so they might possess more copies of this work. Yet, as Benita Parry observes, 'what the native re-writes is not a copy of the colonialist original, but a qualitatively different thing-in-itself, where misreadings and incongruities expose the uncertainties and ambivalences of the colonialist text and deny its authorizing presence'.<sup>100</sup> The enthusiastic reception of the bible might at first be seen as a triumph for the colonial authority it validates, but it is a text now located in some 'other' context. The native adapts it, yet expresses it differently, accepts some parts and denies others. The symbol of colonial authority is undermined and reveals, Bhabha argues, that 'the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference'.<sup>101</sup>

It is, of course, possible to read Saladin's character as one representing the disturbance of colonial authority. Saladin's desire for, and mimicry of, Englishness might at first suggest the triumph of that image. Yet, he is mimicking a culture that only exists within an imaginary, and hence absent realm. Moreover, even though he is an accomplished actor, he cannot avoid repeating those images differently. He never successfully achieves the persona he strives so hard for. He succeeds only in revealing its contradictions and frailties. The same might be said of the magic realism of *The Satanic Verses* – as a form of writing that might mimic imperial views of the margins as fantastic and exotic, yet repeat those views differently and so destabilise colonial and postcolonial power relations while also investing that challenge to oppression with the authority of the real.

*The Satanic Verses*, however, does not restrict itself to the destabilising potential of mimicry. It is not enough that characters such as Saladin undermine colonial authority simply through the dislocating effects of repetition. Such a dynamic, much like those understandings of magic realism that privilege the fantastic, may be in danger of merely reinforcing relations of power that situate the colonial or postcolonial subject as secondary and peripheral to a central colonial authority to be undermined. Bhabha

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<sup>100</sup> Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review*, 9.1/2 (1987), pp. 41-2.

<sup>101</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders', p. 107.



himself, moreover, is not content with such a simple model to describe the postcolonial subject. Bhabha goes on to describe the doubleness of colonial discourse as a process whereby both coloniser and colonised are ambivalently re-inscribed. This is a more complicated dynamic involving what Parry describes as ‘a configuration of discursive transactions’.<sup>102</sup> Bhabha suggests a more active interaction between colonisers and colonised. It is at this point that his argument begins to explicitly foreground the concept of hybridity.

In *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin only achieves the reconciliation and love offered by the ending of the novel when he abandons the role of mimic and accepts an identity forged out of hybridity. His is an identity shaped by experience of different cultures. He is not British nor can he return to India as if his life in Britain has left no mark. Saladin exists between Rushdie’s ‘two stools’, and occupies what Bhabha terms the ‘Third Space’.<sup>103</sup> This concept of a Third Space of potential between differences, moreover, is one occasionally mobilised by magic realist debate. Indeed, when Roh first conceived the category of magic realism, the term was intended to describe the emergence of a new form of artistic expression – one that existed in the space between formal oppositions, between those works of art that suggested a stable and knowable reality and those that eschewed such restrictions to enter the realm of fantastic excess.<sup>104</sup> Roh suggested that the ‘newness’ of magic realism, and its continued survival as an effective critical category, was dependent upon its ability to remain balanced in the ‘middle ground’ between these two poles.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, Miguel Angel Asturias, argues that Latin American magic realism exists ‘between the “real” and the “magic” [in a] ‘third sort of reality. It is a melding of the visible and the tangible, the hallucination and the dream’.<sup>106</sup> Yet, although he is referring to both the formal and thematic content of magic realist works and places that content within a postcolonial context, Asturias suggests that such a ‘reality’ or ‘space’ is specifically Latin America.

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<sup>102</sup> Benita Parry, ‘Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse’, p. 42.

<sup>103</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘The Commitment to Theory’, in *The Location of Culture*, p. 36.

<sup>104</sup> Franz Roh, ‘Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism’, trans. Wendy B. Faris in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> Franz Roh, ‘Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism’, p. 23.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Cynthia Duncan, *The Fantastic and Magic Realism in the Contemporary Mexican Short Story*, p. 111.



*The Satanic Verses*, however, should not be understood simply in terms of a space between stable oppositions. Neither should magic realism. For the notion of the Third Space described by Bhabha clearly indicates that hybridity exists not only at the level of the individual, but also at a cultural level. Similarly, Saladin is not simply formed between two fixed or essential cultures, but his fluctuating sense of self is formed out of cultures that are themselves equally fluid. Bhabha supports his argument by first arguing for a distinction between ‘cultural difference’ and ‘cultural diversity’. He suggests that diversity evokes the notion of cultures formed in isolation, essential by nature, that may be subsequently arranged in relation to each another, yet in no significant sense may one impact upon the other. Bhabha suggests that such simplistic plotting of cultural boundaries gives rise to the sort of ‘anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism’ that Rushdie is so opposed to.<sup>107</sup> Bhabha argues for the more hopeful notion of ‘cultural difference’. He writes:

Through the concept of cultural difference I want to draw attention to the common ground and lost territory of contemporary critical debates. For they all recognize that the problem of the cultural emerges only at the signifying boundaries of cultures, where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated.<sup>108</sup>

Bhabha wishes to discuss culture in terms of the boundaries between cultures, but wishes to replace the notion of stable cultures existing alongside one another with a more fluid and shifting concept of culture. In a similar fashion, *The Satanic Verses* shows that magic realism should not be seen as a hybrid fusion of simply stable realist and fantastic elements, but made up of elements which are themselves fluid, continually contested along lines of difference, yet clearly impacting upon one another. The fantasy elements of *The Satanic Verses* clearly serve to challenge realism as one of the tools of colonial oppression. Yet fantasy is also revealed as a form vulnerable to processes of marginalisation. It is also vulnerable to criticism as politically disengaged when read as a flight from reality. Yet, the magic realist work may maintain a relationship to the real both through its obviously realist elements. It may also, as a form of realism, forward a more fluid conception of realism itself.

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<sup>107</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘The Commitment to Theory’, p. 34.

<sup>108</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘The Commitment to Theory’, p. 34 (Bhabha’s parentheses).



Bhabha argues that all cultures are inherently unstable simply because the act of enunciating cultures involves the same slippage experienced by all utterances. In effect, Bhabha is proposing a poststructural perspective on language as the means to gain insight into the mechanisms of cultural expression and identity. He is suggesting that culture is not something that can be fully communicated or possessed, but is something open to interpretation and performance. This is because, as is the case for all utterances, the first space of 'I' and the second space of 'you' are bridged via the third space of language and context. Any attempts to homogenise culture, or suggest cultural purity, are doomed. Similarly, in *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin's lover, the art critic Zeenat Vakil, attempts to convince Saladin of the importance of non-essentialist readings of India's cultural heritage by presenting him with a copy of her book entitled *The Only Good Indian*. This work argues against the notion of authenticity and seeks to replace it with a more fluid and eclectic view of cultural identity, 'for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seem to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest? [...] Actually, we're all bad Indians. Some worse than others' (p. 52).

Bhabha argues that the 'Third Space' is unrepresentable because it is not a thing-in-itself, but a process. Yet, *The Satanic Verses* clearly attempts to demonstrate the literary potential of such a space. It is a novel very much concerned with the act of enunciating cultural identity, as well as revealing the uncertainty and ambivalence emerging from that utterance. Identity in *The Satanic Verses* reflects what Bhabha describes as the 'discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference'.<sup>109</sup> Characters in *The Satanic Verses* are uncertain, confused by a multitude of experiences not easily identifiable as culturally specific. The ability of these characters to thrive and survive depends on their acceptance of ambivalence. Gibreel's descent into madness is matched by a denial of his past and the manic insistence of his own fantastic divinity. Divinity represents the ability to transcend the world, to escape ambivalence, yet the more violently he insists upon his divine nature the more confused and disorientated he becomes. Saladin, by the end of the novel, lacks either the will or desire for such manic insistence. He surrenders to the confusion that has so dominated his life; he frees himself of the burden created by a vain insistence upon an impossible ideal. The novel ends with Saladin 'in-between'.



Bhabha argues that by exploring hybridity, this “Third Space”, we may elude the politics of polarity<sup>110</sup>. He suggests that *The Satanic Verses* explores this space, declaring that the novel signals ‘the emergence of a hybrid national narrative’.<sup>111</sup> Certainly, Saladin’s migration from India as a thirteen-year-old boy is described in terms of cross-fertilisation. The DC-8 carrying him to England is described as ‘a metal phallus, and the passengers were spermatozoa waiting to be spilt’ (p. 41). Years later, the Shaandar cafe offers him an insight into the relationship between hybridity and sustenance. Saladin initially finds it difficult to derive hope from a gastronomic image. For Saladin ‘England was a peculiar-tasting smoked fish full of spikes and bones, and nobody would ever tell him how to eat it’ (p. 44). His attempts to ingest western culture are thwarted and his attempts to be accepted are rebuffed. However, the cafe is famous not only for the excellence but also the variety of its dishes; dishes that gain their flavour from a marinade of both Eastern and Western influences. For better or for worse, the same is true for Saladin. The very thing he seeks is already a part of him and redemption is found only when he accepts this. Later in the text, while watching *Gardener’s World*, Saladin is introduced to the concept of a chimeran graft and so happens upon an image that at last allows him to accept his hybrid heritage:

There it palpably was, a chimera with roots, firmly planted in and growing vigorously out of a piece of English earth: a tree, he thought, capable of taking the metaphoric place of the one his father had chopped down in a distant garden in another incompatible world. If such a tree were possible, then so was he; he, too, could cohere, send down roots, survive (p. 406).

The concept of hybridity, however, does not meet with universal acceptance. Benita Parry, for example, argues that Bhabha’s conceptualisation of a ‘Third Space’ and his foregrounding of ambivalence serve to elide a more confrontational set of relations between colonisers and colonised, relations not so easily overturned by theory. Parry writes:

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<sup>109</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘The Commitment to Theory’, p. 38.

<sup>110</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘The Commitment to Theory’, p. 39.

<sup>111</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation”: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation”, in *Nation and Narration*, p. 318.



Those who have been or are still engaged in colonial struggles against contemporary forms of imperialism could well read the theorizing of discourse analysts with considerable disbelief at the construction this puts on the situation they are fighting against and the contest in which they are engaged.<sup>112</sup>

Parry argues that emphasis upon hybridity at the expense of struggle and confrontation represents little more than an academic favouring of theory over practice.<sup>113</sup> Rushdie himself concedes that his emphasis upon the multiple potential of hybridity might attract similar criticism. When interviewed by Maya Jaggi, Rushdie observes:

There's a flip side to pluralism; the down side can be confusion, formlessness, chaos, a lack of vision or singleness of purpose. There are some very strong, monolithic, brutal views around, and sometimes those who have a clearer view get further.<sup>114</sup>

In *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), moreover, Rushdie appears to rather playfully poke fun at the rarefied academic manner in which the concept may be applied to his work. One of the central characters of the novel is the artist Aurora Zogoiby, mother of the text's 'hero' Moraes Zogoiby, the 'Moor' of the novel's title. A study of Aurora's work, entitled 'Imperso-Nation and Dis/Semi/Nation: Dialogics of Eclecticism and Interrogation of Authenticity in A.Z', is a joke made directly at the expense of Bhabha's discussion of Rushdie in his essay "'DissemiNation": Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation'.<sup>115</sup>

Yet, Rushdie's comments upon pluralism and his humorous reference to Bhabha merely indicate Rushdie's awareness of the debate surrounding hybridity. It is typical of Rushdie that he should attempt to incorporate multiple perspectives into his thinking and writing. He argues, however, that the potential offered by hybridity is too great for it to be rejected inasmuch as it offers the promise of something new emerging out of old

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<sup>112</sup> Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', p. 43.

<sup>113</sup> Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', p. 43.

<sup>114</sup> Maya Jaggi, 'The Last Laugh', *New Statesman and Society*, 8.369 (1995), p. 21.

<sup>115</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 329.



conflicts and oppositions.<sup>116</sup> Consequently, hybridity remains both a thematic and formal feature of his work. Cundy makes just this point when she argues that Rushdie's work represents 'something else entirely; the hybrid post-colonial text'.<sup>117</sup>

Reading *The Satanic Verses* as a novel very much concerned with such promise allows for a complex appreciation of the novel's engagement with the postcolonial experience of migrancy. It may and despite all the troubles generated by its publication also allow for a reading of the novel as a positive expression of Rushdie's hope for the future. Such a reading, moreover, also allows for a fuller and more hopeful conception of the critical category of magic realism. It has been the purpose of this chapter to demonstrate that magic realism may be usefully applied to *The Satanic Verses*. The dispute associated with the term, its different formal definitions, the various ways it might be linked to postcolonial debate, even the manner in which such links are challenged, is such that the simple act of describing *The Satanic Verses* as magic realism may very usefully indicate the range of debates generated by the novel while also signalling its potential to confuse, disturb and even offend. Reading *The Satanic Verses* as a magic realist novel, however, also broadens our understanding of the term. In this way, the value of describing Rushdie's novel as magic realist flows in two directions. *The Satanic Verses* itself illuminates the manner in which magic realism, when conceived of as a hybrid form, may be linked to postcolonial debates through hybridity and so understood as a critical category that transcends binaries as it emerges from and portrays 'a world of becoming, a dynamic open system incessantly striving to synthesize the stubborn dualisms created by human culture'.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> See: Colin McCabe, et al, 'Interview: Salman Rushdie Talks to the London Consortium About The Satanic Verses', *Critical Quarterly*, 38.2 (1996), p. 65.

<sup>117</sup> Catherine Cundy, *Salman Rushdie, Contemporary World Writers*, p. 26.

<sup>118</sup> Floyd Merrell, 'The Ideal World in Search of Its Reference: An Inquiry into the Underlying Nature of Magic Realism', *Chasqui: Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana*, 4.2 (1975), p. 13.



## Conclusion

As this thesis has shown, magic realism is a disputed critical category. Much of the confusion associated with the term arises from a tendency to apply it almost exclusively to the geographical context of Latin American fiction and/or the theoretical context of postcolonial debate. Some critics go so far as to suggest that magic realism should only be discussed in such terms. These contexts are, in turn, linked to a restricted formal understanding of magic realism in terms of a privileged fantastic placed in opposition to realism. A number of critics, indeed, discuss magic realism as though there was nothing to distinguish it from the fantastic. Consequently, a certain amount of doubt surrounds its critical worth - the value of applying magic realism to other geographical or theoretical contexts is uncertain and its close association with the fantastic means that the term is seen to lack formal precision.

There is no reason, however, to believe that magic realism should be considered the product of specific geographical locations, cultural, theoretical or even historical moments. Perhaps it is best viewed in terms of a literary expression the history and nature of which is still being explored today. During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990's there was a proliferation of novels discussed and indeed sometimes marketed as magic realism. Novels such as Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* (1978), William Kennedy's *Ironweed* (1983), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Christoph Ransmayr's *The Last World* (1990), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1989), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993) are just a few of the examples which serve to reveal the quality and diversity associated with the term magic realism during this period. Although there might be a sense that this high point in the history of magic realist writing may be coming to an end, more contemporary novels such as Shifra Horn's *The Fairest among Women* (2001), Luke Sutherland's *Venus as a Boy* (2004) and perhaps most notably Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) demonstrate that it continues to flourish.

Similarly, academic interest in the term remains high as critics continue to explore possible contexts for and the value of magic realism. Maggie Ann Bowers' *Magic(al) realism* (2004), for example, traces the evolution of the term and its possible links to political contexts.<sup>1</sup> Ian Rudge's 'Magical Realism in Children's Literature: A

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magical Realism* (London: Routledge, 2004).



Narratological Reading' (2004) suggests that there exist discreet codes specific to children's literature that allow them to be placed in relation to magic realism.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang's *A Companion to Magical Realism* (2005), reveals the ways in which critical usage of the term is expanding when they apply the category to Seamus Heaney's poetry and look back through literary history and link the term to the works of writers such as W. Yeats and Ovid.<sup>3</sup> Such studies suggest that magic realism not only remains a valid critical category but will continue to be so as these explorations continue to develop our understanding of the term

This thesis may be placed in relation to this sort of academic exploration. In this thesis, I have argued that despite the confusion associated with the term and calls for its abandonment, magic realism is an important and valuable critical term. Novels such as Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* demonstrate that magic realism may be usefully placed in relation to geographical and theoretical contexts beyond those traditionally associated with the term. More importantly, however, I have argued that these novels signal that the full value of magic realism lies in a more complex conception of the formal qualities encompassed by the category and the manner in which they may be linked to critical theory.

*Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Satanic Verses* may be presented as magic realist texts in terms of a privileged fantastic. Indeed, this thesis has argued as much. Magic realist works do, in part, stand in relation to the fantastic. I have also argued that an oppositional dynamic between the fantastic and realism might also be combined with a discussion of the theoretical discourses associated with them. Reading these novels in this fashion clearly shares much in common with the numerous, but always brief, references made to them by magic realist criticism.<sup>4</sup> Consequently,

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Rudge, 'Magic Realism in Children's Literature: A Narratological Reading', *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 10. 2 (2004), pp. 127-140.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, *A Companion to Magical Realism* (Woodbridge: Tamesis Books, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see: Angel Flores, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction', *Hispania*, 38 (1955), pp. 188-189; Robert Alter, 'Magic Realism in the Israeli Novel', *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, 16.2 (1996), p. 159; Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 180; Isobel Armstrong, 'Woolf by the Lake, Woolf at the Circus: Carter and



each of the novels examined in this thesis may be seen to conform to the dominant understanding of magic realism – formal and theoretical discussions are neatly arranged along clearly drawn battle lines. This thesis has argued, however, that these novels also provide evidence of more complex formal relations than those usually indicated by the term magic realism. *Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Satanic Verses* fluctuate between the certainty of formal oppositions and the uncertainty of formal ambiguity.

Gregor's transformation, for example, may seem to present a fantastic challenge to the authority of his father and that of his employer, yet it fails to free him from his mean and claustrophobic existence; the material conditions that have so oppressed him remain as powerful as ever. Oskar's fantastic powers disturb those around him, but they are ultimately ineffective against the violence of concentrated political will. In *Nights at the Circus* the fantastic not only fails to provide freedom, but appears to reinforce women's experience of marginalisation. Rushdie also has reservations about the fantastic. Throughout *The Satanic Verses*, the fantastic is rarely able to provide positive or lasting liberation or happiness for any of its characters. It is, however, frequently exposed as a failure to comprehend the real or as a something that merely perpetuates systems of power based upon centre and margins.

Each of the novels studied in this thesis, moreover, not only suggest certain reservations about the fantastic, but may also be discussed in terms of realism. Realism may be seen to function usefully within each of these novels rooting their fantastic elements in the realm of the real. *Metamorphosis* moves on from the single fantastic event of Gregor's transformation towards a careful description of the material conditions that both precede and follow this event. Gregor's physical world is a recognisable one and the novel is steeped in detailed, realistic, descriptions of familiar objects. Realism in Grass's writing functions to restrain the fantastic and ensure its subversive potential does not become

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Tradition', in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press, 1994), p. 269; Richard Todd, 'Conventions and Innovation in British Fiction 1981-1984: The Contemporaneity of Magic Realism', in *Convention and Innovation in Literature*, eds Theo L. D'haen, Rainer Grübel and Helmut Lethen (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1989), p. 365; Rawdon Wilson, 'The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, pp. 221-223; Steven F. Walker, 'Magical Archetypes: Midlife Miracles in *The Satanic Verses*', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 347; Keith Wilson, 'Midnight's Children and Reader Responsibility', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, p. 36.



separated from an identifiable frame of historical reference. Realistic description, and reference to the historical real, lends a substance to Grass's narrative that it might not possess if simply read in terms of the fantastic. Similarly, in *Nights at the Circus* the fantastic content of the novel remains firmly rooted in the realm of the real and the very pressing political concerns of that realm. The same can be said of *The Satanic Verses*; the formal ambiguity of the novel allows for a positive reading of both its use of the fantastic and its referential grounding in the stark reality of the postcolonial experience.

It is, moreover, also possible to discuss these novels as realist works in their own right. Such an approach, however, requires a more complicated understanding of realism than is usually presented within magic realist debate. The distortion and confusion of Kafka's fictions does not represent a transgression against realism, but is a feature of Kafka's realism as it reveals the very real material and psychological alienation of man. Grass possesses a fluid understanding of realism, one that challenges current literary prejudice against it. For Grass, realism should not be understood simply in terms of mimetic correspondence, but represents something of a 'rope-walking act',<sup>5</sup> one which transforms elements of the real, but which may also stand in relation to historical reality. For Carter, her writing is a form of realism not necessarily bound to describe only the physical or social world, but also the individual subjective experience of the world – a 'social realism of the unconscious'.<sup>6</sup> Like Carter, Rushdie is also prepared to discuss his works in relation to a more fluid conception of realism. Rushdie very much admires, for example, the manner in which Dickens' novels draw upon a wealth of referential detail from which to construct highly realistic settings and suggests that his own writing should be understood in similar terms. Rushdie observes that like himself, Dickens 'uses a kind of backdrop or setting for his works, which is completely naturalistic, down to the tiniest details. And on top of this completely naturalistic background he imposes totally surrealistic images'.<sup>7</sup>

*Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Satanic Verses*, their movement, from the certainty of formal oppositions to formal ambiguity, clearly demonstrate the need for a more thoughtful, less oppositional, discussion of the formal

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in John Reddick, *The 'Danzig Trilogy' of Günter Grass*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975) p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Amanda Smith, 'Angela Carter: An Interview', *Publishers Weekly*, 4 January 1985, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> Chandrabhanu Pattanayak, 'Interview with Salman Rushdie', *The Literary Criterion*, 18.3 (1983), p. 20.



qualities and dynamics that may be described by the critical category magic realism. As this thesis has argued, this may in turn be reflected in the way the term may be mobilised alongside the theoretical debates associated with these novels.

*Metamorphosis*, for example, paves the way for a discussion of magic realism as a valuable critical category describing a literary engagement with psychoanalytical thought in terms of both hidden psychic forces, and the ways in which they might manifest themselves, and the visible material conditions that give rise to and shape those forces. For psychoanalytical thought also offers an outward, ‘world based’, materialist perspective that should be viewed as inseparable from its exploration of an ‘inner reality’. The *Tin Drum* allows the term to be discussed in relation to historical debate through both historical reference and distortion - through an exploratory combination of correspondence and coherence - that acknowledge the subjectivity underpinning historical discourse and which go some way towards dissolving the boundaries between historians and literary writers. *Nights at the Circus* places magic realism in relationship to feminist thought in terms of both the depiction of invented and imagined alternatives to patriarchal oppression and a keen political engagement with the material realm of the real. The novel celebrates womanhood, explores marginality, but refuses to allow such a position to offer consolation. *The Satanic Verses* stands in relation to a broader range of postcolonial debates than is usually linked to magic realism. For, Rushdie’s novel complicates and ultimately replaces the oppositions of centre and margins with a more fluid dynamic arising from his examination of migrancy and hybridity. In doing so, *The Satanic Verses* allows for a similarly broad conception of magic realism – one that can be seen to engage with both the oppression of the colonial experience and the postcolonial experience of mass migration, cultural exchange and hybridity.

So, as this thesis has shown, *Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Satanic Verses* clearly represent a challenge to the dominant conception of magic realism. Though they are frequently referred to as magic realist works, they fail to conform to both formal and theoretical discussion of the category. They set up formal oppositions between the fantastic and realism only to complicate and undermine them. Their engagement with different theoretical perspectives is equally challenging. They not only show that magic realism may be applied to theoretical perspectives left largely unexamined by magic realist debate, but also demonstrate that such perspectives are far



too complex to be linked to texts in terms of the oppositional dynamic that so dominates such debate. In doing so, moreover, *Metamorphosis*, *The Tin Drum*, *Nights at the Circus* and *The Satanic Verses* might also indicate the future direction of magic realist debate. This thesis, indeed, may be viewed in just such a light. For, this thesis represents a movement away from discussion of the category in terms of formal opposition and how it is reflected in theoretical discussion of the texts. Instead, it has explored the value of magic realism as a critical category by acknowledging the novels' formal and thematic ambiguity and by suggesting a more inclusive approach to the theoretical perspectives associated with them.



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