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## Magical Realism and its European Essence

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### Abstract

Magical realism is known with its oxymoronic characteristic, magic plus realism. It became known with the boom of the magical realist novel in the 1960s in Latin America and became globally recognized from 1980 onwards. However, it is mostly forgotten that it had started its journey from Europe. The term “magic realism” first appeared in German philosophy in 1798 in Novalis’ notebook. Then, it entered art criticism in 1925 through Roh’s essay and developed in Italy through by Bontempelli. Later, after transformation and formation, magical realism appeared in the novels as a popular mode first in Latin America and then worldwide. The present study charts the path and discusses the development of magical realism from its commencement in Europe. In addition to presenting the views of Novalis, Roh and Bontempelli on initiating the term, it compares their views to show what characteristic in their views inspires today’s magic realism.

**Keywords:** Magical realism, Magic realism, Novalis, Roh, Bontempelli.

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## Introduction

Magical realism became known with the boom of the magical realist novel in the 1960s in Latin America. However, it is mostly forgotten that it had started its journey from Europe in the field of art. After transformation and formation, magical realism appeared in the novels as a popular mode first in Latin America and then worldwide. The term “magic realism” first appeared in German philosophy in 1798 in Novalis’ notebook. Then, it entered art criticism in 1925 through Franz Roh’s essay and developed in Europe through the work of Bontempelli. Although nearly forgotten in Europe in the 1940s, it emerged in the discussions of European-educated Latin American writers such as Pierti, Asturias, and Carpentier who wanted to present a Latin American version of surrealism. Magical realism entered the realm of literary criticism through the work of Flores. Writers such as Echevarría and Spindler tried to define different types of magical realism based on the definitions of Roh and Carpentier and the magico-realist fiction written in Europe and Latin America. Magical realism became global through the works of Noble Prize winners who used magical realism in their fiction (Ararguç and Asayesh, 2016: 152).

Due to being an oxymoron and its hybrid nature (magic plus realism), it has caught the attention of critics. In a magico-realist fiction the supernatural is treated as well as an everyday matter.

As mentioned, magical realism first became well known throughout Latin America in the 1960s. Yet, it became globally recognized from 1980 onwards (Ibid). The term was first introduced to the art world in Europe in 1925 by the German art historian and photographer Franz Roh. In 1927, Massimo Bontempelli, an Italian critic, first defined magical realism in literary circles. This study charts the path and discusses the development of magical realism from its initiation in Europe.

### 1. Novalis’s ‘*magischer Realist*’

The first use of the term “magical realism” is usually attributed to Franz Roh. Some authors, including Warnes and Guenther attribute the term to Novalis. Guenther (1995) states that the concept of “magischer idealismus” (magical idealism) in German philosophy is an old one. At the end of the eighteenth century, Novalis wrote about “magical idealist” and “magical realist” in philosophy (p. 34). Warnes (2009) attributes the development of the term to Novalis and mentions that in 1798 Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, the German Romantic poet and philosopher better known by his penname of Novalis, imagined in his notebooks two kinds of prophets “who might live outside the boundaries of enlightened discourse without losing touch with the real” (p. 20). He proposed that such prophets should be called a ‘*magischer Idealist*’ and a ‘*magischer Realist*’—a magical idealist and a magical realist (p. 20). He also mentions that Novalis preferred the term magical idealism.

Novalis was considered a “lyric poet of early romanticism” and a philosopher (Beiser, 2002, p. 407). According to Beiser, Novalis should have an outstanding place in the history of German Idealism, as before Schelling and Hegel he had devised some of the essential themes

of absolute idealism. In idealism, as opposed to materialism, material objects and the external world do not exist in reality; they are creations of the mind or constructs of ideas. Referring to the ideal and real Novalis wrote:

That the absolute is the divine logos, the identity of the subjective and objective; that the ideal and the real are only parts of a single living whole; that thinking lapses into falsehood and contradiction in abstracting parts from the whole; that unity is not possible without difference; and, finally, that only art has the power to perceive the absolute (p. 408).

Novalis calls this magical idealism. While some believe that he was influenced by Fichte or predicted Schelling and Hegel, others state that he was a realist more than an idealist. Beiser himself accepts that Novalis was *not* an idealist “in the Kantian-Fichtean way” (p. 422) yet his views did not have similar characteristics as *absolute idealism* (p. 409). Absolute or objective idealism starts with a rejection of “the unknowable thing-in-itself, thereby enabling philosophers to treat all reality as the creation of mind or spirit” (*The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 2016). For Novalis, the absolute has a subjective and objective aspect that unites idealism and realism. Thus, Beiser links Novalis with Hölderlin, Schlegel, Schelling and Hegel.

What Novalis means by magical idealism seems obscure to some, but most define it as “the possibility of a complete control over our bodies and all of nature” (Beiser, 2002, p. 422). Beiser refers to the fragments from *Vorarbeiten*: “In one fragment Novalis imagines that some day we will have the power to control our external senses just as we now have the power to direct our internal ones” (p. 422). The location of external sense for Novalis is in the body and internal one in the soul: “Through the body we perceive stimuli in the external world, whereas through the soul we perceive stimuli within ourselves” (p. 422). According to Novalis, we can control our internal senses. Beiser suggests that in another section Novalis focuses on the relationship between mind and body rather than that between internal and external sense. Novalis supposes that one day we will be able “to control the inner organs of our body just as we are now able to control our thoughts, actions and speech” (p. 422). Novalis believes that if we can control our bodies, we can control our senses, which will allow us to influence the world. He believes in the power of the will to extend over nature. Beiser regards Novalis’ thinking as utopian, because he demands the “ideal of a complete control over nature”, so that we human beings reach the status of God at last (p. 423). Magical idealism in Novalis’ definition has the romantic principle because romanticism is forming the world into a work of art, so that it gets back to its magic, mystery, and beauty. The magical idealist should become familiar with the art of interpreting the signs of nature, and learn how to read “the inner structure of things from their external and empirical characteristics” (p. 425). However, this control of nature is not by supernatural means. He wants to reach to the outstanding goals of traditional magic that is control over nature — “through method, rule, and reason” (p. 425). For Novalis, magic is in art. There are two arts for a magical idealist: medicine and poetry. A magical idealist by medicine learns how to expand our inner stimuli, and to reach “a balance between over and under stimulation”;

and it is by the means of poetry that he learns how to attain a magical alteration of the sensible world (p. 426).

Another doctrine of Novalis is syncretism, which is a combination of idealism and realism. Beiser (2002) refers, in syncretism Novalis believes that the magical idealist should have the power “to make not only his thoughts into things but also his things into thoughts [...]. He shows how the soul externalizes itself in the things of nature as well as how the things in nature internalize themselves in the mind” (p. 427).

As Novalis was a Romantic poet, nature and unity with nature dominate his philosophy. At the same time, his theory of magical idealism brings together the dualities of mind and body, subject and object, inner and outer world, real and ideal. Although Novalis refers to magical realism, he does not develop this concept clearly. However, according to his discussions on realism, we can infer that a magical realist uses the supernatural power that existed in both nature and the empirical world.

## **2. Franz Roh’s “Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism”**

Magical realism appeared in Germany for the second time in 1925 through the publication of Franz Roh’s “Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism”. Almost all studies on the history of magical realism attribute the first use of the term to this essay. In studying magical realism, Guenther (1995) finds it necessary to have the “historical context and aesthetic explanation of the term” because it connects Roh’s artistic construction to its literary implications (p. 34).

Roh (1995) first uses the term to describe a new painting’s return to realism after expressionism’s abstract style. While realism is used to recognize a movement in the writing of novels during the nineteenth century and represents human life and experience in literature, expressionism does not use realistic descriptions of life and the world, instead includes unrealistic and emotional states of mind. Roh chooses the term magical realism instead of post-expressionism because he believes post-expressionism shows a chronological relationship. He states, “with the word ‘magic’ as opposed to ‘mystic’ I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (p. 16).

Roh (1995) states that what distinguishes one phase of art from another is only through the use of the particular objects that artists observe. A new painting is different from expressionism by the use of its objects. As a reaction to impressionism, expressionism “shows an exaggerated preference for fantastic, extraterrestrial, remote objects,” while in post-expressionism “the fantastic dreamscape has completely vanished and our real world emerges before our eyes, bathed in the clarity of a new day” (p. 17).

Roh (1995) tries to distinguish expressionism, futurism, and post-expressionism through objectivity:

But during the development of Expressionism, painting, which has somehow almost always held on to nature, went as far as it could toward rejecting its

representative, imitative meaning; specific objectivity was suspected of lacking spirituality; in Futurism, the objective world appeared in an abrupt and dislocated form (p. 18).

On the other hand, post-expressionism aims to amalgamate reality into the center of visibility.

Expressionism lacks a combination of reality and appearance, Roh (1995) refers. This combination was not possible until the recovery of the objective world. It seems to eliminate the image of real nature in order to choose an entirely spiritual world. Post-expressionism affords us the miracle of existence in its serene time: the endless miracle of everlastingly mobile and vibrating molecules. Roh continues that new objectivity, a term he borrows from Hartlaub, is more than the simple respect for the objective world in which we are fused. Besides, we see the contrast in the forms of the spirit and the very solidness of objects. We would see this later in magic realism when it enters the domain of literature. Roh discusses two worlds in post-expressionist painting, stating that “[t]he point is not to discover the spirit beginning with objects but, on the contrary, to discover objects beginning with the spirit; for that reason, one accords consummate value to the process in which spiritual form remains large, pure, and clear” (p. 24). He goes on to say this second objective world is similar to the first, the existing world, but it is a refined world. Talking about the paintings of German artist George Schrimpf’s painting, Roh states that Schrimpf wants his painting “to be ‘real’ to impress us as something ordinary and familiar and, nevertheless, to be magic by virtue of that isolation in the room: even the last little blade of grass can refer to the spirit” (p.25). He calls this a double-sided art that strives between contraries.

As mentioned, Roh did not put any special value into the term magical realism. He finds magical realism to be the most appropriate among other terms such as verism, ideal realism, and neoclassicism. Guenther (1995) believes that Roh never gives a brief definition of magic realism (p. 34). He gives twenty-two characteristics for Post-expressionism in contrast with expressionism. In his *German Art in the Twentieth Century* (1958), Roh reduces the number to fifteen and refers to new objectivity finding out that his terms had been concealed by Hartlaub’s (qtd. in Guenther, p. 35). Two years earlier than Roh’s “Post-Expressionism” Gustav Hartlaub, a German art historian, expressed his intention for a new objectivity exhibition. Roh’s magic realism and new objectivity both arose with the decline of expressionism and the outcome of World War I.

For Roh, magical realism was an aesthetic category. According to Chanady (1985), although it is useful to know what “magical realism” initially concerned itself within Roh’s theories, it cannot be put to use “to both pictorial art and literature without causing confusion because the two belong to a different medium of expression” (pp. 17-8). Even if there are similarities between magical realism in painting and in literature, they have different implications. At the same time, she says that we cannot abandon the term completely. Chanady does not mention how Roh’s aesthetic definition of magical realism differs from those in the literature. She finds it helpful for developing a useful critical notion.

Similarly, Hegerfeldt (2005) finds that many of Roh's aspects are totally related to technical features of painting. She discusses one central difference between Roh's definition and the current literary concept is in the meaning of the term magic. While magic for Roh refers to "the sense of newness with which quotidian reality is endowed through painterly emphasis on clarity and clinical detail," it now refers to the opposite of realistic (p. 13). While Roh's magical realism tries to show "everyday objects are endowed with a sense of mystery and unreality," today's magic realism "springs from the naturalization of fantastic occurrences" (p. 60).

### **3. Massimo Bontempelli and the new myth of magical realism**

Another significant figure in the development of magical realism in Europe is Massimo Bontempelli, an Italian poet, novelist, dramatist and critic. In 1926, Bontempelli founded *900 (Novacento)*, a review in which he expressed his perspectives on contemporary matters. Witt (2001) calls Bontempelli the creator of magical realism in Italy. Bontempelli became secretary of the fascist syndicate of writers and authors in 1928. Witt finds Bontempelli's creation of myth "the most enthusiastic and most developed" (p. 109). She states that according to Bontempelli, the creation of new myths is imperious due to the contemporary historical and political situation: World War I created a "tabula rasa" from which a new era is beginning (p. 109). He divides history into three periods: the classical, the romantic, and the present. The classical includes the pre-Homeric times to the time of Christ, the romantic contains the beginnings of Christianity to World War I. From Bontempelli's point of view, Nietzsche is the pioneer of the third period and of fascism. As humanity is starting again, we should "feel elementary" and rebuild from nothing, and create our own myths as it happened in the other periods (p. 109). How are we going to create this myth? Bontempelli's answer is that the style of the present age will be "'magical realism,' which conceives of art not as an imitation of reality but as an exploration of mystery and of daily life as a miraculous adventure" (p. 109). Bontempelli does not define myth in a clear way but rather associates myth with the politics; he sees fascism and communism as the new system for the new age. In the same way that politics rediscovers power, art is reviving magic; Moscow and Rome are the tombs of democracy; democracy's demise needs new myths, and new art forms.

Explaining Bontempelli's devotion to fascism, Witt (2001) quotes him, "my long-standing adherence to Fascism is due primarily to the fact that I considered it to be a frank political primitivism, which joyously and with one clean sweep canceled the experiences of the outworn politics that had preceded it" (p. 109). At the same time, Bontempelli warns that the new start in politics and art is not total because we cannot become Adam, we have a past. He suggests that making new myth for the new men must be, "self-conscious". It should not be simple like the myths of the pre-Homerics (p. 110).

### **4. Novalis, Roh, and Bontempelli's Magical Realism: A Comparison**

Magical realism finds meaning in philosophy, art, and literature, but its true nature flourished in the literature of Latin America. However, the amalgamation of reality and fantasy in the imitation was not the same as the one we observe in magico-realist fiction today. It is not

clear whether Roh borrowed the term from Novalis. For more than forty years, Warnes (2009) states, Roh was the main person in critical and artistic circles in Germany [...]. His academic training made certain that he was familiar with the thinking of German philosophy, and the effect of Romantic ideas is clear in his dialectical method of analysis and in the language of his commentary on *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting (p. 24). As a result, he might have been familiar with the magical realism of Novalis. Warnes believes that in order to understand more about Roh's particular choice of term, we must return to Novalis (p. 24).

Warnes (2009) links Novalis and Roh's "conceptualisations of magical realism[...]with the limits of mimesis and a reliance on dialectics of inwardness and outwardness, subject and object, spirit and the world in their formulations of this concern" (p. 25). German Romanticism develops away from irrationalism, while magical realism ends the subjective prejudice of expressionism. As Romantics do not return to rigid neo-classicism, or to the autocracy of the mimetic principle submitted by Novalis, so too could the magical realist painters of the 1920s scarcely return to paint impressionistic landscapes and inanimate objects (p. 25).

As previously mentioned, Novalis developed magical idealism. For Novalis, absolute has both a subjective and objective aspect that unites idealism and realism. Magical idealism requires a complete control over the body and soul (external and internal senses). If we can control our body, we can control our senses, and our power will extend to nature. A magical idealist can interpret signs of nature as well as the inner and outer structure of things. For Novalis, magic is in art, medicine, and poetry. It is through poetry that a magical idealist learns how to attain a magical change of the sensible world (Witt, 2001: p. 426). In his doctrine of syncriticism, Novalis states that a magical idealist should have the power "to make not only his thoughts into things but also his things into thoughts" (Witt, 2001: p. 427). He shows how the soul externalizes itself in nature as well as how nature internalizes itself in the mind.

Comparing Roh and Novalis, Roh does not use magic as mystic. Like Novalis, he is not trying to find something supernatural in magic, which he views as something that is behind objective reality. In syncriticism, Novalis believes that the magical idealist should have the power "to make not only his thoughts into things but also his things into thoughts. He shows how the soul externalizes itself in the things of nature as well as how the things in nature internalize themselves in the mind" (Witt, 2001: p. 427). Similarly, according to Roh, new objectivity [magic realism] is more than the simple respect for the objective world in which we are combined. Besides, "we see juxtaposed in harsh tension and contrast the forms of the spirit and the very solidity of objects, which the will must come up against if it wishes to make them enter its system of coordinates" (Roh, 1995: p. 22). Roh's and Novalis' magical idealism hover between opposites: for Novalis, that of mind and body, internal sense and external sense, subjective and objective; for Roh, a double-sided art in which we can see a real, familiar and ordinary thing plus its spirit.

Another point to be considered is whether Bontempelli adopted magical realism from Roh. Warnes (2009) regards Bontempelli as a "more relevant figure than Roh to magical

realism's genealogy" (p. 27). He explains Bontempelli's desire for a new mythography that would regard the connections between past and present. The kind of art he offered was one that would find miracles in the middle of ordinary and everyday life (p. 27). Like Guenther, he believes that Bontempelli was independent from Novalis or Roh when he called his art magic realism.

Bowers (2005) states that Bontempelli was influenced by both surrealism and Roh's magical realism. She mentions that Bontempelli's *900* published magical realist writing and criticism. From her point of view, Bontempelli's magic realism coincides with that of Roh. On this issue, she quotes Dombroski's observation that Bontempelli was concerned with presenting "the mysterious and fantastic quality of reality" (p. 12). She quotes Dombroski in that, before reading Roh, Bontempelli emphasized the role of the imagination and nature in his writing, "providing a preparation for the influence of Roh's search for the magic of life shown through the clarity of heightened realism" (p. 58). While Bontempelli applied magic realist thoughts to writing, Roh applied it to pictorial art.

Although Bontempelli introduced magic realism in a 1927 article, Guenther (1995) considered that he defined certain features of "*realismo magico*" in the first four issues of *900* and used the term in both a literary and artistic context (p. 60). Unlike Bowers, who refers to the adaptation of Bontempelli from Roh, Guenther states that whether Bontempelli borrowed the term from Roh or not cannot be determined with any degree of certainty (p. 60). However, she does try to establish links. Bontempelli cooperated on *Der Querschintt*, a prominent German artistic and literary journal in which essays about modern art appeared. It was in this journal that Hartlaub publicized his 1925 Mannheim exhibit (p.60). Moreover, Georg Kaiser, mentioned in Roh's Magic Realism book, helped Bontempelli edit *900* (p. 60).

Hegerfeldt (2005) considers one important difference between Roh and Bontempelli's magical realism to be that the latter contains the use of realistic techniques to fantastic elements something Roh clearly omits (p. 15). Faris writes that Bontempelli used magic realism to describe both painting and literature almost concurrently in 1926 (p. 39). At the same time, magical realism due to Roh's description of "European painting's movement back toward realism after expressionism" in 1925, includes the features from "visual history" (p. 39). In this case, its verbal representation cannot be well applied.

Both Roh's and Bontempelli's views on magical realism are presented between the World Wars and during the rise of modernism. Bontempelli believed that after World War I, we collectively needed to create a new myth-maybe because it could help bind people together. Magical realism in this context is not an imitation of reality but an explanation of mystery and daily life as a miraculous adventure. His view is similar to that of Roh, who argues that in post-expressionism, the fantastical dreamscape has entirely disappeared and that our real world appears before our eyes. In other words, post-expressionism sought to reintegrate reality into the heart of visibility.

Another similarity lies in their view of magic and art. For Novalis magic is in art while art is discovering magic according to Bontempelli. Novalis says that there are two types of art

for a magical idealist: the art of medicine and the art of poetry. It is through poetry that a magical idealist learns how to achieve a magical transformation of the sensible world. Bontempelli believes that in the same way that politics rediscovers power, art is reviving magic. Moscow and Rome are the tombs of democracy; democracy's demise needs new myths, and new art forms.

Despite the differences in their views, Novalis, Roh and Bontempelli believed that magical realism encompassed the burden of unreality behind the reality. This is the point that links magical realism in Europe to its practitioners in Latin America, the place where it flourished.

## 5. Conclusion

Magical realism, which is known with its oxymoronic characteristic; magic plus realism, became known with the boom of the magical realist novel in the 1960s in Latin America. However, this study presented a discussion on how magical realism had started its journey from Europe in the field of art.

The term "magic realism" first appeared in German philosophy in 1798 in Novalis' notebook. As it was discussed Novalis in his notebook mentioned the terms '*magischer Realist*' and '*magischer Idealist*'. However, he preferred the second term. Being a Romantic poet, nature and unity with nature dominated Novalis' philosophy. At the same time, his theory of magical idealism brought together the dualities of mind and body, subject and object, inner and outer world, real and ideal. Although Novalis referred to magical realism, he did not develop this concept clearly. However, according to his discussions on realism, we can infer that a magical realist uses the supernatural power that existed in both nature and the empirical world.

Magical realism appeared in Germany for the second time in 1925 through the publication of Franz Roh's "Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism". Almost all studies on the history of magical realism tribute the first use of the term to this essay. It was stated that Roh first used the term to describe a new painting's return to realism after expressionism's abstract style. His famous statement has inspired the magical realist critics: "with the word 'magic' as opposed to 'mystic' I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it" (1995, p. 16). Roh's magical realism tries to show everyday objects are enriched with a sense (an implication meaning) of mystery and unreality.

Another significant figure in the development of magical realism in Europe was Massimo Bontempelli in 1926. As discussed, creation of myth was one of the significant issues for Bontempelli. He found creation of new myth urgent due to the contemporary historical and political situation: World War I created an erased tablet from which a new age was beginning. He believed that-at his time-as humanity is starting again, one should "feel elementary" and rebuild from nothing, and create our own myths as it happened in the other periods. Bontempelli's answer to the question that how this myth is going to be created is: the

style of the present age will be “‘magical realism,’ which conceives of art not as an imitation of reality but as an exploration of mystery and of daily life as a miraculous adventure” (Witt, 2001, p. 109).

On the adoption of the term, it is not clear whether Roh borrowed the term from Novalis. However, as discussed, his academic training made certain that he was familiar with the thinking of German philosophy. Another point to be considered is whether Bontempelli adopted magical realism from Roh. Like the previous case, this point is not clear and there are different views about this. Unlike Bowers, who refers to the adaptation of Bontempelli from Roh, Guenther stated that whether Bontempelli borrowed the term from Roh or not cannot be determined with any degree of certainty. Like Guenther, Warnes believed that Bontempelli was independent from Novalis or Roh when he called his art magic realism.

Our study showed that magical realism started its journey from Europe in German philosophy in 1798, in 1925 in European painting and in Germany, and in 1926 in Italian literary criticism found its way. It was in 1927 with the translation of the article to Spanish in *Revista de Occidente* that it became known for Latin America, it would change to a Latin American mode in 1960 and has changed to a popular mode since 1980s.

Despite the differences in their views, Novalis, Roh and Bontempelli believed that magical realism encompassed the burden of unreality behind the reality. This is the point that links magical realism in Europe to its practitioners in Latin America, the place where it flourished.

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