

NOTES ON MAGIC REALISM IN LATIN AMERICA

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The subject I will try to deal with is related to a branch of Mexican Art which has been current since very old times. However my approach concerns only the contemporary application of the term Magic Realism, as related with supra-real iconographycal elements which don't apply to Surrealism in the way André Breton defined this movement, though it may have a few aspects frequently found in surrealistic imagery.

¿What is Magic Realism?. We can say that it is the objective, static and precise representation of everyday's reality, touched by some sort of unusual or improbable element that leaves the viewer or the reader marvelled, disconcerted or bewildered.

As a precise tendency, classified in the artistic historiography of our times, Magic Realism is: a current that is not exclusively Latin American, nor exclusively plastic, which manifests itself in Europe, the USA. and Latin America from 1918 to the present.

However, I have to state that what I have said is not essentially true. For instance, in painting we can trace back that same tendency from Hyeronimus Bosch, Arcimbaldo and a great number of mannerist painters. Actually it can be said that it appears together with the first artistic productions of mankind.

In modern times, Romantic and Postromantic literature and painting, specially the Symbolist movement, offer many examples. One of the most conspicuous ones are Edgar Allan Poe's Extraordinary Stories, that caused such a strong influence upon French and Latin American

writers and artists. The esoteric visions of the mexican painter Julio Ruelas, (1870-1907) illustrator of the most important Avant-Garde magazzine in Latin America, La Revista Moderna , fit perfectly in this tendency. It is not necessary to assert that England provides many examples, both in art and literature. William Blake can be seen as a forcruner of Magic Realism and William Turner's hallucinated visions were not far from suggesting paranormal forces. But maybe the most efective example comes from literature. It is Alice in Wonderland by the writer, matematician, photographer and paidophilic priest Charles Dogson, who wrote under the name of Lewis Carrol, as we all know. On my oppinion, Carrol's attitudes towards art and life became a sort of prototype which pervades our time.

¿Why then 1918 is to be taken as the year in which starts this tendency? . Because from the historical point of view, the conscient response to the dilemma caused by technologycal era was suffered with anxiety form the time of the First World War, and this conscience is one of its effects. Since the end of the war started a purpose of re-discovering the magical element existing in reality by means of a sort of faith. In many countries maybe it reflects some of the philosophical and psychologycal ideas spread by Carl Gustav Jung since 1913 (year of his departure from Freud). He had been suggesting the necessity of complementing men's psychical integrity by joining the irrational with reason itself.

But the term, which might be appliable in a universal sense, nowadays is used mainly to design Latin American artistic productions, either literary or plastic. It is not by chance that long time ago this continent was supposed to be the land where El Dorado was to be found.

By means of understanding what Magic Realism implies, it is convenient to ask oneself: ¿What is magic?, or perhaps it is better to say: ¿What things or events are to be considered as magic?. There are many forms and varieties of magic, but in spite of their differences, one common instance links them all: the use of paranormal powers to compel a desired result in accordance to the practitioners will. Of course magic is, no doubt, as old as man himself, and very often it has been suggested that magic was a precursor of Religion, though maybe both fields developed one at the side of the other, like parallel lines that might converge sometimes. The only gulf between the two exists in their attitudes to these paranormal powers. For magic is concerned with commanding, controlling and compelling it to its own ends, while religion is concerned with adoring, asking and accepting what it gives. No matter if the response is opposite to the demand, religion is supposed to guarantee something that benefits the individual (in the most misterious way, I should think). The magic power has quite a different aproach, since it is neither tolerant, nor mediatized. However, in Latin America the sincretism between the two attitudes is very strong. For instance, the image of a Saint can be put upside down if he or she has "behaved badly", a religious image might be pinched or a Crucifix can be strongly scolded. There are some historical facts that prove these mixed attitudes. It is known that José de León Tovar, the man who killed president Alvaro Obregón, before shutting him at Parque de la Bombilla in Mexico City, brought his gun to a Sanctuary, La Villa, where the image of Virgen de Guadalupe, a symbol of mexican identity, is worshiped. In doing this, he was responding orders given to him by a nun: "la madre Conchita". The pistol could kill, only if it was blessed and sacred by being in touch

with the holy icon.

Cinema portrays this reality in the most direct way. In the Brazilian film by Jabor Tuto Bem (Everything is all right, 1979), the maid who serves the extremely catholic family of a bourgeoisie-socialist journalist, is invested with stigma and venerated as a saint. Candles are lightened surrounding the woman, who stands beside her bed, while thousands of people of different social status form an endless queue in order to reach her, so as to state their demands.

Roughly speaking, there are two principal types of magic: white and black. The first is pursued for good ends and the black for evil ends. This last has been condemned officially by most societies. We all remember the number of immolations inflicted on people (mostly women), put to death by inquisitorial processes. However it still persists. A lot of persons are still used to go to the "brujos" bringing photographs, strands of hair, pieces of cloth, so as to make possible the rites which provoke damage, illness or even death to people they hate. These can protect themselves, and do so, by wearing special types of rings, amulets or "eyes of god".

Evil possession is related to black magic and exorcism as a religious rite is still practiced, as quite a few films have illustrated. Talk of cinema, Roman Polanski is the one who has dealt with the subject in the most surprising way, provoking, as it is well known, an extremely real fusion between fiction and life.

If we think of the certain commitments obtained through magic processes, we have to ascribe them scientifically back to the XVIII Century, when Anton Mesmer discovered and practiced what he called Animal Magnetism, which of course, is based on suggestion. Collective suggestion plays a fundamental role in all magic activities. And

either white or black, magic uses the same sort of rites and symbolism in different proportions. These rites and symbols are always visible. They are in the roots of a high quantity of artistic productions.

Coming back to art terms. We have other words to design this artistic tendency related to magical principles so current in Latin American art of our times. Very often we talk about Marvellous Realism or about Fantastic Realism. Are they equivalent terms? Not exactly, as we shall see. However there are so many constants as there are differences between these denominations.

The first given name: Marvellous Realism, was first used, I think, by the recently disappeared Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier in the prologue of his novel El reino de este mundo. (The Kingdom of This World) 1949. He said that a marvel begins to be such in an unequivocal way when it springs from an unsuspected alteration of reality, of an unusual illumination or a very favorable one of the inadvertent richness of everyday's life, or else when it comes from a privileged revelation of things. These factors are perceived with particular intensity due to an spiritual exaltation which conveys to a sort of border-line state. The marvellous sensation implies faith, he says. Those who don't believe in saints, can not be cured by miracles. Seeing some facts of existence as miracles, and presenting them in configurations is one tendency currently found in artistic works of all times and countries. In many small Latin American towns, life as a miracle, might be found before the eyes at every moment, as the Mexican artist Francisco Toledo has recently demonstrated in his huge retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, where the fables, myths and ways of life of his native region: Juchitan, Oaxaca, were recreated through his lavishly refined iconography in a most contemporary sign-language.

While the marvel is supposed to exist outside the self, fantasy be-

longs to the inner world. Fantastic Realism deals not with improbable facts, it deals with the impossible. Its kingdom belongs to the exacerbated imagination. There, a woman can lay in her bed amidst clouds, while her veins give life to an ivy which involves her body, like in Frida Kahlo's painting The Sleep, or else, women-birds might have serpent-like limbs, that coil like volutes, as in some paintings by Emilio Ortiz. Another "aethereal-feminine" symbol, Remedios la Bella, levitates from the land as if she were an Asumeta in Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez. Fantasy is fixed neither in the possible, nor in the improbable and it does not require faith, as dreams do not require any special power to be produced. However: magic, marvel and fantasy have something in common: the capacity of looking at the world or at the inner events with the eyes of the visioner. There is also, in the three instances, the belief in transmutations which not only do have an existence, but can be revealed to humans. And in a strict sense, they do exist in their own right, only their existence takes place in the field of the imaginary. This field is as real as reality itself, only it works with different type of logical principles, others than those we are used to deal with in the ordinary world. The imaginary is regulated by the same laws which rule the myth, the dream or the rhythe.

What sort of differences, if any, can be found between these sort of realisms and the literary and plastic movement named under the term coined by Guillaume Apollinaire and described by André Breton as Surrealism? I would say that this last supra-realism is based on a programme which is deliberately directed to the conquest of the irrational, like a propositive Praise of Madness. Surrealistic images reflect a real but arbitrary process. Marvel might exist, only it is not dis-

discovered, but provoked by volition. Sometimes it is invoked by means of prescriptions whose aim is to link objects with different proprieties in the most bizarre combinations. For the surrealist poets and painters, the marvel was not an spontaneous image received with surprise or amazement, it was rather the power to catalize images and relations between them as a crystal ball does, by infinite and distorted reflections on the mirror.

But if we analyze concrete individual works: poems, novels, films, paintings, collages ecc. Is it possible to delimit all these types of Supra-Realisms, Surrealism included, as if we were to establish once and for all definite boundaries between them? We all know that the answer is no. Proprieties of artistic objects exist clearly demarked only theoretically, and the works of art have the privilege of provoking many lectures at the same time, even if some of these lectures might correspond better than others to the structural configuration of the object and to the artist's intentions as well.

It is quite possible to encounter magic, marvel, fantasy and the surreal co-existing in one single object. Why then, taking the trouble to underline the differences? I will leave my question unanswered, hoping that the reader has already picked up what is useful to his own understanding when having finished to read this paper.