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Magic Realism: From Literature to Cinema

This essay will examine how the literary term *magic realism*, which was used to describe the work of many Latin American authors who wrote in the 1940s and 1950s, became a genre of Latin American film. Magic realism is a term widely used not only in academic, but also in popular culture circles. The popularity of films such as Like Water for Chocolate (1991) and Pan's Labyrinth (2006) attest to the pervasiveness and popularity of magic realism in both film and literature.

Arturo Usler-Pietri (1960) was the first critic to use magic realism to identify what was considered a new style of narrative in Latin America, in which reality and fantasy have no boundaries. Unfortunately, Usler-Pietri did not provide a clear definition of magic realism and the term that first applied to authors such as Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo, Fuentes and Márquez, was later applied to earlier authors like Borges and to most recent ones like Esquivel and Allende.

Magic realism, which has much in common with surrealism and science fiction, has been more appropriately defined by Lydia Rodríguez, who states that in magic realism “the text presents an anomaly that clashes with reality, yet neither characters nor reader are bothered by the facts.” (My translation) Rodríguez applies this definition only to works of literature. In the 1950s, magic realism texts were adapted into film and three of the most representative authors (Rulfo, Fuentes and Márquez) also wrote scripts for the big screen. It will be argued that the characteristics of magic realism in literature are very similar to those of magic realism in film,

because of the participation of the authors of literary work in the production of the scripts used to make the films. Magic realism in literature and film is almost always associated with the novel One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez; however, this novel was not the first magic realist text, nor was it ever made into a film. While Ernesto Sábato's novel El Túnel (The Tunnel) was the first magic realist literary work to be adapted into film, I will assert that the practice of adapting magic realism literature into film really began in Mexico with Juan Rulfo, whose short story "Talpa" was the source of the 1956 movie of the same name. I will examine films written by Rulfo, Fuentes, and García Márquez and will compare them to more recent films produced in the 1990s in order to establish a definition of magic realism in film that stems from the work of Juan Rulfo and the artistic and literary circles in which he worked. Latin American film historians like Jorge Ayala Blanco and John King do not use the term magic realism. Nevertheless, The New York Times has used "magic realism" to categorize works of literature as well as film and theater not only from Latin America, but for current works produced around the world.