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Magical realism as narrative to fight back in the post-truth context

Il realismo magico come narrativa per reagire nel contesto della post-verità

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ABSTRACT

Nell'era della post-verità, cercare la verità è diventato meno importante per il pubblico, mentre seguire dati e informazioni che confermano il proprio punto di vista sembra più promettente. Il realismo magico, mescolando il magico con il reale, funge da modalità narrativa per reagire. Attraverso l'analisi di due classici - Cent'anni di solitudine e Grande seno, fianchi larghi, questo articolo dimostra che i realisti magici creano una fusione in cui varie versioni della realtà possono coesistere. Nella collisione tra diverse versioni, emergono in modo spontaneo le menzogne politiche e la verità obliterata dalla versione dominante. Attraverso le bugie magiche che dicono la verità, il realismo magico insegna al pubblico a lasciare le proprie "echo chambers" e ad avvicinarsi alla verità multidimensionale.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Realismo magico, post-verità, realtà*

In the post-truth era, seeking the truth is meaningless for the general public; instead, following data and information that reinforce their interpretation of reality seems more promising. Magical realism, mixing the magical with the real, serves as a narrative mode to fight back. By analyzing two classics - One Hundred Years of Solitude and Big Breasts and Wide Hips, this paper demonstrates that magical realists create a fusion where various versions of reality claimed can be incorporated. In the collision of different versions, the operation of political lies and the truth obliterated by the dominant version emerge in a spontaneous way. Through magical lies that tell the truth, magical realism teaches the public to leave their echo chambers and approach multidimensional truth.

KEYWORDS: *Magical realism, post-truth, reality*

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1. *Magical realism in the post-truth era*

The word “post-truth”, which is defined as an adjective to describe «circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief»,¹ was chosen by Oxford Dictionaries as the Word of the Year 2016 due to a surge of its use in political contexts like the 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2016 United States presidential election. Consequently, «it has also become associated with a particular noun, in the phrase post-truth politics».² This suggests that nowadays people have entered a post-truth era where politicians are not in the least perturbed to lie in a conspicuous way to the public, as the public are willing to be complicit with the lies. For the general public, «reality is now so elusive and *their* perspectives as individuals and groups so divergent that it is no longer meaningful to speak of, or seek, the truth».³ Instead, accepting political lies that align with their own standpoint or even prejudice, and, taking these lies as reality seem more promising. In the post-truth context, since the foundation of truth has shifted «from fact to fiction, from reason and logic to rhetoric and emotions»,⁴ the meaning of truth becomes relativistic and the line between truth and falsehood is blurred. As Michiko Kakutani stresses in *The Death of Truth*, «truth increasingly seems to be in the eye of the beholder, facts are fungible and socially constructed».⁵

In fact, there is nothing new for politicians to lie, as Machiavelli instructs that «the princes who have accomplished great deeds are those who have thought little about keeping faith and who have known how cunningly to manipulate men’s minds».⁶ It is also not surprising that the connotations of reality and truth get diversified and complicated in a society marked by postmodernism which advocates deconstructing fixed, objective meanings of traditional concepts including “reality” and “truth”. Under this circumstance, what lies at the core of post-truth is the shift of the public’s attitude toward truth - that is, the cessation of efforts to uncover the complex truth of reality and the retreat into the ideological echo chamber characterized by one-sidedness. However, the question is that truth has long been serving as the defender of democracy and freedom as well as the fighter against

¹ *Word of the Year 2016*, <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/> (url consulted on 15/10/2024).

² *Ibid.*

³ Ivi, p. 98.

⁴ A. HUSSAIN, *Theorising Post-Truth: A Postmodern Phenomenon*, in «Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics», V, 42, 2019, pp. 150-162, 152.

⁵ M. KAKUTANI, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, Penguin Books, New York 2018, pp. 43-44.

⁶ N. MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince*, trad. di P. Bondanella, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, p. 60.

totalitarianism and autarchy, as mentioned by Thomas Jefferson.⁷ When the public are willing to be intellectually infantilized by political lies, they have irretrievably lost the discourse power on reality. By then, just like what Orwell illustrates in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, «whatever the Party holds to be truth, is truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party».⁸ In this sense, people's indifference to truth today will eventually backfire as to undermine their citizenship in the future. Faced with the increasingly dire post-truth tendency, scholars like Matthew d'Ancona and Lee McIntyre in their books appeal to people to fight back before it is too late.⁹

Noticeably, in d'Ancona's book against post-truth, he emphasizes that «more than ever, truth requires an emotional delivery system that speaks to experience, memory and hope. [...] It is not absurd to imagine a modern, mythic appeal to mankind's collective yearning for certitude and honesty - not in the crass, conspiratorial language of the so-called "Truthers", but in an open, collaborative rebellion against the cognitive sickness of our times».¹⁰ To be precise, d'Ancona advocates a new narrative that affirms the existence of truth by «asserting reality in the form of stories with panache» and «wrapping facts in stories that speak to ordinary human concerns».¹¹ In this narrative, a reliable balance between rationality and imagination is achieved, allowing not only the reality people want to see but also the reality that is «uncomfortable or challenging or important»¹² - the reality that conflicts with their personal belief - to be presented. Stories of this narrative cultivate their readers «to growth and maturity»¹³ by compelling them to step out of their cognitive comfort zones so that they will be equipped with the ability to question their cognitive limitations and to uphold the truth regardless of how difficult it is to approach truth or to distinguish truth from falsehood due to postmodern relativism, thus confronting the post-truth era.

The mention of a new narrative characterized by «modern, mythic appeal», «reality in the form of stories» and rationality «matched by imagination and innovation»¹⁴ inevitably reminds people of magical realism which specifically draws

⁷ T. JEFFERSON, *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0079> (url consulted on 15/10/2024).

⁸ G. ORWELL, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Guild Publishing, London 1978, p. 171.

⁹ Cfr. M. D'ANCONA, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* cit., p. 113; L. MCINTYRE, *Post-Truth*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2018, p. 155.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 130.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 136.

¹² E. PARISER, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, Penguin Books, New York 2011, p. 3.

¹³ J. SACHS, *Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell - and Live - the Best Stories Will Rule the Future*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston 2012, p. 113.

¹⁴ M. D'ANCONA, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* cit., p. 130-146.

attention to the notion of truth in political events and discloses the deviousness of politicians' words through its typical writing style to present the magical and the real «in a state of equivalence» so that «on the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality».¹⁵ Some people may regard the juxtaposition of magic with reality as falsehood and fantasy that distances reality from truth; however, magical realism actually affirms the multiplicity of reality and offers a unique access to the complex truth. To be specific, magical realism, as a postmodern narrative mode that blurs the boundary between the magical and the real, does not aim to distinguish fact from fiction or claim the absolute truth. Instead, it creates an elaborate fusion where various versions of reality claimed by different groups can all be incorporated within the text with the help of magical elements, thus highlighting the multidimensionality of truth. In contrast to post-truth's tendency to replace truth with subjective, one-sided beliefs, magical realism - by presenting the collision of different versions in a single narrative - questions the certainty of any version of an event. In this way, it prompts its readers to critically engage with the complexity of truth, perception, and power, encouraging them to avoid taking one version of the reality as the ultimate truth and to seek truth without slackness. Therefore, I would argue that magical realism actually serves as the new narrative advocated by d'Ancona to fight back against the post-truth tendency. With the magical «lies that tell the truth»,¹⁶ magical realism, instead of providing a clear answer to what the truth actually is, pushes readers to participate in the inherent contradiction and ambiguity of truth. It fosters a more nuanced understanding of the political and social world, enabling readers to get closer to multidimensional truth despite the epistemic complexity involved. This essay is to demonstrate my argument by analyzing the plots of two typical magical realism works - Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*.

2. Narrative against post-truth in 'One Hundred Years of Solitude'

García Márquez, the most renowned magical-realist writer from Colombia, believes: The ideal novel 'disturbs the reader not only with its political and social content, but also with its power to penetrate reality. So much the better if it turns over the reality and allows the reader to see the other side'.¹⁷ For García Márquez,

¹⁵ C. WARNES, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2009, p. 3.

¹⁶ Cfr. A. HEGERFELDT, *Lies that Tell the Truth: Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction from Britain*, Rodopi, Kenilworth 2005, pp. 199-319.

¹⁷ Z. ZHANG, *The Solitude of the Century: Gabriel García Márquez and 'One Hundred Years of Solitude'*, Hainan Publishing House, Haikou 1993, p. 124, my translation.

the responsibility of fiction should not be satisfied with presenting one version of reality, which is invariably insufficient for the public to get to the truth. In fact, García Márquez's literary view corresponds to his consistent confrontation with the official version of events in his magical-realist writing.¹⁸ Among the works in which García Márquez stirs up the dominant reality through the deployment of magic, the plot about the banana massacre in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the most quintessential and successful one.

This «central shaping episode of the entire novel»¹⁹ comes from the real event of the banana strike in Colombia. In 1928, the workers of United Fruit Company in the banana zone, which was owned and run by Americans, went on strike for better treatment. In response to the summons of the Magdalena governor, hundreds of workers set out to the venue appointed by the government, the train station of Ciénaga, to settle the strike on December 5. At around 1:30 a.m. on December 6, the executive officer of the massacre, General Cortés Vargas, ordered his troops to march to the rally with their machine guns, which was followed shortly by the atrocity that they shot at the workers in the train station when it was still dark. A witness called Adán Ortiz describes: «They fired on anything that moved. They even killed donkeys that night».²⁰ Others recall that they heard the garbage truck passing by their house and then the boat tooting its horn, realizing the next day that the truck had been transporting the corpses to load them onto the barge to throw them into the sea.²¹ Soldiers intervened, trying to prevent anxious townspeople from seeing what had happened, but at dawn, people found that nine bodies were left deliberately on the plaza, «equal to the nine demands that the workers made».²² This number is also the death toll of the event claimed by Colombia's government, while the figure ranges from 47 to 2000 according to estimates from contemporaries and historians.²³

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, García Márquez depicts two versions of the banana massacre with the aid of magical elements. One version is the experience of José Arcadio Segundo, one of the leaders in the banana strike, in which the government troops opened fire on the unarmed strikers and even irrelevant people then loaded 3000 bodies on the train to throw them into the sea. However, this version based on real experience is denied as reality in Macondo. Instead, almost

¹⁸ Cfr. G. MÁRQUEZ, *Por un País al Alcance de los Niños*, in «El Espectador», 23 July 1994, p. 12.

¹⁹ G. MARTIN, *Journeys through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Verso, London 1989, p. 229.

²⁰ A. WALSH, *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism*, edited by D. Bender and J. Lipman, NYU Press, New York 2015, p. 118.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ivi, p. 119.

²³ E. POSADA-CARBO, *Fiction as History: The Bananeras and Gabriel García Márquez's 'One Hundred Years of Solitude'*, in «Journal of Latin American Studies», V, 2, 1998, pp. 395-414, 404.

every resident accepts the official version that «there were no dead, the satisfied workers had gone back to their families».²⁴ This official version miraculously functions by the government's obliterating any trace of the massacre, repeating it for a thousand times, spreading it all over the country by every means of communication at hand and diverting public attention with three-day festivities. Since Macondo people acquiesce in the government's cover-up of the truth, which takes advantage of their wish to live in «a happy town» without «any dead»,²⁵ they lose their discourse power to confront officers' assurance. At last, even «the relatives of the victims who crowded the commandant's offices in search of news»²⁶ are condemned as being dreaming by government officials.

Faced with the government's determination to shut down news and control public opinion, José Arcadio Segundo, who is protected by the magical room left by Melquíades, becomes the only evidence of the massacre. For the officer who comes to search the room in order to find and arrest José Arcadio Segundo, the room appears to be shabby and dusty, clearly having been uninhabited for a long time. However, for José Arcadio Segundo who hides in it, the room is pristine and spotless, and the officer is mysteriously unable to see him inside it. With its magic to show different images to different kinds of people, the room not only provides a shelter for José Arcadio Segundo's version of the massacre - a version rejected by the mainstream discourse in Macondo, but also enables the readers to shift between the perspective of the officer and the perspective of José Arcadio Segundo. In this sense, the magical room in the text reveals that «*reality* is a question of perspective»²⁷ and encourages the public to work out what lie is fabricated outside it and what truth is hidden inside it based on their own judgement.

Despite the fact that the death toll in the novel falls short of the absolute historical truth, which has been admitted by García Márquez himself,²⁸ García Márquez's magical-realist writing still successfully fights back against the Colombian government's false, shameful version of the historical event in an imaginative way appreciated by d'Ancona. Besides revealing the historical fact that the government of Colombia deliberately planned the massacre, opened fire on peace-seeking citizens, threw the bodies into the sea and tried to suppress the news for the protection of US interests, García Márquez also indicates how political lies take over reality with citizens' collusion and how devastating the consequence can

²⁴ G. MÁRQUEZ, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. by G. Rabassa, Avon Books, New York 1970, p. 151.

²⁵ Ivi, pp. 151-152.

²⁶ Ivi., p. 151.

²⁷ S. RUSHDIE, *Midnight's Children*, Penguin Books, New York 1991, p. 197.

²⁸ D. WELDON, *My Macondo*, British Film Institute, London 1990.

be, thus urging people to recognize the lie and uphold the truth rather than confine themselves to merely what they want to see.

3. Narrative against post-truth in 'Big Breasts and Wide Hips'

For Mo Yan, the Chinese Nobel laureate, magical realism is a strategy to 'return to "truthfulness" and return to the thing itself'²⁹ when he tries to delineate China's tumultuous modern history in his writing. Providing 'a space between between right and wrong, true and false' through magical realism, Mo Yan honestly presents his readers with various historical judgments deriving from 'different political views, different ideological viewpoints, and even different discourse positions', and thus encourages readers to search for the truth of history during their critical reading of historical judgments which compete to be the reality.³⁰ In his representative novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, the image of Sima Ku exemplifies Mo Yan's return to fact in a magical-realistic way.

In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, it is difficult to precisely define the image of Sima Ku. On the one hand, there is undeniable bright side of the figure as he introduces modern technology into the backward village, spares no effort to fight against Japanese invasion of his beloved hometown and throws himself into a trap for the safety of others. On the other hand, his dark side is also obvious as countless communists and even their innocent families are killed or wounded under his command or by himself. The fact is that instead of being a pure angel or pure devil, Sima Ku is a complex subject who possesses both nobility and depravity; just as Mother says in the novel, «he's a bastard, but he's also a man worthy of the name».³¹ However, in the propaganda of the government, fugitive Sima Ku becomes a haunting ghost with sheer atrocity and elusiveness. This interpretation of the fact spreads effectively and widely in forms of drawings and stories, finally the demonized image of Sima Ku takes root in the mind of people. As residents are so emotionally fascinated by the government's version, they demand the public trail of Sima Ku and take great trouble to get to the site simply «to be part of the excitement»,³² but the scene lets them down:

Out-of-town witnesses who were seeing Sima Ku for the first time, and had assumed him to be a murderous demon, half man-half beast, a monster with fangs and a ferocious, green face, later said that seeing him in person had been a

²⁹ *The Return of Folk, Reality and Novel: Transcript of the Colloquium on Mo Yan's Recent Works (Part 1)*, https://www.sohu.com/a/427458336_661695 (url consulted on 15/10/2024), my translation.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Y. Mo, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, trans. by H. Goldblatt, Methuen, London 2006, p. 379.

³² Ivi, p. 378.

disappointment. This middle-aged man with his shaved head and big, sad eyes didn't look threatening at all. In fact, he struck them as a guileless, good-natured fellow, and had them wondering if the police had arrested the wrong man.³³

Fortunately, in the novel, people still have access to traces of fact about Sima Ku, such as his real appearance, rather than being confined to the ghost story popularized by the government's propaganda. Faced with the contrast between the images of Sima Ku in their minds and in their eyes, people realize: The devil they have been taught to fear and despise is actually a human being like any one of them. Their previous interpretation of Sima Ku is shaped by biased or selective narratives, which reflects merely one dimension of his true self and underestimates the complexity of real humanity. In this sense, Sima Ku's regaining his identity as a human being through the eyes of people at the end of his life challenges the post-truth tendency to subjectively simplify the truth regardless of fact.

With his truthfulness to present Sima Ku as either a sort of hero or a haunting evil ghost in narratives of different groups, Mo Yan provides a space to accommodate multiple dimensions of the truth, where readers can make their own judgement based on fact with a comprehensive perspective, instead of blindly following where ideological prejudice leads:

'In the past, mainland writers depicted "people" with class and political prejudice, which was highly stereotyped. To avoid this, I would not write the Nationalist army as a ghost, nor would I write the Communist army as a god. [...] Only when we transcend class and political prejudice and depict a person as a "human being", can we present the image of a complete, real person, restoring their true self.'³⁴

Through the magical-realistic return of Sima Ku's image from a ghost to a human being, Mo Yan's work not only reveals how the understanding of reality is influenced by cognitive limitations of individuals but also leads its readers to confront the complexity of truth, which plays an exemplary role in deconstructing the post-truth world.

4. Conclusion

³³ Ivi, p. 380.

³⁴ W. LIE e L. CHEN, *Mo Yan Talks about Writing in Taiwan*, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2013-09-22/042728266517.shtml> (url consulted on 15/10/2024), my translation.

From the above analysis of the plots in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, we can see that magical realism challenges the traditional boundary between truth and falsehood and presents a more sophisticated contact with reality, reflecting the epistemic complexity of “truth”, “falsehood”, and “reality” in the postmodern world. Magical realism aims not to explicitly tell readers what the truth is, but to create a textual fusion where different versions of the reality are truthfully presented and how politics operate to take a single version of reality as the truth is revealed. This means that magical realism makes readers aware of the multidimensionality of truth and the one-sidedness of individual cognition and encourages them to listen to voices from different perspectives and explore intricate truth with a critical eye. Therefore, magical realism is the ideal new narrative advocated by d’Ancona to fight back in today’s post-truth context. It provides an open space to resist the ideological echo chamber, in which the general public are motivated to examine elusive reality and approach multidimensional truth.