

SPECULATIVE REALISM

The Merging of Postmodernism and Magical Realism in the Post-Information Age

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Speculative Realism: The Merging of Postmodernism and Magical Realism in the Post-Information Age

Literary terms are tossed around continuously, yet often they remain amorphous. “Magical realism literature” and “postmodernism literature” are two such terms, heavily used, yet both defy strong definitions.

To argue for the evolution and merging of these, I propose a simple set of definitions. The simplicity allows for the narrowing of focus on the proposal that the post-information age—over twenty years since the advent of the World Wide Web (WWW) and over fifty since the advent of the Internet—has created a new worldwide cultural consciousness of people. This has led to writing that exhibits many characteristics of both postmodernism and magical realism, but is distinctly post-information age. I call this hybrid writing “speculative realism.” I will examine a few works that illustrate this trend and suggest others, without any deep examination of those additional works.

The entry for *magic realism* (Appendix B) in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines it as “a kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the ‘reliable’ tone of objective realistic report” (Baldick). While simple, this is too simple. Any single instance of magical realism has many, but not necessarily all, of the following elements, either paraphrases from other essays or my own interpretations:

- Magical realism explores and pushes boundaries (political, geographic, ontological) (Zamora and Faris 5).
- Magical realism is subversive: resistant to monologic political and cultural structures (Zamora and Faris 6).

- Magic is accepted and normal within the world, history, milieu, but the milieu is recognizable (even if altered).
- The “magic” in magical realism is not only supernatural magic, but the crossing of boundaries between the fictional world and the reader’s world (see first bullet point). This is key, also, in thinking of postmodernism.
- The narrative is often nonlinear.
- The text contains an element of “magic,” something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them (Faris 167). I will discuss the post-information age’s context of magic later.
- Descriptions convey a strong presence of the phenomenal world with realistic details that resemble the world we live in (Faris 169).
- The reader may see two understandings of events, one that is real (or surreal and dream-based) and one that is magical (Faris 171–72). While I find this less than compelling, it does mesh with Zamora’s discussion on boundaries.
- There is a closeness and merging of two realms—for instance, between the living and the dead (Faris 172–73). Again, this falls within the boundaries discussion.
- Classic ideas of time and space are questioned (Faris 173–74). This converges with the aforementioned elements of boundary-pushing and nonlinear writing, which characterize postmodernism.

My argument for a speculative realism—that is, an evolution and merging of magical realism and postmodernism—is an extension, or progression, of Wendy Faris’ essay “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Her argument is that magical realism adds to, or is an extension of, postmodernism. My argument is that postmodernism has changed and magical realism has become so widely accepted that there is more than a simple extension; there is something approaching a new form: speculative realism.

Postmodernism has moved to the post-information age.

Postmodernism, for my purposes, has the following elements:

- Irony, playfulness, black humor.

- Intertextuality: relationships and references to other texts or stories (either explicitly or implicitly).
- Pastiche: pasting together two elements (e.g., science fiction and fairy tales).
- Metafiction: writing about writing, or making the fiction apparent to the reader, or challenging the notion (e.g., Tim O'Brien).
- Fabulation: Magical realism and/or embracing that literature is made up and not bound by traditional rules.
- Historic metafiction: fictionalizing actual historical events or people.
- Temporal distortion: fragmentation and nonlinear (e.g., Vonnegut, Mo Yan) .
- Technoculture and hyperreality: Society has moved past the industrial age and into the information age. In postmodernity, people are inundated with information, technology has become a central focus in many lives, and our understanding of the real is mediated by simulations of the real. Note: This aspect is key to my argument that magical realism has evolved, as we are far into the information age.
- Paranoia: For the postmodernist, no ordering system exists, so a search for order is fruitless and absurd. This is emphasized and also key to much of speculative realism.

To wrap up introductory definitions, I would like to refute Gene Wolfe's assertion, quoted in numerous places and in his interview with Brendan Baber, that magic realism "is fantasy written by people who speak Spanish" (130). He is making several implicit points, such as a certain literary snobbery for popular fiction, or that labels are silly and pretentious, or even that fantasy is a better all-encompassing label. These are valid arguments, but the key point he misses is that, while magical realism might be accepted as fantasy by fantasy readers, it is a very specialized subset of fantasy that can be described and analyzed. Most readers of magical realism would be less interested in standard fantasy than in other postmodern literature.

Given the thought that labels have limited usefulness, why coin another one, as I have done with speculative realism? There is already the term "speculative fiction,"

which encompasses all of science fiction, fantasy, and alternate history. The issue is that, just as the label “fantasy” is too broad, certainly the term “speculative fiction” is too broad. My premise and reason for the new term is to capture the effect that magical realism has had on both speculative fiction and literary fiction. Speculative realism is the narrowing of extremely broad labels to a moderately broad label, explicitly to demonstrate how magical realism has combined with our post-information age to influence a group of writers and readers.

Standard, or popular-fiction, fantasy tends to focus on the fantastical elements as the purpose of the story. Often the descriptions of the world are fantastical, and the readers don't feel that we are in a world that we know and understand. This is what many readers are after. The fantasy is to explore the fantastical elements and plot. These books often follow the classical “Hero's Journey” structure borrowed from Joseph Campbell. Magical realism, often, does not follow this structure. If it does, it is a convoluted and stretched version where the metamorphosis of the protagonist is not the primary point of the novel. Gene Wolfe's writing is not popular in the sense that it sells well, but he is hugely influential in the fantasy and science fiction intelligentsia, and his writing is almost a genre unto itself. Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, a set of four books recently released as two volumes: *Shadow & Claw* and *Sword & Citadel*, would meet almost all the criteria for a magical realistic work except that the world is so far into the future that Earth is Urth and the realism is a new realism. He never explains what is happening; it simply does, and the fantastical elements are mixed in with reality, for instance: eating the gland of a particular animal that has eaten someone's flesh gives the memories of that person—and no one is surprised. Wolfe pushes boundaries: the protagonist is a torturer

and an executioner, from a guild that specializes in that, for the government. You almost like this protagonist, but rail against his rationalization of his craft, which he takes professional pride in. In the end, it is science fiction and fantasy, not magical realism, nor speculative realism as I define it—but it comes very close and is worth noting both because of Wolfe’s stature as a writer and because it illustrates how much magical realism has permeated all forms of literature.

Modern fantasy has a history that is almost parallel to magical realism. The art critic Franz Roh used the term in 1925, and the first fantasy magazine, *Weird Tales*, was started in 1923. The modern literary usage of magical realism arose in the mid-1950s, just as high fantasy, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, became wildly popular. J.R.R. Tolkien began writing *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1930s, finishing *The Lord of the Rings* just after World War II. The public acceptance of mythology as literature, such as *Beowulf*, invented mythology that borrows from existing mythology, such as Tolkien’s work with his elves and dwarves, and the presentation of math and science that we cannot understand as magical, as illustrated in H.P. Lovecraft’s work in *The Call of Cthulhu* (written in 1926), obviously influenced both fantasy and magical realism. It is this continued influence, illustrated by several modern magical realist texts, that led me to coin the term “speculative realism” as a more accurate description of the direction magical realism has taken over the recent years, certainly where the boundaries are being pushed and crossed. Boundaries, after all, are what magical realism is about, just as science is about exploring the boundaries of the known.

My first new definition—for post-information age—is simply an assertion. I am not going to spend much time defending my assertion. Then I will examine a number of

writings that support my definition of speculative realism, or illustrate boundaries. In some cases these works do not fit my concept of speculative realism completely, but help define the borders between magical realism and speculative realism, or between fantasy and science fiction and magical realism/speculative realism.

The assertion is that the Internet and WWW have now been in place long enough that we are in a post-information age within the era of magical realism. We are constantly bombarded by miracles of science and by what Carrie Arnold, in *Scientific American*, calls “diss information,” and we believe it as if it were true. We are not surprised by almost anything under the aegis of “science” and will believe it, or accept it in writing. It is an accepted magic in our world. I believe there is a modern form of fiction, of literary fiction, that steps on the shoulders of what is labeled “magical realism.” I label this form “speculative realism.”

With some terms defined, it is worth examining whether some works that have been excluded from the label “magical realism” should be included. In particular does the “alternate history” element that is often used disqualify a work as magical realism? I can find no accepted magical realism novel that uses alternative history at the grand concept level, but many accepted magical realism novels use alternate history at a micro level. The alternate history element of a novel is strongly embraced as an element of “speculative realism.” The increasing use of the technique is part of the evolution from magical realism to speculative realism.

Certainly no one would argue that any literary term is mutually exclusive of another. The label “alternate history” in no way precludes that a piece of literature is also magical realism. Alternative history is sometimes solely the grand concept, where there is

no story without the concept, but increasingly there are extremely literary works that use the alternative history mechanism as only one aspect of their exploration of boundaries and indeed form a subset of magical realism. The “alternate history” term is generally used only when a major event is altered, but all fiction that takes place in the past is alternate history. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is an alternate history. That slave did not escape. That community where she fled to was not there, in the form described. It is a matter of degree, certainly, but if the major event change is still within a world we recognize as our own and it is described in a realistic manner, it should not be precluded from the label “magical realism.” Is *Red Sorghum*, by Mo Yan, an alternate history? It looks at events of the Japanese invasion of China, but certainly the town and the events chronicled are completely different from reality. These are minor alternate histories. Both *Red Sorghum* and *Beloved* are generally accepted as magical realism. Both take place in real historical time that has been modified.

In *The Years of Rice and Salt*, by Kim Stanley Robinson, the grand concept is this: What if the bubonic plague of the 1300’s wiped out 99% of Europe, instead of the 30% worldwide average? If that were the only fantastical element, this book would obviously not fit the magical realism mode, nor indeed even postmodernism. However, the dense text (at 760 pages) covers a huge amount of history, exploring two characters who are continually reincarnated and their interaction with Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Eastern religions that flourish when Europe disappears and is rebuilt. This is realistic text in most ways, but the reincarnation includes meetings between the two main characters in the waiting area, prior to reincarnation. Additionally, one of the two has been reincarnated as a tiger, at least once. If one is willing to take the grand historical fact

change, that the Black Death killed most Europeans, than this, too, is much closer to magical realism than to popular-fiction fantasy.

What makes an alternate-history fiction a candidate for magical realism and, by extension, speculative realism is that the altered historical events do not radically change the acceptable real world, as the reader knows it. The events and history may be totally different, but the realism is still there. In *The Years of Rice and Salt*, technology still evolves at about the same pace; the boundaries pushed are the way we think about religion and dominant religion, and the way we act. What makes us human remains the same, even if the reader witnesses 'the in-between stages of reincarnation when the two characters talk:

And so it was that when they all reconvened in the bardo, many years later, after going north and founding the city of Nsar at the mouth of the Lwiyaa River, and defending it successfully from the Andalusian taifa sultans coming up to attack them in the after years, and building the beginnings of maritime power....

“I recognized you!” he reminded Katima. “In the midst of life, through the veil of forgetting, when it mattered, I saw who you were, and you—you saw something too. You knew something from a higher reality was going on! We’re making progress.” (186)

“And the so it was” is a classical speech pattern of fairy tale and myth. Despite the fact that *Years* can still be found on the fantasy shelves of a bookstore, the writing will likely appeal only to those who are comfortable with magical realism.

Contrast this with *The Difference Engine*, by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. If anyone has a history of dreaming in the post-information age, since the dawn of that age, it is Gibson (who coined the term “cyberspace” in 1980), but *The Difference Engine* is an alternate-history science fiction. It does not fit the magical realism mold for a variety of reasons, but comes surprisingly close to earning my “speculative realism” label. *The Difference Engine* is set the mid-1800s, with the industrial revolution in full swing. The difference is that steam-driven supercomputers are a reality. This is grand-concept writing, driven by a murder-attempt mystery plot. Grand concept driven novels are rarely magical realism, especially when the plot is a basic one. What is important to the discussion of speculative realism is how easily we accept a rather magical concept of an information-age supercomputer in the era of steam power and industrial revolution. Technology and magic are interchangeable. To twist Arthur C. Clarke’s third law of prediction, known to every science fiction and fantasy writer: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” one can say that, in a sufficiently advanced technological society, all things seem possible and are indistinguishable from magic. Indeed, this is why so many conspiracy theories involving technology are so hard to destroy. *The Difference Engine* does not feel like a science fiction. The realism is there; it fails to rise to magical realism (or speculative realism) for small reasons, not large. It is vaguely linear, but really five linked novellas. It is subversive in the sense that it is Orwellian and uses the magic of a recognizable steam-driven information age to demonstrate how Big Brother can still be there, watching, in any information age. However, it does not push other boundaries, such as those between two worlds (e.g., dream and real), and our classic idea of time and space remains intact. Ultimately, the

book's "feel" does not reach critical mass for magical realism. It is close enough, however, that I would not argue strongly against calling it speculative realism. What jars the classical magical-realism reader is the time spent showing the grand-concept idea of the alternate history. It is telling us this: How cool is it that computers are running on steam power and isn't that a cool idea too? It spends too much time on its coolness.

Gibson's *Idoru*, however, definitively makes it into the category of speculative realism. *Idoru* pushes the boundaries of what any current scientist thinks is possible with the concept of virtual reality and artificial intelligence, but this impossible is not simple hand-waving, it is a bit of magic, done to explore boundaries. Despite being a "hard science" fiction writer and physicist, Arthur C. Clarke had a keen insight into the value of boundaries and pushing them—one of the recurring themes of magical realism. All three of his "laws," as postulated in his collection of essays *Profiles of the Future*, apply well to speculative realism and our ability to accept technology based magic. Clarke's second law, "The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible,"¹ could easily be an examination of modern magical realism. *Idoru* explores the idea of a truly intelligent virtual being that is formed into a living being of the Internet. Gibson examined this once before, in *Neuromancer*. *Idoru*'s matter-of-fact attitude toward the strange meets one of the magical-realism criteria. We get no lead-in, no sense that the protagonist finds any of what is happening to her to be strange. For example, Chapter Two begins:

They met in a jungle clearing.

Kelsey had done the vegetation: big bright Rousseau leaves,
cartoon orchids flecked with her idea of tropical colors Zona, the only
one telepresent who'd ever seen anything like a real jungle, had done the
audio

¹ Clarke's 1962 essays are hard to find, despite being the most quoted science and science fiction essays ever written. Clarke's three laws are as well known in scientific and science fiction communities as $E=MC^2$ is associated with Albert Einstein. At the time of this writing, I was unable to obtain a copy of the *Profiles of the Future* for an exact page citation. I have only copies of the essay with no page numbers.

(13)

If this were old-style magical realism, this would be a dream sequence. Instead, the magic is technology: virtual-reality descriptions. This technological hand-waving² fits my evolution of the magical realism genre and my label of “speculative realism.” When the magic, the technology, is not explained at all and assumed, it is either very sloppy science fiction, or speculative realism.

With much of *Idoru*’s narrative of occurring inside a virtual reality that is fundamentally a dream world, time as we know it does not exist. This, too, characterizes magical realism. Finally, a large portion of the virtual world is hidden from the rest of the virtual world for subversive (to the establishment) reasons—which places *Idoru* squarely in both magical realism and postmodernism. The plot features of big government, the Internet, and Big Brother on a worldwide scale combined with the fore mentioned technology hand-waving, categorize it as speculative realism. Indeed, conspiracy theory and Big Brother have become so pervasive due to the WWW that they are almost part of the realism, rather than the magic.

Also worth noting in *Idoru* is the fourteen-year-old protagonist who hops on a plane from the U.S. to Japan, with no problems despite her age. While this plot detail of age isn’t nearly as striking as in Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*, whose protagonist never grows up physically from a five year old body, yet has affairs and children, it nudges the realism of *Idoru* into a magical place, pushing the boundary of what is acceptable for an age.

² The term “hand-waving” or “handwaving” is often used pejoratively for science fiction. I am not using it pejoratively, but the meaning is fundamentally the same: A plot device that is left unexplained. The implication is that the writer is aware of the logical weakness. In speculative realism, the assumption is that the reader buys into this device the same way the reader buys into the magic in magical realism.

Really good science-fiction authors have always been genre crossers. Literary snobs will no doubt complain that Gibson is not literary enough, although this criticism happens even to those more widely accepted into the magical realist camp—Isabel Allende, for one. In an interview with Lawrence Donegan, she said:

The fact people think that when you sell a lot of books you are not a serious writer is a great insult to the readership. I get a little angry when people try to say such a thing. There was a review of my last book in one American paper by a professor of Latin American studies and he attacked me personally for the sole reason that I sold a lot of books. That is unforgivable.

I agree wholeheartedly with Allende.

An important aspect of magical realism, as it morphs toward speculative realism through the use of technology, is whether a novel that clearly uses the future, even the “very near” future, overplays the futuristic plot device, at which point it becomes science fiction.

To support my claim that speculative realism isn’t a short term passing trend or a phenomenon of the late twentieth century (*Idoru* was published in 1999), I will examine a novella that appears in the same-titled collection of stories, *Memory Wall*, published in 2010. Its author, Anthony Doerr, would not be shelved in the science fiction and fantasy shelves of a bookstore; a point worth making as I am not trying to migrate only excellent authors such as Gibson into the speculative realism camp.

The base concept of “Memory Wall”— of being able to record the memory of a person for playback later—sounds at first blush to be pure science fiction. However, the explanation for how this is done is utter nonsense, and the author makes no pretense that

it is anything but. It simply “is” accepted in a post-information age. This premise is used purely to explore the concept of memory, self, and non-linear time in such a way as to be a form of magical realism. The protagonist is a homeless South African black. He has been fitted with a receptor stud for the memory cartridges. He randomly samples the cartridges of a privileged, prejudiced, white woman—experiencing her memories fully, in a nonlinear timeframe. The nonlinear nature, the boundary of self, the loss of identity, the examination of a post-apartheid South Africa, all bring it into the magical-realism/postmodernism style of literary fiction. The use of technology as the magic is what brings it to the speculative-realism level.

The description of these cartridges, within the context of the rest of the “memory wall,” is matter of fact. It is part of the milieu and, unlike (most) popular fiction and science fiction, not played up:

Around the photo, the scraps of paper and plastic cartridges build outward in crowded, overlapping layers, anchored with pushpins and chewing gum and penny nails. She sees to-do lists, jottings, drawings of what might be prehistoric beasts or monsters. She reads: *you can trust Pheko*. And *Taking Polly’s Coca-Cola*. A flyer says: Porter Properties. There are stranger phrases: dinocephalians, late Permian, massive vertebrate graveyard. Some sheets of paper are blank; others reveal a flurry of cross-outs and erasures. On a half-page ripped from a brochure, one phrase is shakily and repeatedly underlined: *Memories are located not inside the cells but in the extracellular space*. (3)

Note how the cartridges are in no way played up. Note how the “technology” is swept under the rug with “Memories are located not inside the cells but in the

extracellular space.”—a meaningless phrase. In fact, the cartridges are simply part of the wall collage. The prehistoric beasts become as important as anything in this novella.

The nonlinear nature of the narrative is certainly one of the magical parts of any speculative realism. It is a sign, though not necessary, that a piece is drifting into a postmodern style.

An aspect of magical realism, as it morphs toward speculative realism, that bears some examination, is whether a novel that clearly uses the future, even the “very near” future, qualifies as realism. My reply is a qualified yes. “Memory Wall” has no other technology mentioned that is not immediately recognizable and accepted. The central narrative is not the technology. Our only time anchor is the existence of cell phones and the post-apartheid setting. It feels like today. *Idoru*, is a greyer area, yet in the end I believe it qualifies. The virtual world that much of the narrative drifts into is so close to surrealism that the technology remains a hand-wave, and the Japan that is presented is immediately recognizable to those who have traveled to Japan in the last twenty-five years. There are no dates in the novel to force it into the future. This makes *Idoru* a genre-bending, speculative-realist novel.

“Memory Wall” “explains” the nonlinear narrative, with a magical technology. Traditional magical realism often does not bother with any explanation. This hand-waving technology explanation is one of the ways speculative realism departs from magical realism. There is a sentence or two spent on the explanation, but this is not a strong difference. In William Kennedy’s *Ironweed*, often classified as magical realism, the narrator makes it clear that he could be hallucinating from alcohol. Thus, putting for an explanation. Magical realism can put forth possible explanations, but indirectly. It is

not until page 11 that we really understand how much Francis, the protagonist drinks, despite Francis “seeing” the dead from page 1:

Francis did not need Daddy Big’s advice. He did not get sick from alcohol the way Daddy Big had. Francis knew how to drink. He drank all the time and he did not vomit. He drank anything that contained alcohol, anything, and he could always walk, and he could talk as well as any man alive about what was on his mind. Alcohol did put Francis to sleep, finally, but on his own terms. When he’d had enough and everybody else was passed out, he’d just put his head down and curl up like an old dog, then put his hands between his legs to protect what was left of the jewels, and he’d cork off.

Similarly, in *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, by Audrey Niffenegger, we are thrust into the magical, nonlinear, world instantly, in the prologue, with no text immediately explaining anything:

I can be reading the *Sunday Times*, coffee in hand and Clare dozing beside me on our bed and suddenly I’m in 1976 watching my thirteen-year-old self mow my grandparents’ lawn. Some of these episodes last only moments; it’s like listening to a car radio that’s having trouble holding on to a station. I find myself in crowds, audiences, mobs. Just as often I am alone, in a field, house, car, on a beach, in a grammar school in the middle of the night. I fear finding myself in a prison cell, an elevator full of people, the middle of a highway. I appear from nowhere, naked. How can I explain? I have never been able to carry anything with me. No clothes, no money, no ID. I spend most of my sojourns acquiring clothing and trying to hide. Fortunately I don’t wear glasses. (10)

At first blush we might be talking about flashbacks, or surrealism. Yes, the title of the book gives us the clue, but the title could be indicating time travel in your head. The

“science” behind the time travel is never explained; the closest thing to explanation is that a scientist sees something strange in the protagonist’s gene structure. Again we are presented with handwaving, magical technology, that we and the world in the narrative accept. This is not pure science fiction. It is not based on a scientific world, yet science is used instead of the magic. The science is the magic and here is how it is presented: “I don’t know very much. Dr. David Kendrick is a molecular geneticist who discovered—will discover why people are chrono-impaired. It’s a genetic thing; he figures it out in 2006” (35), explains Clare, the other protagonist, to Henry, the time traveler, about his own future, which she hasn’t seen but had it explained to her by a future version of Henry who traveled back to Clare as a child. Despite the explanation, both protagonists don’t dwell on this. It is mentioned in passing.

My biggest issue in putting *The Time Traveler’s Wife* into the speculative-realism category is that a number of the secondary characters initially find the time traveling fantastic. Ultimately, I believe it qualifies as speculative realism due to the strong nonlinear aspect, the exploration of boundaries, and the “normal” real world the characters reside in. The disbelief is never explored, nor followed up on.

The boundaries are interesting. Many critics of literary fiction feel that *The Time Traveler’s Wife* is rather light, but the falling in love with someone in a nonlinear manner is very well done. Even strange things are well executed, like an understated threesome of Clare sleeping in the same bed with Henrys of two different times, where she is mad at one but realizes she can’t be mad at the other because he would have no idea why she is mad, as it has not happened for that Henry. The exploration is on the boundaries of love, including the boundary between a daughter in the last quarter of the book who also time-

shifts randomly and has seen her father die. What does the foreknowledge of your own death mean, especially when you are not living in a linear time system? It does not have the subversive aspect that most magical realism has, other than challenging the U.S. puritanical norms in a manner that would not be accepted without the fantastic aspect.

Never Let Me Go, by Kazuo Ishiguro, uses the same hand-waving technique of “Memory Wall” and *The Time Traveler’s Wife*. The children in the prep school, who all appear to be orphans, are clones for organ transplants. The reader does not “know” this for a very long time. A big hint is given in the first few paragraphs, and then the narrative jumps to twenty-plus years prior. The initial paragraphs are fundamentally a prologue.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the word “clone” does not appear until page 309 in this 500-plus-page eBook. It is not until page 481 of that the alternate-history aspect is revealed—a pacing radically different from that of *The Years of Rice and Salt*, where the alternate history is grand concept. The alternate history presented in *Never Let Me Go* is clearly part of the hand-waving on science. The cloning is a brief nonsense explanation (a magical science), but in no way changes the realistic world that is our own.

The narrative in *Never Let Me Go* is nonlinear. The protagonist slips from the bracket time frame of the first paragraphs to almost any time in her memory to build the story in a nonlinear manner. The focus is on relationships. The subversion is on the arrogance of some people viewing themselves as better than others, what constitutes a human being, and a strange compassionate dignity of these people who know they are walking organic parts. It pushes the boundaries of Western thought, certainly, as these people do not rebel. It pokes hard at British society and projects a bit of Asian, or Japanese, sensibilities. The latter point is worth noting, as yet another indicator that

magical realism has moved past a Latin American dominance. The alternate history, which is explained in only a few pages at the novel's end, is in no way central to the meaning. You could, in essence, delete those few pages and still have a speculative realist novel. If you eliminate the alternate history it moves toward a more traditional magical realist novel.

Ishiguro is very British, but the influence of his early childhood roots in Japan—or perhaps the influence of his parents—is still evident. Indeed, there is a strange undercurrent of similarity between Ishiguro, whose family moved to England when he was five, and Haruki Murakami, who still lives in Japan. It begs the question as to how cultural identity and habits are formed and understood. (An examination of Japanese magical realism contrasted with Latin American magical realism would illuminate the evolution of magical realism as a world phenomenon, but is beyond the scope of this discussion.) Murakami writes something closer to classical magical realism, but is very modern. What strikes me as the bridge between Ishiguro and Murakami, and even between Audrey Niffenegger and Gibson, is that “modern” magical realism—speculative realism—has returned to the idea of a coherent plot driving it forward and that coherent plot generally involves love and the relationship between a couple.

Speculative realism does not need to have a magical technology to move beyond magical realism toward speculative realism. In my opinion, Murakami is the quintessential modern, international, magical realist. Mo Yan, the recent Nobel Laureate, may now gain more public recognition, but Murakami is a unique blend of Japanese and Western culture that crosses metaphysical boundaries, touching lightly on the magical realism of both West and East. Murakami's writing takes place in a modern Japan.

Murakami makes references to art, literature, and music—all Western—which ground us in a realistic world that feels like our own, even when it drifts into something that is alternate history, or even alternate world (as in *1Q84*). These references are just old enough to be both recognizable and enduring that we don't feel thrown off the realism track, as we might have been by faddish or esoteric references. For instance, if Murakami referenced pop music that was popular the day of his writing, the text would feel like popular fiction with a limited life span. Yet, by referencing jazz from decades ago or Western classical composers, Murakami creates a world that is realistic even to a contemporary reader, with only subtle differences from our own. Ishiguro' creates a similar experience in *Never Let Me Go*, albeit without the music and art references.

Murakami's *1Q84* is considered his magnum opus—a three-volume novel running 1600-plus pages. Here, he creates a magical-realistic world loosely based on Orwell's *1984*. One of the main characters shifts from what we assume is our world to this new world—which would normally be seen as a science fiction of parallel worlds, but the science of parallel worlds is never invoked. Indeed, for a time you wonder if this is an alternate-history world and the main character, Aomame, is simply going over the edge. What makes *1Q84* speculative realism is that some things are not revealed for hundreds of pages, emphasizing that the difference in the world is not the main point. We do see a second moon later, but is this because it is an alternate universe, or because it is an alternate history and something happened? It is never explained; the magic just is. Murakami also uses the common postmodernism technique of incorporating the act of writing into the plot itself. One of the main characters is a writer and editor rewriting a manuscript that a young woman, Fuka-Eri, supposedly wrote. The plot, within the plot,

within the plot is almost impossible to describe. The use of an author as a character within a novel is hardly new, but what the author is writing about becomes part of the actual narrative in a complex way. I am reminded of *The Keep* by Jennifer Egan, which has a few magical realistic elements in it (for example, the writing is done by a prisoner who is listening to a dead person that may be received via a “radio” made of dust balls and string in a shoebox).

The technique of dividing a book into three sections is interesting for a variety of reasons. It makes it postmodernist in that it is a nod to the three-act play, thus not necessarily asking the reader for a full suspension of disbelief. This not requiring of a full suspension of disbelief is a valuable distinction from classic fantasy. Good classic fantasy asks you to suspend disbelief on fantastical elements, but implicitly promises some sort of internally consistent system. Postmodernism and speculative realism do not make this implicit contract. The keep, in the first act of *The Keep*, is never precisely located and is fantastical in its history, the old lady living there and the town near it. The second act feels very real, except that toward its end, we find out that a ghost has been narrating to the prisoner. The third act bridges the previous two. Murakami uses a similar style. The three-act form is not indicative of speculative realism per se, but when this technique and all the others mentioned are used so frequently by authors that are certainly postmodern and whom I classify as speculative realist, then patterns emerge. Part of what makes speculative realism “real” in its feel is the use of classic narrative techniques. This is evolution, not revolution.

Murakami remains classical in many of his techniques. One is nonlinear time: for instance, Aomame is carrying Kento’s child, even though they have not seen each other

for twenty years; and Kento writes about “little people” without ever seeing them, who then turn out to be real. What pushes *IQ84* squarely into speculative realism is its very modern realistic world, with less of a fairy-tale feel than, for example, Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* or his *American Gods*. Both of these novels are set during modern times, but Gaiman uses classical fantasy elements—more important, a strong Hero’s Journey character arc drags it toward popular fiction. The counterbalance to the Hero’s Journey plot, the fairy-tale style pushes his works very close to magical realism, not unlike some of Salman Rushdie’s work. *Midnight’s Children* is perhaps the best example of this fairy tale telling style by Rushdie. It is widely accepted as magical realism and the biggest difference in technique between Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Gaiman’s books is the clear popular fiction character arc and linear progression found in Gaiman’s writing. Gaiman often uses literary characters, such as in his *Sandman* series he tells the origins Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a clearly postmodernist plot device, but I still put him in the fantasy category, albeit very modern and with elements of speculative realism. Another classical technique Murakami uses is an omniscient narrator. We know what various characters think from paragraph to paragraph. While individual chapters tend to focus on main characters, we have knowledge of walk-on characters that is available only through omniscience.

What speculative realism shows us is a broad acceptance of magical realism as a literary form, but one that has been heavily influenced by the post-information age. The industrial age, the scientific age, and two World Wars heavily influenced literature, creating both magical realism and postmodernism. The innovation of the label “speculative realism” is simply an acknowledgement of the continued influence of

science, the World Wide Web, and the post-information age. The Spanish accent is gone and the writing is worldwide. The term “fantasy” is simply too broad. I expect that a number of great authors will continue to fall into this category over the next couple of decades and that this rough initial definition will become refined.

Appendix A

To quickly illustrate how the novels discussed fit into the categories, I have created a quadrant chart (see figure 1). I have placed key works discussed into this chart to indicate that there is a difference between these works and that there are a number of works near the borders, the boundaries, of speculative realism. The chart is not the only way to map how books fall within the spectrum. In particular, it should be clear that the arrows indicating left/right or up/down are not both necessary. In other words, *IQ84* does not use science explicitly to push it into speculative realism; rather the setting is modern, and the concept of parallel universes is a commonly understood metaphysical notion that is incorporated but never explicitly analyzed. Thus, the chart is an oversimplification of the discussion, but still useful in showing where a literary work lies. Here's another example in the chart that illustrates the limitations: *The Keep* is on the edge of fantasy and magical realism, not so much because it is a pure fantasy, but because it is closer to a standard novel structure with a protagonist and an arc, and the magical elements are considered strange by the characters and are not part of the everyday narrative.

Ultimately, there is this recurring theme in my analysis: Good magical realism is constantly pushing boundaries, and it has been so successful for a number of years that it has pushed the genre into a new quadrant: speculative realism.

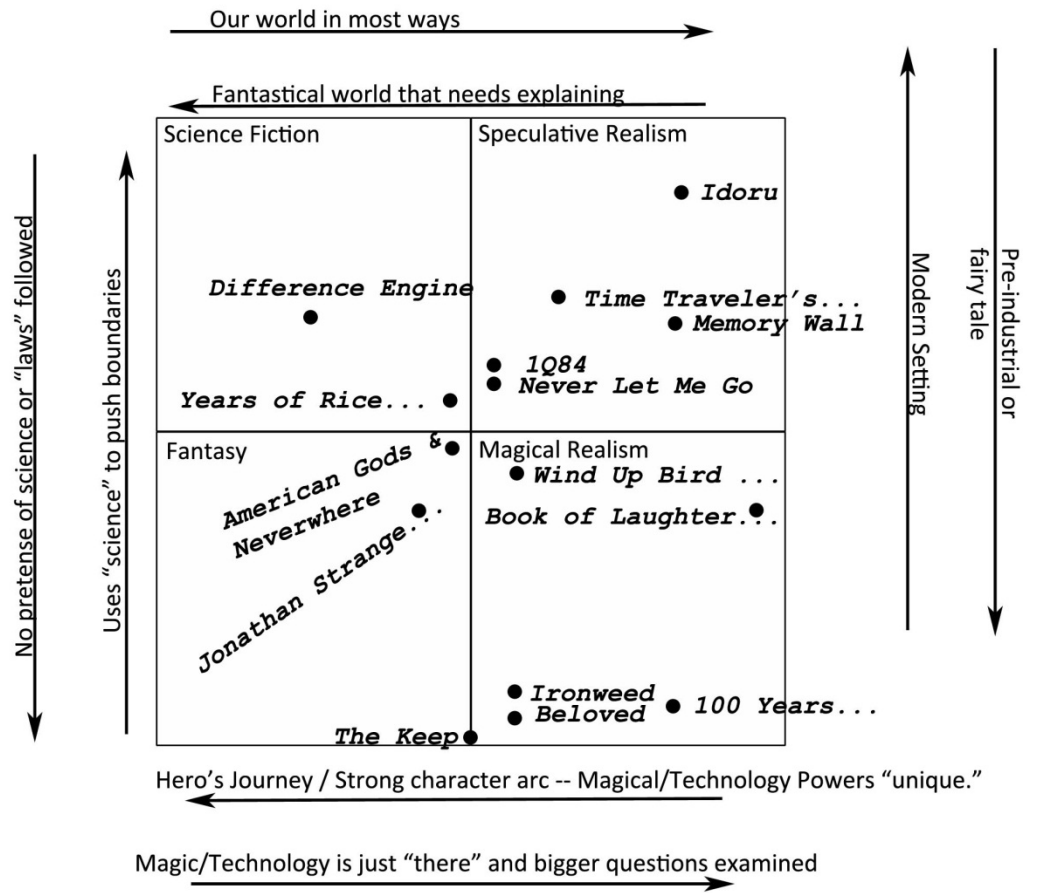


Figure One: Magical Realism - Speculative Realism spectrum

Appendix B

The full text of the entries for *magical realism* and *postmodernism* in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2003):

magic realism:

A kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the ‘reliable’ tone of objective realistic report. The term was once applied to a trend in German fiction of the early 1950s, but is now associated chiefly with certain leading novelists of Central and South America, notably Miguel Ángel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, and Gabriel García Márquez. The latter’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967) is often cited as a leading example, celebrated for the moment at which one character unexpectedly ascends to heaven while hanging her washing on a line. The term has also been extended to works from very different cultures, designating a tendency of the modern novel to reach beyond the confines of realism and draw upon the energies of fable, folktale, and myth while retaining a strong contemporary social relevance. Thus, Günter Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, 1959), Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) have been described as magic realist novels along with Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988). The fantastic attributes given to characters in such novels—levitation, flight, telepathy, telekinesis—are among the means that magic realism adopts in order to encompass the often phantasmagoric political realities of the 20th century.

postmodernism:

A disputed term that has occupied much recent debate about contemporary culture since the early 1980s. In its simplest and least satisfactory sense, it refers generally to the phase of 20th-century Western culture that succeeded the reign of high modernism, thus indicating the products of the age of mass television since the mid-1950s. More often, though, it is applied to a cultural condition prevailing in the advanced capitalist societies since the 1960s, characterized by a superabundance of disconnected images and styles—most noticeably in television, advertising, commercial design, and pop video. In this sense, promoted by Jean Baudrillard and other commentators, postmodernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.

As applied to literature and other arts, the term is notoriously ambiguous, implying either that modernism has been superseded or that it has continued into a new phase. Postmodernism may be seen as a continuation of modernism's alienated mood and disorienting techniques and at the same time as an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world: in very crude terms, where a modernist artist or writer would try to wrest a meaning from the world through myth, symbol, or formal complexity, the postmodernist greets the absurd or meaningless confusion of contemporary existence with a certain numbed or flippant indifference, favouring self-consciously 'depthless' works of fabulation, pastiche, bricolage, or aleatory disconnection. The term cannot usefully serve as an inclusive description of all literature since the 1950s or 1960s, but is applied selectively to those works that display most

evidently the moods and formal disconnections described above. It seems to have little relevance to modern poetry, and limited application to drama outside the ‘absurdist’ tradition, but is used widely in reference to fiction, notably to the novels (or anti-novels) and stories of Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Italo Calvino, Vladimir Nabokov, William S. Burroughs, Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, Peter Ackroyd, Julian Barnes, Jeanette Winterson, and many of their followers. Some of their works, like Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and Nabokov’s *Ada* (1969), employ devices reminiscent of science fiction, playing with contradictory orders of reality or the irruption of the fabulous into the secular world.

Opinion is still divided, however, on the value of the term and of the phenomenon it purports to describe. Those who most often use it tend to welcome ‘the postmodern’ as a liberation from the hierarchy of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures; while sceptics regard the term as a symptom of irresponsible academic euphoria about the glitter of consumerist capitalism and its moral vacuity. For more extended discussions, consult Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1986); H. Bertens and D. Fokkema (eds.), *Approaching Postmodernism* (1986); and Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). See also post-structuralism.

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