Magical Realism Films as a Resistance Device: Cultivating Space for Marginalised Narratives

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Abstract

This research paper aims to highlight the utility of magical realism films as a resistance device for marginalised communities to reclaim their narratives. The historical timeline of magical realism as a genre is traced to recognize its evolution as a distinct school in contemporary independent cinema. In order to establish the magical realism film as an ideal medium for the propagation of revolutionary narratives from socially ostracized and oppressed communities, a film analysis has been conducted. The objectives of this paper include identifying the magical realist elements in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 2015 film "Cemetery of Splendor", exploring the scope of representation provided to marginalised identities through these elements and explaining how magical realism films allow space for subjects that need to be approached indirectly though highly coercive metaphorical devices. The study has been able to find substantial evidence for the connection between magical realism and narratives of resistance. It has also been proven to a great extent that the hybrid nature and immersive quality of the cinematic medium enhances both the realist and the fantastic element in magical realism. The medium aids the conviction in the genre's imaginative tools, maintaining the objectivity essential for the acceptance of unconventional narratives. The findings of this research can be applied to further research into resistance art. The growth of radical thought in independent cinema and the role of symbolic justice as a gateway to practical empowerment must be studied to provide proper representation to the alienated margins of society.
Keywords: Magical realism, Marginalised, Metaphorical, Resistance, Representation, Symbolic justice,

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INTRODUCTION

Magical realism is defined as a literary genre or style that incorporates magical elements into otherwise realistic fiction. It effectively blends myth and mystery into seemingly normal circumstances by way of metaphors and symbolic representations. This clever amalgamation of the decidedly real and the somewhat or entirely unbelievable creates a space for artists to raise questions about sensitive issues that cannot be addressed directly. Metaphorical devices are used to represent certain characteristics of people as well as society and function as an objective lens through which the barriers of prejudice and bias are dispersed. This creates an opportunity for marginalised people to amplify their narratives to reach a wider audience. Magical realism thus grants more freedom of expression and a higher degree of acceptance for the truth contained in subjective experiences that have either been erased or misrepresented. It makes use of ordinary objects and situations to ground the narrative into reality and introduces magical agents to act as placeholders for ideas that must be conveyed directly to the audience and left open to interpretation. The deliberately concealed conflict is slowly resolved through a subtle layering of revelations, showing glimpses of the truth but never stating it directly.

The objective is to create a sense of doubt in one's knowledge and perception and leave them unguarded, their imagination capable of constructing its own reality, of seeing from an otherwise unseen perspective. The space for the manipulation of symbols allows magical realism to subvert or displace existing narratives. The genre must then employ certain tools of conviction essential to the execution of its message. In essence, the mode of delivery is crucial for magical realism's capacity to cater to marginalised voices.

Although narrative tools have been successful in allowing magical realist thought to be conveyed with great efficiency throughout the literary history of magical realism, there is one particular medium that enhances the persuasive ability of the genre far beyond the limits of the textual medium. With the rise of independent cinema, there has been a shift from mainstream commercial movies towards genre-bending experimental films. The immense potential for exploring less utilized mediums means experimenting with technical devices and targeting specific audiences becomes possible. Instead of targeting commercial success through mass production and distribution, these films seek only to question and reform existing ideals.

There are some wonderful examples of the application of magical realist devices in contemporary independent cinema, such as the work of Thai film director Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Weerasethakul belongs to the indigenous rural community of Thailand and has created critically acclaimed films under his production label "Kick the machine films" wherein kicking the machine is supposed to imply defiance of existing social structures. His work is a prime example of the utility of magical realism in dealing with issues of marginalisation and social justice within one's native homeland, as well as in representing the authentic truth of communities stereotyped or misrepresented by Western and mainstream media.

This research is based on an in-depth analysis of different narrative and cinematic techniques in Weerasethakul's 2015 film, "Cemetery of Splendor". The objective is to interpret the magical realism devices in the film to highlight the specific issues they represent. It is crucial to understand the importance of the film medium in enhancing magical realism's ability to empower people facing oppression in real time and provide symbolic reparations for

communities subjected to war atrocities, colonialism, social injustice, and other such practices.

The researcher has been able to identify certain elements in the film that serve as symbolic representations of real events and people. The plight of peripheral communities in Thailand in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and urbanism, the erasure of indigenous culture and religion, the detrimental effects of war on individuals and society at large, socioeconomic depravity, etc., are some of the social issues discussed in the film in the context of the country's history and current political climate. The director has crafted a landscape of symbols rooted in ordinary real-life situations and locations to serve as the basis for realism, while the inspiration for the magical elements is derived from folklore and superstitious belief systems prevalent in the forest community of Thailand's Isan region. The characters in the film and the places themselves exist in a metaphysical state between sleep and wakefulness, life and death. The film transports its viewer to a dreamlike state within which the plot is slowly unravelled. This allows magic and reality to exist in harmony, creating a quality of immersion through which the underlying message takes root in the mind, as persistent as an original idea would be.

Research Objectives

• To identify key elements of magical realism films and explain their significance

• To establish a connection between magical realism and marginalised representation

• To analyze the role of magical realism films as a tool for resisting erasure and oppression

Materials and Methodology

The research has been conducted by analyzing the film Cemetery of Splendor (2015) and interpreting its themes by

decoding the symbols and metaphors. The reference material includes published interviews with Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the director and writer of the film, to understand the creative decisions behind his stylistic choices. The analysis delves into the context of the film, studying indigenous cultural practices and historical events from Thailand's rural Isan province to make sense of the implied meanings behind the magical elements. Characteristics of film language, for example, lightning, sound design, duration, framing and perspective of shots, art direction, mise en scene, etc., have been studied to deduce the intended effect of each and how it aids the choice of genre. The qualitative analysis is supported by material derived from interconnected studies about film, philosophy, politics, and identity. Logical conclusions are drawn based on observations from the selected piece of media. This methodology allows research to gather evidence supported by previous research and validates the argument for magical realism films as a resistance device.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Merriam Webster dictionary, magical realism is "a literary genre or style associated especially with Latin America that incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction, also called magical realism"

The term "magical realism" was coined by German art critic Franz Roh in an essay referring to a painting style that had emerged in contrast to expressionism in the 1920s. Later, it was used to describe surrealist paintings, although it was distinct from surrealist paintings. The exploration of this genre in European art and literature would inspire a movement under the postmodern school of thought in Latin America. Authors like Jorge Luis Borges and Alejo Carpenter were among the first to utilise magical realism as a narrative device. Later, in the context of post-colonialism, Salman

Rushdie and Garcia Marquez continued to use this medium to break away from a dominant Western worldview. (Bowers, 2004)

These writers came from rich cultural backgrounds and marginalised ethnicities, colonised regions that had faced war and calamity. They made use of magical realism to highlight their subjective experiences and revived and even rewrote the historical events that had shaped their identities.

Magical realism is often related to or utilised by works correlating to postmodernism and post-colonialism. Its ability to layer several interconnected issues that come across as divisive in realist terms provides a subtle quality of conviction to characters and their narratives. Folklore and fairytales passed down often by oral tradition have little credibility when it comes to the critical discourse on literature and are not taken into consideration on account of their supposedly impractical hyperbole. In magical realism, the characters take on mythic representations of identity and native communities, hence questioning the authority given to mainstream narrative and exposing the unverifiable nature of what is presented as absolute truth.

"Instead of exporting the reader to a remote fairy-tale realm, they import the marvellous into a world apparently analogous to the one the reader knows. In a realist world, however, the marvellous is a transgression, and in spite of being presented in a completely nonchalant manner, the use of a fairy-tale opening already marks what is to follow as a departure from realism." (Hegerfeldt, 2005)

Widely accepted ideas of truth are questioned. Seemingly impossible things are weaved into the fabric of reality and correspond with social commentary. This technique can be utilised to draw parallels between opposing schools of extremist ideologies and inclusive ideas of social justice using the shroud of imaginative experimentation. Research on magical realism as a resistance device

is diverse, spanning across time and regional boundaries. From Latin America in historical times to contemporary Latinx writing, Japanese fiction, particularly short stories, feminist and anti-establishment narratives, independent cinema in postcolonial societies, etc., magical realism has helped build a diverse archive of resistance art.

In his essay "On magical realism in Film", Jameson (1986) analyses historical magical realism films, explaining how devices like colour, space, and narrative are employed to provide a profound perception of specific situations contextualising the lived experience of the characters on screen. He argues that magical realism doesn't aim to "subvert" but rather "neutralize" altogether and in doing so ascend barriers of time and space.

Scott Simpkins (1988) presents an interesting argument regarding the de-familiarization technique magical texts use to allow for political discourse and the rewriting of history. He asserts that in its attempt to fictionalise reality, the magical realist text displaces reality instead of enhancing or redefining it. Even inculcating magic, realist texts are bound by the ordinary in a manner that perhaps a purely magical text would not be. This limitation, he argues, makes narratives in magical realism hit a dead end due to their use of the textual medium.

The scope of research on magical realism in cinema, specifically concerning work by contemporary independent filmmakers, is still limited or uses different terms to analyse the narrative styles, such as "performative realism" or "fantastic realism". For instance, independent Thai cinema, specifically films by *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, an auteur of magical realism, has been described as such. Concerning his use of caves as a symbol of suspension in space, between reality and superstition, birth and death (or reincarnation in this case), James Naremore (2010)

examining *Uncle Boonmee, who can recall his past lives* puts the filmmaker's aim into perspective:

"His cinema cave is dedicated to recovering a repressed history, healing pain, and connecting our spirits with others."

The film creates a complex tapestry of metaphors incorporating native culture and regional history, political unrest due to polarisation, and opposition between modernity and Indigenous practices in Thailand by employing the narrative devices of magical realism. Moreover, the addition of visual and auditory devices that bring about a certain depth in perception, gives a subversive quality to the work increasing the conviction of its fantastical elements.

"For if we are already accustomed to the liberties which language and painting can take with reality, moving pictures almost automatically make us expect some sort of true camera reality; films remain a form of photography, and while everyone knows the camera can lie, we do not look initially at photographs as though they were lies. And so the force of movies to wrench us out of our habitual realism is particularly great. Further, the conditions of viewing a movie in a darkened room are particularly conducive to a form of dreamy participation where the marvellous would not appear simply as wrong, silly, or outrageous." (Earle, 1968)

Comparative studies are abundant between themes in literary magical realism. However, since its origin, the genre has been globalised and diversified through adaptations of literary classics into film and local independent filmmaking. The magical realist film utilises both the medium and the genre in a manner where one's technique amplifies the other's influence. Research on magical realism in film explores this genre as a means to raise awareness about social issues, initiate political discourse, navigate identity politics, and provide authentic representation to marginalised

communities by dismantling stereotypes prevalent in popular narrative.

The unique quality of subtlety and objectivity makes magical realism an ideal medium for grand ideas of resistance. The genre itself defies pre-established notions of expression in art, literature, and film, combining two opposing streams of ideas. This break in conformity is a powerful device for the expansion of existing ideas and perspectives, specifically in cases where the ideas being represented come from previously or currently oppressed or marginalised voices seeking to reclaim agency for themselves and their communities. The film itself has a magical quality in its ability to bring imagination to life.

Owing to the "show, don't tell" technique, the film allows the deliberate sense of mystery and ambivalence to prevail through the stories, giving the audience a window into subjective experiences from an objective standpoint. The combination of different mediums, mainly music and visual creativity, and the general accessibility of the medium cater to a larger audience. Technological advancement in editing and special effects makes it possible for absurd or surreal characteristics of magical realism to take form on-screen, increasing the credibility of their existence in the real world. Magical realism films, therefore, have the potential to become a vehicle for diversity, inclusivity, and a global unified resistance against the erasure of marginalised narratives. The work that has been selected for this research utilises magical realism to represent different unheard stories and lived experiences that must be expressed if they are to survive. Thus, in bringing these narratives to a space that commands attention and inspires action, magical realism becomes a viable form of resistance art.

DISCUSSION

Magical realism has been utilised across time by various oppressed groups seeking to reclaim their own narratives, which either faced misrepresentation in popular media or were erased altogether. Overt messages that specify and target certain power centres in order to critique and question can garner a negative reaction. Magical realism provides a space for contemplation, leading to constructive debate around issues that, when discussed directly, could cause alarm and further intolerance. (Gee, 2021)

Before understanding how magical realism becomes a vehicle for change, it is essential to understand how it functions in the medium of film. There are distinct narrative and cinematic techniques that distinguish a work of magical realism from a surrealist, Avant-garde, experimental, absurdist, or satirical film, although these terms are often confused and used in lieu of one another. (Jameson, 1986)

Magical realism, as the name suggests, must successfully create a bridge between reality and fantasy. A magical realism film features a realistic foundation within which the element of magic is allowed to exist without othering or alienating it from existing reality. (Ann Bowers, 2004)

Cemetery of Splendor (2015) opens with a blank screen and ambient background noise as do most of Weerasethakul's other films. This opening sequence brings out an inquisitive attitude in the viewer that stays inevitably throughout the film as they try to discern reality from imagination.

"While the film unfolds, you are caught in its undulating rhythms, drawn from image to image, given the time to contemplate the juxtaposition, how the film is put together and why. It's so rich that way. Once the screen goes to black, you are left to your own devices in terms of interpretation." (O'Malley, 2016)

This is just one of the many stylistic choices that allow this film to be interpreted as a magical realist. In accordance with the supernatural element, the premise rests on a strange sleeping illness taking over several soldiers who have been transferred to an old school building where volunteers tend to them, and a woman with psychic abilities communicates with their souls, conveying messages from the beyond to their families. There is no explanation for the illness. Two powerful deities appear to a volunteer nurse in human form only to assert that the sickness cannot end, but the question of why this sickness pertains remains shrouded in mystery. The eerie exists with every day, and the characters are not alarmed or disconcerted in the least.

The film does not rely on the resolution of the central conflict. It allows the audience to connect with the characters by exploring their individual lives side by side with their communal lives. This not only allows representation of multiple aspects of marginalization, thus enriching the narrative but also makes it easier for the audience to empathize with the characters themselves.

Metaphors and social commentary are used to critique established structures of power. The characters are not stereotypical representations. The existence of the soldiers as an easily dispensable resource, the government's neglect and sinister ambitions, characters recounting memories of war, longing for independence, and the history that resides in archives of memory when wiped from land are all sociopolitical themes that, while specified to a region in the film, raise questions regarding ethical practices in warfare, state authority and the safeguarding of minorities.

While treating the sleeping soldiers, a nurse mentions the Iraq war. The suffering of the soldiers, although contextualised into the

specific case of Thailand, can also be interpreted objectively as a commentary on the average individual's suffering as a byproduct of war. The cemetery of kings that keeps the soldiers alive only to serve their battles even in death can be interpreted as the abuse of authority that marginalised individuals face at the hands of the powerful. (Lucca, 2016)

On the subject of memory as a central theme in his film and its connection with the medium itself, Weerasethakul responds:

"I am really interested in how memory works and how it is shaped by experience, especially the experience of seeing movies. For our generation, I think that movies have a big influence on how we remember things. My filmmaking is mostly about looking at each space and what is happening in both the physical world as well as the internal world of the actors and the audience. It is almost like a play, a game to see."

(Ganjavie, 2015)

Ordinary aspects of unseen lives, a lonely housewife, a disabled woman working to make ends meet, and the stigmatisation of certain desires are represented through the characters. Thus the scope of marginalisationis not limited to larger concepts of war histories and social inequality. It extends to the socially ostracised members of society facing discrimination on an individual level that goes unnoticed in popular narrative.

The film emphasises certain aspects of folklore and tradition to highlight the sense of community that connects the identities of these characters. Before taking a walk through the palace in the forest dream sequence, both characters come across an orchid covered in a plastic bag to protect it from insects. The removal of this plastic covering to "let it breathe" is a foreshadowing of the journey of discovery these characters embark on.

Similarly, the flood marks on the trees (which represent the everlasting nature of war and its physical effects), making offerings of wood-carved animals at shrines and certain belief systems like reincarnation, psychic abilities, the healing powers of light and meditation are all aspects of the magic in the film but take some degree of inspiration from real life cultural practices (Weiying, 2020). It is visible in a shot from the film shared below.

Fig.1

The dream sequences in the film are not actually shot as dreams. The dialogue serves as a guide to what the character is dreaming of, but everything else is left up to the audience. The vague, distorted nature of reality makes the viewer question what is being conveyed, and the visual being left entirely up to imagination and interpretation engages the audience with the character's perspective as is shown in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2

This makes the film more immersive, a quality that is aided by many technical choices by the filmmaker. The film is grounded in reality. Long shots taken from a distance, the outward portrayal of very private bodily functions, the inclusion of certain imperfections like a mumbled background conversation, ambient sound and lingering anticipation created by the use of minimal editing techniques are all devices used to enhance the realism in the film. The audience is made to experience everything the characters are experiencing on an emotional and slightly physical level, "He does not tell you where to look. And yet, as a filmmaker, he helps an audience to see with an *inner* eye" (O'Malley,2016).

The director, who is also the film's writer, speaks of a particular scene in a radio interview describing his decision to film a dream sequence left entirely up to the viewer's imagination instead of one designed with captivating special effects. In any other film, a dream sequence would be shot differently from the rest of the film, but Weerasethakul provides his audience with the freedom and, through that, the objective lens to interpret the magical reality by themselves without stunning visual aids designed to make them feel

and think a certain way. This makes the film distinctly a work of magical realism and makes it possible for a subjective experience to be conveyed with subtle conviction so the audience feels welcomed into the world of the oppressed and not threatened or intimidated by it. (ABC Radio National, 2016)

He's walking somewhere.
He's disorientated.

Fig. 3

As is visible in Fig. 3, the cemetery of Splendor makes the viewer a participant in the treatment techniques being employed to treat the soldiers. First, a guided meditation, then a form of therapy with fluorescent shifting colours of light, so visceral they are felt by the audience as they would be felt by the characters themselves as is visible in the images taken from the film below (Lim, 2015).

Fig. 4

In an interview with Clayton Dillard for Slate magazine, the director says:

> Since the movie is about sleeping and about a journey into a different territory, I like to add this element of science to open up the audience's imagination. The possibility of characters being hypnotised by some machine works in a parallel way with the audience being hypnotised by movies. I also like the idea of mediation and discovery. (Weerasethakul, 2016)

This light also serves as a device for indicating the shift between realities and dreaming states in the film. The hue and saturation of a particular colour gradient over a still frame are manipulated, making something completely mundane, like people sleeping or sitting by the lake, feel slightly unreal as is evident in the a screenshot from the movie below in Fig. 5.

Fig. 5

This creates a fleeting sense of doubt in one's own perception. The audience is deliberately put through this confusing experience to raise questions within their minds that will eventually be answered by the film's material. The deduction of facts, however, will require the audience to contemplate deeply and open up their mind to other interpretations of reality. The film does not provide a concrete resolution as is common in works of magical realism. If a clear argument were made in support of or against certain ideas, as is required for a closed ending to any narrative, it would defeat the purpose of embellishing the entire film with subtle clues and subliminal messages inspiring thought instead of inducing it and posing questions instead of answers, which can often be the harder task.

CONCLUSION

The research has found magical realism films to be an effective mode of representation for marginalised and oppressed communities through metaphorical layering in narrative as well as cinematic techniques, which confirms the original hypothesis. Though the research is limited by scale and relies on one particular source, the scope of this research can be expanded and applied to other films that explore issues of identity and alienation from the marginalised

perspective. The results of this research can be applied to a practical extent in creating space for dialogue concerning reparations for historically ostracised communities and incorporating multiplicity and tolerance in contemporary political reforms. Artists and filmmakers can make use of independent cinema exposure to unearth their repressed personal and communal narratives and challenge regimes of terror by creating an ideal cinematic worldview that serves as a blueprint for the change they wish to see in the world.

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