



Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

**MAGIC REALISM IN FILM NARRATION**

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**Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours**

**(Cinematography)**

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**MAGIC REALISM IN FILM NARRATION**

YOW KAI CHING

This project is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours  
(Cinematography)

Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

2018

**UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK**

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Final Year Project Report

Masters

PhD

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	
DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY	
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
INDEX	ii – iv
LIST OF DIAGRAM	v
LIST OF FIGURE	vi
ABSTRACT	vii
ABSTRAK	viii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	
1.0 Introduction	1 – 2
1.1 Background	2 – 3
1.2 Research Problem	3 – 5
1.3 Research Objective	5
1.4 Research Question	5
1.5 Purpose of Research	6
1.6 Significance of the Study	6
1.7 Restriction / Limitation	6 – 7
1.8 Audience	7
1.9 Conclusion	7
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	
2.0 Introduction	8 – 9
2.1 The Notion of Magic Realism	9 – 11
2.2 Magi Realism in Art and Literature	11 – 12

2.3 Magic Realism in Film	12 – 13
2.4 The Elements of Magic Realism	14
2.5 Magic Realism as Metaphor to Reality	15
2.6 Conclusion	15
<b>CHAPTER 3 RESEARCHER METHODOLOGY</b>	
3.0 Introduction	16
3.1 Research Design	17 – 18
3.2 Research Approach	18
3.3 Research Methodology	
3.3.1 Interview	18 – 19
3.3.2 Film Analysis	19 – 20
3.4 Conclusion	20
<b>CHAPTER 4 FINDING AND DISCUSSION</b>	
4.0 Introduction	21 – 22
4.1 Data Collected from Interview	22 – 23
4.2 Analysis about Magic Realism in Film Narration	
4.2.1 Pan’s Labyrinth	23 – 25
4.2.2 Life of Pi	25 – 27
4.3 Project Application	27 – 29
<b>CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION</b>	
5.0 Introduction	30
5.1 Conclusion of Research	30 – 31
5.2 Recommendation	31
5.3 Conclusion	31
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>32 – 34</b>



## LIST OF DIAGRAM

<b>LIST OF DIAGRAM</b>		<b>PAGE</b>
3.1.1	Research design	17

## LIST OF FIGURE

LIST OF FIGURE		PAGE
4.1	Banquet in front of pale man	25
4.2	Banquet at Vidal's house	25
5.0	Fantasy element in the story	29

## **ABSTRACT**

This research is aimed to study magic realism in film narration for the purpose to introduce the notion of magic and the elements of magic realism. Qualitative was used as a methodology to collect the data for this research such as interview, film analysis and reading. As a conclusion, magic realism is a term which fantasy element exist in realistic world. The end of the research is to apply the elements of magic realism in storyline as a result to produce a magic realism's short film.

## ABSTRAK

*Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis “magic realism in film narration” bagi memperkenalkan istilah magic realism serta ciri-ciri yang membentuknya. Penelitian yang dilaksanakan menggunakan data yang bersifat kualitatif yang meliputi temubual, filem analisis dan buku. Secara kesimpulannya, magic realism merupakan satu istilah apabila elemen fantasi muncul di dunia realiti. Akhirnya penyelidik akan mengaplikasikan elemen-elemen magic realism dalam sebuah filem pendek bagi mencapai tujuan penyelidikan ini.*

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

Most of the films that included magic elements were automatically linked to science-fiction and fantasy. Magic is the supernatural's matters that impossible to explain by natural causes such as powers of gods. Science-fiction films are based on imagined future scientific and frequently portraying space or time travel and life on other planets; fantasy films are contain unrealistic settings. Beside the science-fiction and fantasy which contained magic elements, magic realism is another mode which also applied magic elements.

Magic realism is a new mode form when combining fantasy and reality. Normally, filmmaker used fantasy elements to depict a reality story to make it more meaningful and more interesting. The reality content could be ordinary daily life such as problems of young adult, security and fear of leaving home. The reality discuss the basic value

of people and concerns of different cultures. In contrast, the “magic” in magic realism is a place or world allows people to escape from their current situation. In other words, magic is a technique or metaphoric that reflect reality to give viewers a better understanding of the story. Magic realism is often used to show the power of storytelling and the little freedoms that the storyteller can take the tale even more powerful.

The general aim for this research is to introduce filmmaker and film student about the notion of magic realism and how the concept is used in film to power up the story. A magic realism film must include reality background setting, fantastical elements, hybridity, and authorial reticence. Watching and analysis magic realism film are the another ways to gain the extra knowledge about magic realism. Researcher uses *Pan’s Labyrinth* and *Life of Pi* as film reference to reach a deeper understanding about magic realism.

## **1.1 Background**

The notion of magic realism was coined by German art critic Franz Roh. He is the first person who applied magic realism into painting to describe expressionism. In 1925, Franz Roh published his book named *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei (Post-expressionism, Magical Realism: Problems of the latest Europe Painting)*. He thought that magic realism is a kind of expressionism. The expressionism is a style of painting, writing, or music that express feeling rather than describe the objects and experiences.

The term “magical realism” was coined by art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe German Post-expressionist painting. It was independently applied to

literature for the first time, with a diverging meaning, by Italian novelist Massimo Bontempelli in 1927 to characterize modernist fiction. (Freixas, 2014, p.3)

Post-expressionism is a term that influenced by expressionism to describe a variety of movements in post-war art world. Hurley (2013,p.3) stated that “Post-expressionist paintings of the 1920s return to a renewed delight in real objects even as it integrates the formal innovations and spiritual thrust of Expressionism”.

Later, magic realism came across to Latin America in 1950s. Novelist applied the notion of magic realism in their novel to express suffering feeling. Novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was published by a Colombian author who named Gabriel Garcia Marquez, which had push Latin American literature to a new phase. This novel is a landmark novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez which make the notion of magic realism came to prominence. Hence magic realism is often associated with Latin American literature.

## **1.2 Research Problem**

Fredric Jameson in his book ‘On Magic Realism in Film’ (1986) stated that the notion of “magic realism” raises many problems, both theoretical and historical. The theories of magic realism are changed according to scholar. Franz Roh comments magic realism with post expressionist, Amaryll Chanady comments on magic realism with surrealism while Lisa Dethridge claims magic realism is a virtual of second life. A concept with different meanings will confuse the public and make them difficult to clearly understand about magic realism.

Franz Roh was coined a post-war movement with magic realism for the purpose to describe the arts produced after World War I. The arts work that produced after World War I were to express the thought of the current situation in German.

Surrealism is a movement happen between World War I and World War II. Art and literature at that time were created to release the unconscious mind. For example, elements of surprise and unexpected juxtaposition even illogical image are painting to create a visual artworks. Amaryll Chanady (2003) was linked the surrealism with magic realism because of their similarity which mixed the fantasy and reality into one.

Lisa Dethridge (2009) stated that magic realism is a virtual of second life. Second life is a cyberspace that allows user to build their own objects, environments and characters. She connected the second life with the characteristics of magic realism. The characteristics of magic realism included magic elements, present phenomenal world, and the story must setting in two different space- fantasy and reality.

The film *Pan's Labyrinth* narrate a young girl named Ofelia live during the period of Spanish Civil War. In the real world, she is only a twelve year old young girl live during the war period, but in the fantasy world, she is missing princess of the King in fantasy world. She has to complete three missions in order for her to return back her kingdom. All of the missions and fantasy world are imagination from Ofelia who only want to comfort herself from the dark reality life. Because of the less known about magic realism, *Pan's Labyrinth* was categorized as fantasy film. For those who know about magic realism just can analysis that film as magic realism film.

Magic realism is a genre when fantasy been used to describe the reality. With the help of fantasy elements, a story can become more interested and attract more viewers. Some of the contents of certain magic realism are just a simple thing that

happen in human's ordinary daily life such as problems of young adult, fear of leaving home, fear of not having children or discuss basic value of people. The term of magic realism is a way to add value in to the story.

A basic knowledge of magic realism elements are important in order to create a magic realism film. These elements included setting, fantastical elements, hybridity, and authorial reticence. A new style of fantasy world or things is the most difficult thing to create in a new film. The new style of fantasy world must be meaningful to the audience, so that audience can better understand the content of the story.

### **1.3 Research Objective**

1. To describe the notion of magic realism in film.
2. To study the elements of magic realism that inspire filmmaker to produce a magic realism visual film.
3. To apply magic realism's elements in a short film directed by the researcher.

### **1.4 Research Question**

1. How magic realism used in film to help the storytelling?
2. What are the magic realism elements that inspire filmmaker to create a magic realism visual or set in film?
3. How magic realism's elements apply in a film to reach a deeper understanding of reality?

### **1.5 Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of magic realism, to let other film student understand the benefits of magic realism and later apply it in film.

I write magical realism because some fires do burn in the midst of floods (think of hope when all seems lost), and all cures are essentially mysterious (I can't explain aspirin), and angels do occasionally intervene (according to the beggars in Mother Theresa's Calcutta), and there are moments in the midst of work when artists sometimes fly (just ask one if you don't believe). (Dickson, 2011)

Magic realism will make people escape from reality and they are tend to believe that fantasy is real. It is a way for people to get out from their current situation to relax. Moreover, magic realism is a little freedoms for storyteller to make the tale or simple story even more powerful.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This study is important to filmmaker or film student and person who love to watch movie. Filmmaker has to understand the term of magic realism deeply, then apply it in own project or film. The term of magic realism refers to the use of fantasy elements as technique or metaphoric to reality. The purpose of using fantasy is to make the storytelling become more meaningful. The benefit of this study is to produce an attracting story by combining the fantasy elements in real world.

### **1.7 Restriction/ Limitation**

The limitation of this study is lack of information about the term of magic realism. Hurley (2013, p11) stated that "for many decades, Jameson's essay was the

only source you would find on magic”. The term of magic realism is delivered from Latin America literary, hence most of the information about magic realism are found in novel or literature. Another restriction while doing this study is lack of magic realism film.

### **1.8 Audience**

Since this study is about film genre and storytelling, filmmaker and film students with strong imagination are the main target in this proposal. The study is well suited for new filmmaker who have just started making films. At present, most people attach importance to fantasy, so new filmmaker must create a new fantasy visual effect to attract more audience.

### **1.9 Conclusion**

In conclusion, magic realism is another genre which filmmaker could apply it in to their own film. A successful magic realism film can blur the line between fantasy and realistic. Sometimes audience may ask: “Is that reality or illusion?” The confusing between fantasy and realistic is the best describe of the words of “magic realism”. In the next chapter, researcher will describe the concept of magic realism and explain magic realism in art, literature and film through book, journal and online article.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

From the previous chapter, the researcher has discussed about the basic idea of magic realism. Magic realism is a literature term that applied in art and literature in late 1920s. It is associated with a technique style that fantasy and realistic take place together. The setting and character are realistic, but there has a layer of fantasy event which makes the mode become magic realism. Magic realism has changed the way of people present their daily life and changed the thinking of people on boring life. It allows people to escape from their current situation to express what is truly free and gives them an image of the new world. The fantasy part of magic realism serve as a powerful condiment to add feeling or value in to the story. If the ordinary daily life is a bowl of rice, then the magic part is the spice that added into the rice to improve its flavour.

The notion of magic realism in today still remains vague term. It does not has a clear shape or form because of less detailed information about magic realism. Magic realism is a literary term that has a lot of information only about literature and art. For film studies, only a little information about magic realism in film. Whether in literature, art or films, people should always remember that magic realism cannot be considered as science fiction or fantasy.

Recently, magic realism has been applied to works in cinema. The films *Pan's Labyrinth*, *The Big Fish*, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *Soul on a String* were applied elements of magic realism in it. Some filmmaker begin their work without understanding of magic realism, they just do what they want to do in film. After the films were shown, the people with knowledge of magic realism wrote some articles to link the film to magic realism.

To better understand about magic realism, this chapter will discuss magic realism in three main movements: art, literature and film. The elements of magic realism and the metaphor of fantasy element will also discuss in this chapter.

## **2.1 The Notion of Magic Realism**

The article written by Michelle Witte has clearly describe the difference between the genres. Fantasy and science fiction have alike sense with magic realism, because those genres are contain fantasy event. The difference between fantasy and magic realism is fantasy story consists of fantasy background setting where the place setting in a world other than our own; magic realism story has a realistic setting in which fantasy events suddenly occur.

The words “science fiction” had given a best definition to people. Science fiction involved any kind of science stuff, but magic realism is not futuristic. Magic realism cannot explained by science because the event of the story will not come true.

The notion of magic realism refers to the story background set at real world and some fantasy elements are added into the story. Michelle Witte had posted a five-part series articles on Magical Realism in 2015. Those articles are about the meaning of magic realism and the difference between magic realism and other genres. She had unpacked the magic realism itself to explain the magic realism word by word. Witte’s article found that following:

Magic is about the extraordinary, things that aren’t natural, that are more than man can accomplish by normal means. There is a sense of astonishment about magic that allows us to suspend our disbelief, even for just a moment, to consider whether something like that really truly could actually happen. (2015)

In the notion of magic realism, realistic is the major part to be talk or to be show. According to Bayliss:

In magical realism, the realism plays a bigger role. The primary plot will be about real things in the real world, but there is an undercurrent of magic. It’s so real in fact, that the author may imply that the characters themselves may not be reliable narrators, so as to not be too decisive about the existence of magic. (2011)

Sometimes, people use magic realism to create an escapist world to get out from their current situation. Rachele Gardner (2011) stated that “magic realism genre used to create escapism, it does not means to forget the suffering life, but it is to describe life more accurately.”

Magical realism by definition remains tethered to the “real” workings of this universe. I believe sometimes just a touch of the magical can make a story more applicable to a reader’s everyday existence than it would be otherwise. (Gardner, 2011)

## 2.2 Magic Realism in Art and Literature

The notion of magic realism is applied in art from the early of 1920s to the end of 1950s. The first person that coined magic realism and applied it in painting was a German art critic, Franz Roh. His paintings were described a new style that most value in expressionism. He had published a monograph named *Post-expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Latest Europe Painting*. According to Bowman (2015), Roh referred magic realism as a way of reacting to reality and pictorially representing the mysteries inherent in it. The meaning of ‘magic’ in magic realism refers to the mystery of life. But the mystery does not represent the world, it is metaphor to the reality life. In other words, the mystery has a hidden meaning behind it. Hurley (2013) stated that magic realism painting “represents in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world”. Through the exterior of the painting to find its hidden meaning. Most of the Roh’s paintings are exaggerated facial features, calm setting, isolated subjects, and distorted perspective.

Later, magic realism came across to Latin America in 1950s. Colombian author, Gabriel Garcia Marquez published his landmark novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The novel had push the Latin American literature to a new phase. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a novel about the multi-generational story of the Buendia family over a century. The seven generation of Buendia family have experienced the