Jesús Benito, Ana Ma Manzanas, and Begoña Simal: *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realisms in US Ethnic Literatures*.
In their united assault on the concept and practice of realism in the 1970s and after, postmodern writers and poststructuralist critics made fabulation and/or metafiction the narrative tools which, via the deconstruction of their own narrative order, might subvert the institutional order of literature as well as of society since both could be metaphorically collapsed into a single system of repression: the order of mimesis. To that attack we owe a number of great postmodern novels (like Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*) but also critical studies that link, for instance, Henry James's realism of visual perception with contemporary social structures of surveillance. It is therefore tempting to see the more recent rise of postcolonial theory and the concomitant flowering of ethnic (or postcolonial) novels of “magical realism” as a variant of the earlier anti-realist attack: “realism,” in this case, referring to the global economic, military, and symbolic power of an imperial “West” and its dominant mode of literary expression.

Jesús Benito, Ana Manzanas and Begoña Simal, in their *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realisms in US Ethnic Literatures*, are aware of the trap inherent in such schematic confrontation and manage to escape it – most of the time. Like Benito’s and Manzanas’s earlier *Intercultural Mediations: Hybridity and Mimesis in American Literatures* (2003), this study, too,
is as illuminating as it is useful: It enquires into the philosophical foundations of “mimesis” (Plato’s and Aristotle’s) and its most influential versions (mimesis as reflecting the world vs. mimesis as creating a world, i.e. as shaping reality - on the basis of what is deemed probable – in the process of representing it); it probes into the functions mimesis assumed, especially during the late-nineteenth century, when realism, in its attempt to fight the “lies” of the bestselling romance, held up a “truthful” mirror to reality. (As, some fifty years earlier, Hawthorne, inversely, had made use of the narrative freedoms provided by the “romance” in his struggle with the factual weight of the historical novel.) The book then discusses the crisis of literary “mimesis” during the 1960s and the ideological dismantling of “realism” it brought about: its claim of representing reality “truly” exposed as a mere literary convention that, in fact, avoided truth in the interest of bourgeois society. In the wake of realism’s deconstruction, the imagination was liberated and, through fabulation, metafiction, or the magic of story telling, able to attack the system of representation that had imprisoned it. It could thus (re)assume the narrative task of mimetic representation creatively in a different, an alternative way. To that extent, postmodern (meta)fictions and the fictions of magical realism, although by no means identical, can be seen as related historical phenomena, as running on parallel tracks (Manzanas speaks of “postmodernism” and “postcolonialism” as “immediate allies”[3]); the difference being not only that “magical realism” draws on the story-telling tradition of a specific ethnic group (in which reality is always already more than what empirically meets the eye), but also on that group's history – a history repressed, neglected, or forgotten by the dominant culture. Although one should insist that this political dimension was never absent in postmodern narrative either (vide Pynchon, Coover, or Doctorow), it certainly gained special relevance for ethnic literatures in the U.S. and, in the context of globalization, for the literatures of (post)colonial groups or nations. It seems therefore plausible to argue – as Jesús Benito does in chapter four – that “magical realism” has become the specific medium of “postcolonial experience,” i.e. the experience of the marginalized, exploited or otherwise repressed. In chapters five and six, Begoña Simal presses this point farther by tying magical realism to Levinas's theory of self-abnegation (or “substitution”) on one hand and to theories of ecocriticism on the other. In both cases, she argues, the fictions of magical realism give expression to a possible “other” existence (ambiguously projected as utopia or apocalypse). In a short final chapter, Jesús Benito once again sets the concepts of “realism” and “magical realism” in complex relation to each other, this time seeing them – with the help of Adorno’s aesthetic theory – as tied together by a dialectics of negation: magical realism exposing realism as a closed system, yet also as each preventing the other from resting in self-sufficient certainty.

3 Especially the chapters authored by Manzanas and Benito are impressive in their expert handling of theoretical issues but also in their wonderfully precise and subtle analyses of a number of key texts of magical realism which underline the theoretical debate, create a dialogical relation between fiction and theory. (I am thinking especially of the intelligent use Manzanas makes in her “Introduction” of Louise Erdrich's “Father’s Milk,” or Benito's careful reading of Yamashita's Tropic of Orange, Vizenor's Bearheart, orGloria Naylor's Mama Day.) If I have some reservations, they concern the heavy ideological/political burden the authors place on literary terms or categories. When was “realism” the literary expression of a closed repressive system of signification (social, political, or semiotic) – except in the poststructuralist theories of Foucault and others? Rather, late-nineteenth century American realism asserted itself against such a system which it saw represented
in the dominance of the historical romance (in the eyes of W. D. Howells, the literary ally of America’s imperial ambitions). But even if we see the realistic novel of that period as based on the “objective truths,” the facts, of scientific knowledge (which makes Manzanas, inversely yet not convincingly, connect “magic realism” with the unstable and undecidable truths of the Quantum theory [3]), - the modernist break with realism's narrative conventions has subsequently brought about forms of a new “realism” that has creatively absorbed the gaps and uncertainties which ever more complex notions of the real and its “changing nature” (27) have left in its system of representation - from Henry Roth, to James Agee, to Ralph Ellison to Don DeLillo. Manzanas speaks of a “ragbag of opposites, a vast, primordial matrix that engenders both nineteenth-century realism and its negations” (19).

Each literary mode eventually exhausts itself and becomes mere worn-out convention; this is true of realism as much as of magical realism. (As Manzanas concedes, at one point. [59]) During the last two hundred years or so, the strategies of either one have been used imaginatively, “disruptively,” in the interest of the marginal or the repressed (be they of ethnic group or working class), or, simply in the interest of artistic innovation: to break open an ossified (or commercialized) system of literary conventions. Of the various modifications of realism (a realism that is less monolithic than this book, at times, cares to acknowledge), magical realism is only one. Or, alternatively, “magic realism” is understood as encompassing metaphor, as a “rag bag” –new name, for all the modernist, postmodernist, or post/neo-realist re-visions of the, by now, historically dead and discarded realism of the late nineteenth century–, which would make for a broadness of definition at once welcome and problematic for the authors. For in his final chapter, Benito takes recourse to Adorno’s “negative dialectics” in order to assert a dialogic relation between “realism” and “magical realism” in which the latter is the “negative” (disruptive, imaginative) element. Doing so, he uses the large frame of Adorno's aesthetics to explain what he takes to be the dialectic interaction between related (if opposite) forms (or are they genres?) of narrative representation – something Adorno would most certainly have objected to. Adorno’s concept of the radical negativity of art – its only remaining freedom vis-à-vis the all-pervasive reign of the empirical and the commercial – aims beyond either style or genre at the inescapable dilemma of contemporary art itself. Benito is conscious of that, – and it is clear that by discussing the literature of magical realism within a broader aesthetic context, he wants to escape an ethnic parochialism that is noticeable as a steady ideological pull in the book’s argument. But why should realism not be as ecologically conscious as magical realism? Because it is the literary expression of an established order that denies or ignores the relevance of ecological issues? And why (and in what way) is ethnic (or postcolonial) magical realism different from postmodernist fictions that use magical realist elements? Because one gives voice to the experience of the ethnic repressed, whereas the other is a voice of the dominant literary system (the famous and yet largely undefined “mainstream” of most ethnic literary studies)? Even if this should be true, how does one, in this case, deal with Toni Morrison who, although representing the repressed, has, like much ethnic literature, become part of the literary system? Or with Robert Coover whose stories deal, however obliquely, with the left-out and passed-over and who certainly cannot be regarded as part of mainstream literature?

In this respect, I see much virtue in the forgotten theories of the Russian Formalists (Viktor Shlovsky's or Jurij Tynjanov's, for instance) who see literary, social, or economic
developments as evolving on parallel paths, i.e. on paths that are related but not narrowly correlated. This leaves room for the possibility that literary developments may follow their own logic, -although in reaction to specific social contexts and events. So that two different literary modes may, at different times, have the same social function; or one mode (be it realist or magical realist, in this case) may at one and the same time be used in/for two different social contexts or purposes. This would allow for more flexibility in the discussion of literatures that, although different, can nevertheless be seen as engaged in a dialogue within, but surely also beyond, the borderlines of ethnicity, gender, class, or nation.

This may sound like a plea for universalism – but it is not. Rather it argues for perceiving contemporary literature comparatively, i.e. as an open field in which particular literatures interrelate and interact in full recognition of their different traditions (be they cultural, aesthetic, or historical –in national or transnational correlation). Uncertain Mirrors, especially in its early chapters, takes a big step in that direction – even though it decides to do primarily what its title promises: to study “magical realisms in US ethnic literatures.” It does this in parts brilliantly, with great analytical subtlety and with remarkable knowledge and sophistication. In addition, it leads its readers – as it led this reader – to reflect on the borders of its chosen field of research (as well as on those of one's own critical perception). Not unlike the “negative dialectics” by which it sees magical realism tied to the realism it questions, Uncertain Mirrors, in seeking to provoke established critical positions, also disallows any certainty of closure with regard to its own premises: it invites, perhaps even provokes, probing the limits it has set for itself.

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