

BEYOND REALITY : MAGICAL REALISM IN CINEMA

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Abstract

Art, in all its forms, is deeply embedded in culture, reflecting the beliefs, values, and traditions of a society. One such artistic genre that has sparked ongoing debate is magical realism. Defining magical realism within a single framework is challenging, as scholars continue to discuss its application across different artistic mediums. There are some key questions related to magical realism. It include its association with Latin American literature, its prominence and connection of its themes with political conflicts and societal struggles

The term “magical realism” was first introduced in the 1920s by German critic Franz Roh. It later became closely associated with Latin American literature, particularly through the works of authors such as José Martí, Ruben Dario, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Although artistic works within this genre vary in style and approach, they share certain defining characteristics. One key feature is the seamless blending of magical or supernatural elements into everyday reality. Instead of treating the extraordinary as something unusual, magic realism presents the unbelievable as an ordinary part of life, making the fantastic feel real and natural.

As the genre continues to expand beyond its literary origins, it challenges our understanding of reality and fiction, proving that magic can exist in the most unexpected places. Magical realism in film is not a rigid genre but rather a stylistic approach that merges reality with fantastical elements in a way that feels natural and unforced. Unlike traditional fantasy, where supernatural aspects define the world, magical realis introduces extraordinary occurrences within everyday life without questioning or explaining them. The characters accept these surreal moments as part of their normal existence, creating a narrative that blurs the boundary between the real and the magical.

The movies Anandabhadram, My dear kuttichathan, Wings of Desire, City of Angels etc. can be analysed with the tool of magical realism. The distinction between *Wings of Desire* and *City of Angels* illustrates how different directors approach magical realism in film. In *Wings of Desire*, the presence of Angels is not questioned or explained; they simply exist alongside humans, reinforcing the magical realist notion that the supernatural is an integrated part of reality. Films such as *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) and Pan’s *Labyrinth* (2006) exemplify this tradition. Like

Water for Chocolate, based on Laura Esquivel's novel, presents a world where emotions manifest physically through cooking, merging the magical with the ordinary in a seamless narrative.

INDEX TERMS – Magical realism, super natural elements, fantasy

INTRODUCTION

The word “real” is the source of the word “realism.” In actuality, realism is a perspective that prioritizes objectivity over subjectivity. The pursuit of truth and reality, particularly in art and literature; the image and visualization of the facts; the denial of illusions; the emphasis on adhering to the facts; the belief in the existence of truth in generalities; and the idea that objects that we can perceive actually have an independent existence are some dictionary definitions of realism. According to these definitions, real (the truth) is simply the reverse of subjectivity and refers to the location and state of an item that is objective.

Magical realism is a literary and artistic movement that blends realistic settings with supernatural or magical elements, treating extraordinary occurrences as ordinary aspects of life. The term was first introduced by German art critic Franz Roh in the 1920s to describe a style of painting that combined realistic depictions with surreal elements. However, it gained worldwide recognition as a literary genre through the works of Latin American writers, most notably Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Isabel Allende, and Alejo Carpentier. Unlike fantasy, where magical elements exist in a separate world, magic realism integrates them into everyday life without explanation, making them an accepted part of the narrative.

Magical realism in movies

The evolution of magical realism can be divided into three major phases. The first phase began in the 1920s in Germany and Europe, when Roh used the term magical realism to describe a painting style that portrayed reality with an unusual, dream like quality. This approach was reflected in the works of artists like Giorgio de Chirico and Otto Dix, while in literature, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* demonstrated early magic realist tendencies. The second phase emerged in the 1940s in Latin America, where magic realism became a defining feature of literature, influenced by the region's folklore, myths, and colonial history. Alejo Carpentier introduced the concept of *lo real*.

The third phase of magical realism, which began in the 1950s and continues today, saw the genre gain global recognition. The publication of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967 marked a turning point, solidifying magical realism as one of the most significant literary movements of the 20th century. Márquez's novel presents a multi-generational saga filled with surreal occurrences such as a rain of yellow flowers and a character ascending to heaven told in a matter-of-fact tone.

As magical realism spread beyond Latin America, authors worldwide adopted and adapted its techniques. Writers like Isabel Allende (*The House of the Spirits*), Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*), and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*) incorporated magical elements into their works, using them to explore themes of history, memory, and identity. Today, magical realism continues to influence literature, film, and art, bridging the gap between the real and the imaginary in ways that challenge traditional storytelling. Some of the key figures in the development of this term other than Franz Roh are Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, literary critic Angel Flores, Indian writer Massimo Bontempelli, and Latin American novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Anandabhadram is a remarkable film that seamlessly blends magical realism with Kerala's folklore, mythology, and supernatural traditions. Adapted from Sunil Parameswaran's novel, the film follows Ananthan, a rationalist who returns to his ancestral village, Sivapuram, to fulfill his late mother's wish of lighting the sacred lamp at the Shivakavu temple. However, he soon finds himself in a world where magic and mysticism are an intrinsic part of daily life. Unlike conventional fantasy films, where the supernatural exists separately, *Anandabhadram* treats it as an accepted reality, with elements like tantric rituals, the legendary Nagamanikyam, and eerie visions naturally woven into the villagers' beliefs and experiences. As Ananthan encounters the sinister black magician Digambaran, his skepticism gives way to an understanding of the blurred boundaries between the mystical and the ordinary.

Digambaran, portrayed masterfully by Manoj K. Jayan, embodies the dark mysticism that drives the film's tension. His eerie black attire, hypnotic presence, and pursuit of the Nagamanikyam to enhance his tantric powers reinforce the idea that magic is not a distant fantasy but a force that influences everyday life in Sivapuram. Santosh Sivan's cinematography enhances this magical realism, using dramatic lighting, vibrant colors, and surreal imagery to create an atmosphere where the mystical and the real coexist. The song "Pinakkamano," inspired by Raja Ravi Varma's paintings, is a stunning example of how art and magic merge within the film's visual storytelling. Additionally, *Anandabhadram* integrates Kerala's cultural heritage through elements of Theyyam, Kathakali, and Kalaripayattu, ensuring that its supernatural themes remain deeply rooted in regional traditions rather than feeling like mere fantasy.

The film also employs powerful symbolism, particularly through its use of light and darkness, to represent the eternal struggle between knowledge and ignorance, good and evil. Ananthan's journey to light the temple lamp symbolizes enlightenment, while Digambaran's sorcery embodies the lure of forbidden power. Serpents, a recurring motif, represent both danger and wisdom, aligning with Indian mythology's depiction of them

as protectors of hidden treasures, divine knowledge and everyday life. This interplay between the living and the dead reinforces the idea that the past and present are intricately connected, shaping the destiny of those who inhabit the village. The film also draws heavily from Kerala's artistic and

cultural traditions, incorporating elements of folklore, Kathakali, and ancient manuscripts to create a visually and thematically rich narrative. The power of sound and mantras plays a crucial role.

The narrative of *Ananthabhadram* is a mystery. Black magicians, martial arts masters, sorcerers, and seductresses predominate in this rural Kerala story. “I was enthralled with the story of Ananthabhadram,” Sivan remarked. I was transported to a mysterious world by the stories my grandmother used to tell me. When I heard this story, I felt the same way, and I tried to depict that in my movie. “The fables that my grandmother told me when I was a child were there at the back of mind and that has been a source of my stories,” states Parameswaran. Little Ananthan hears a story from his mother (Revathi) in the beginning of the film. She informs him that his family in the historic village of Shivapuram is descended from a line of strong magicians. The family is in charge of safeguarding nagamanikyam, a jewel on the head of the serpent, which is kept in a hidden location within the home under the watchful eye of snakes, including a small snake known as Kunjootan. The actual story starts with Ananthan (Prithviraj Sukumaran). Incantations and chants are depicted as forces capable of shaping reality, reinforcing the belief that words and rituals hold true power. Through these elements, Anandabhadram masterfully blends mythology, mysticism, and storytelling, offering a unique cinematic experience that resonates with Kerala’s deep-rooted spiritual and cultural heritage.

My Dear Kuttichathan (translate. My dear little goblin) is a 1984 Indian Malayalam-language children’s fantasy film directed by Jijo Punnoose and produced by his father Navodaya Appachan under Navodaya Studio. It was the first Indian movie to be shot in 3D format. Written by Raghunath Paleri, the plot centers on a magical native goblin named “Kuttichathan,” who is enchanted by an evil wizard. However, he is freed by three kids, and thereafter forms a friendship with them. The film’s soundtrack was composed by Ilaiyaraaja, with cinematography and editing by Ashok Kumar and T. R. Shekhar, respectively. Raja and Anthony, two fortune seekers, were determined to find a legendary treasure hidden inside the eerie mansion of the wicked sorcerer, Mantravadhi. Their desperation led them to employ various methods, first seeking the guidance of the Mystical Baba Khondol, a self-proclaimed spiritual expert, and later turning to scientific approaches with the eccentric Professor Chashmish. However, no matter what they tried, Their efforts always ended in failure. Mantravadhi’s house was heavily protected by ancient spells, making it impossible for them to break in.

While Raj and Anthony were plotting their next move, a group of children in the same town had their own adventure unfolding. The three friends Vijay, Vinod, and Laxmi had grown up hearing fascinating. *My Dear Kuttichathan* masterfully blends elements of magical realism with fantasy and folklore, creating a unique cinematic experience. The titular character, Kuttichathan, is a mystical spirit with supernatural powers, embodying childhood innocence, desires, and the unpredictability of fate. His presence introduces magic into an otherwise real-world setting, allowing for extraordinary events to unfold. The enchanted ring, which grants wishes, acts as a

bridge between reality and the supernatural, highlighting themes of human greed and morality. Similarly, the haunted mansion, where Kuttichathan is trapped, serves as a symbol of forgotten pasts and hidden secrets, adding an air of mystery to the narrative. The film creatively showcases surreal and fantastical moments that define its magical Realism. Scenes where food magically multiplies or appears out of nowhere blur the line between the ordinary and the extraordinary, while floating and flying objects defy the natural laws of physics, creating a dreamlike quality. Time and space distortions further reinforce the idea that reality is fluid and malleable. These magical elements are not just for spectacle but also serve a deeper purpose, challenging perceptions of reality and infusing the story with wonder and excitement. At the heart of the conflict is the evil magician, a character who seeks to exploit Kuttichathan's powers for his own selfish gains. He represents human corruption and the dangers of unchecked greed, directly opposing the innocence and purity that Kuttichathan.

CONCLUSION

Magical realism, as a narrative and artistic technique, transcends the boundaries between reality and fantasy, offering a unique lens through which to explore the complexities of human experience, culture, and history. This project has delved into the origins and evolution of magical realism, tracing its roots from the visual arts to its flourishing in Latin American literature and its subsequent adaptation into cinema. Through the analysis of two iconic Malayalam films, *Anandabhadram* and *My Dear Kuttichathan*, the project has demonstrated how magical realism can be effectively employed in film to create immersive, culturally rich narratives that resonate with audiences on multiple levels. *Anandabhadram* masterfully blends Kerala's folklore, mythology, and supernatural traditions with magical realism, presenting a world where the mystical is an accepted part of everyday life. The film's use of striking visuals, cultural symbolism, and seamless integration of the extraordinary into the ordinary highlights the genre's ability to explore themes of good versus evil, tradition versus modernity, and the coexistence of the real and the surreal. Similarly, *My Dear Kuttichathan* exemplifies magical realism through its portrayal of a mischievous yet benevolent spirit, Kuttichathan, whose presence introduces magic into an otherwise realistic setting. The film's exploration of childhood innocence, moral lessons, and the fluidity of reality underscores the genre's capacity to evoke wonder and philosophical reflection. Both films illustrate how magical realism in cinema can serve as a powerful storytelling tool, allowing filmmakers to challenge conventional perceptions of reality and engage audiences in deeper emotional and cultural dialogues. While the medium of film presents unique challenges, such as the need to visually represent the magical without disrupting the narrative's realism, directors like Santosh Sivan and Jijo Punnoose have successfully navigated these complexities. Their works demonstrate that magical realism in cinema is not confined by genre but is a versatile approach that can enrich narratives across themes and styles.

In conclusion, magical realism continues to evolve as a significant artistic and narrative force, bridging the gap between the real and the imaginary in ways that challenge and inspire whether in literature or film, it invites audiences to question the boundaries of reality, embrace the extraordinary in the ordinary, and explore the profound connections between culture, history, and human experience. As seen in *Anandabhadram* and *My Dear Kuttichathan*, magical realism remains a timeless and universal mode of storytelling, capable of transcending cultural and linguistic barriers to create stories that are both deeply rooted in tradition and universally resonant.

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