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Langdon, Jo 2011, Magical realism and experiences of extremity, *Current narratives*, no. 3, pp. 14-24.

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## MAGICAL REALISM AND EXPERIENCES OF EXTREMITY

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**Abstract:** Examining magical realist texts including Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1991), and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), this paper discusses how magical realism examines the extremities of trauma and fear, proposing that magical realist narratives afford a unique ability to represent trauma in a way that is not open to the stylistics of literary realism. Blending the real or believable with the fantastically outrageous, magical realist narratives typically destabilise and disorder privileged centres of 'truth' and 'reality', demonstrating the constructedness of knowledge and history. Accordingly, magical realist strategies are frequently used in interventionist or counter narratives that refuse to adhere to privileged versions of truth or history and insist upon a multiplicity of experience. The majority of magical realist scholarship explores how the genre undermines hegemonic perspectives of history to clear a space for marginal representations of the past. However, as this paper argues, magical realist narratives also provide a unique space for writing about experiences of extremity. Examining the role of fantasy in representations of violence and trauma, this paper proposes that rupturing a realist narrative with the magical or un-real accommodates representations of extremity by conveying the 'felt' experience of trauma.

**Keywords:** *Magical realism; Trauma.*

Magical realist narratives — with their flights into the fantastic and dislocation of borders of time and space and history — typically aim to destabilise privileged centres of reality. Refusing to legitimise a distinction between the marvellous and the real, magical realism has previously been recognised more for its political (postcolonial and feminist) agenda and its post-structuralist qualities than its role in representations of violence and trauma.

The understanding of magical realism offered here, however, proposes that the un-real, exaggerated, and magical of these narratives conveys a 'felt experience' that simulates the overwhelming effects of extreme experiences. Examining magical realist texts including Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1991), and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), this paper discusses how magical realism examines the extremities of trauma and fear, proposing that magical realist techniques afford a unique ability to represent trauma in a way that is not open to the stylistics of literary realism.

Theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Laurence Kirmayer propose that trauma narratives are characterised by incoherence, gaps and absences, and often demonstrate the 'frailty and imperistence of memory' (Kirmayer 1996, p. 174). Caruth contends that traumatic events challenge 'our usual expectations of what it means to tell, to listen, and to gain access to the past' (1995, p. 154). The aim of this

paper, then, is to situate understandings of trauma narratives within a magical realist framework, connecting the patterns of incoherence and trauma with the magical realist strategies employed by Foer and O'Brien.

### **Bizarre little butterflies: the misrepresentations of magical realism**

Maria Takolander describes the term 'magical realism' as at once 'alluringly lyrical' and 'an enigmatic oxymoron' (2007, p. 13). Indeed, the mode is easily and frequently misconstrued, often confused with the fantasy or marvellous literature of JK Rowling, JRR Tolkien, Lewis Carroll, or Brothers Grimm. It is a mistake, as Eugene Arva proposes, that demonstrates a 'misunderstanding of the magical element and possible underestimation of the realism component of the term' (2010, p. 103). It is also this implied 'divorce from reality' (Hegerfeldt 2005, p. 273) that has led many magical realist authors to reject the label as extravagant, apolitical and clichéd. O'Brien, for example, claims to have 'hated' Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* so much that he 'could not read more than three pages of it' (cited in Arva 2010, p. 109). Indeed, for some critics, magical realism is an exoticist commodity designed for a Western marketplace that wants to escape into fantasies of mysterious, non-Western places. David Jones describes Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1985) as a 'Latin American soap opera' full of 'bizarre little fantasies' (1985, p. 26), and Alberto Fuguet (whose early works were dismissed by publishers for lacking the magical realism they expected from a Latino author) is especially derisive of the genre. He complains, 'the thing is, I get suffocated by thick, sweet, humid air that smells like mangos, and I get the munchies when I begin to fly among thousands of colourful butterflies' (1997).

However, despite its whimsical connotations with butterflies, green-haired beauties and the otherworldly, magical realism cannot be reduced to, in the terms of Carolyn See, a 'delicious sweet for the mind' (cited in Boehm 1995, p. 40). In fact, magical realist narratives are often — if not always — anchored to an historical moment, and as such frequently represent and confront violent and traumatic events such as war, scenes of massacre or execution, or images of torture or rape. Moreover, the magical or un-real in these narratives does not provide readers with relief or consolation. They often serve a subversive purpose, attempting to highlight the falsity or 'unreality' of dominant discourses and hegemonic representations of history. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, García Márquez refers to an actual historical event, the massacre of three thousand Colombian banana plantation workers, emphasising the delicacy of history and the violence done to 'reality', often in the interests of the powerful. The eerie butterfly plague that inflicts García Márquez's fictional town of Macondo demonstrates, as Takolander points out, 'the frailty of realism and reality' (2007, p. 78). Arva refers to a 'kaleidoscope of realities', and argues that in the magical realist text, 'reality can be perceived, lived, and relived over and over again, in all its freshness, each time as if it were occurring for the first time' (2008, p. 80). Indeed, magical realism refuses to verify a fixed, singular or homogeneous version of any event or reality. The subversive aims of the mode might be best described in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which Rhys's protagonist, Antoinette, argues, 'There is always another side, always' (1997, p. 82). Indeed, as Takolander argues, magical realism's fundamental agenda is, typically, 'the elucidation of a marginal and transgressive politics' (2007, p. 14).

### **Magical realism and 'felt' trauma**

However, not all magical realist texts are subversive in the sense that they propose another version of events. For example, despite its use of humour, hyperbole, and forays into the fantastic, *Everything is Illuminated* — in which a young American travels to the Ukraine hoping to uncover the stories of his grandfather's Holocaust experience — does not intend to question, challenge or interrupt mainstream historical representations of the Holocaust. On the other hand, by refusing to adhere to the methods of literary realism, Foer seems to propose that there is not just one reality, or one way of experiencing reality, and highlights the problems associated with representing both the past — 'historical events characterised by referential uncertainty' (Collado-Rodriguez 2008, p. 57) — and the complexities of trauma.

As Arva contends, 'magical realism does not seek a logical representation of reality because its founding premise is that reality cannot be explained — or at least not only in one way' (2008, p. 78). What magical realism does afford authors is the opportunity to represent what might otherwise be beyond representation. Referring to the 'muteness of trauma' and its 'unspeakable extremities', Arva argues that magical realism has the unique ability to turn 'what resists representation into an accessible reality' (2008, p. 69; 74). By rupturing the realist narrative with the magical or un-real, the narratives of Foer and O'Brien acknowledge the difficulties in accurately representing trauma, and at the same time engage readers with the text emotionally. Paradoxically, the un-real of these texts simulates the sense or experience of something real. Referring to what he calls the traumatic imagination, Arva argues that magical realism offers a reality that is unexplained but simulated and felt. Often details do not refer directly to violence, but the unfolding horror is suggested in a way that is aligned with 'the initial traumatic shock when any conceptualisation is impossible' (Arva 2008, p. 70). For example, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a violent scene is narrated in a way that 'conspicuously lacks any specific words denoting physical violence' (Arva 2008, p. 61):

[They] were penned in, swirling about in a gigantic whirlwind that little by little was being reduced to its epicenter as the edges were systematically being cut off all around like an onion being peeled by the insatiable and methodical shears of the machine guns' (García Márquez 1992, p. 249).

Here the 'real' of the text is in the experience of the reader, rather than in something that can be objectively measured or determined. Although the reader might understand that what is occurring is real, the scene's ambiguity and the image of an onion being peeled — a metaphor that does not seem to denote violence — is enough to also make it seem unreal. It thus aligns the reader to *experience* trauma and the 'overwhelming affects' that often prevent its ability to translate into a narrative form in the first place (Arva 2008, p. 61). Of this scene, Arva argues that 'more factual imagery, as for example, "human bodies being ripped apart by high-calibre bullets," might have been more shocking or, in terms of style, more "realistic," but its impact on the readers' minds would not have been as deep — nor as long lasting — as that of the magical realist image' (2008, p. 71). In trying to represent the felt experience of trauma authentically, violent and traumatic events are narrated in un-real or magical terms. Yet in a way that seems paradoxical, this narrative style makes those events appear more real, because it positions the reader to *feel* something specific to or closely aligned with the original experience of extremity.

### Everything is incredible: magic and hyperbole in Jonathan Safran Foer's fiction

In *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer likewise positions his readers to experience the violent and extreme:

... the guards put him in the synagogue with the rest of the Jews and everyone else was remaining outside to hear the crying of the babies and the crying of the adults and to see the black spark when the first match was lit by a young man ... it illuminated those who were not in the synagogue those who were not going to die and he cast it on the branches that were pushed against the synagogue what made it so awful was how it was so slow and how the fire made itself dead many times and had to be remade I looked at Grandmother and she kissed me on the forehead and I kissed her on the mouth and our tears mixed on our lips ... I said I love you I love you I love you ... (Foer 2002, p. 251).

The surreality of this prose positions the reader to feel, rather than know or necessarily understand, the situation. In this way, 'felt' reality might, in Anne Hegerfeldt's terms, 'convey a sense of horror ... more profound than could have been expressed in words' (2005, p. 87). The representation of the 'un-real' is, then, as capable of effecting an emotional connection between the reader and the text as more 'objective' and 'realistic' forms of narrative.

Other magical realist texts work to set up two contradictory perspectives, one that understands, usually after the fact, the reality of the situation, and the other that, from inside the moment, does not. These incongruous perspectives, Hegerfeldt argues, work to 'make a horrible point' (2005, p. 214). For example, in *Everything is Illuminated*, Alex's grandfather recalls how, when German soldiers arrived in his Ukrainian village and 'stopped all of the tanks', he and his family considered whether 'they had decided to return to Germany and end the war because nobody likes war not even those who survive it, not even the winners' (2002, p. 248).

Arva also points out that many of the main characters or narrators of magical realist texts are children or immature adults. 'After all,' he argues, 'it is they who can, better than anyone else, experience reality without letting reason get in the way' (2008, p. 80). *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is partially narrated by ten-year-old Oskar Schnell, whose father has perished in 9/11. As well as representing the actual horrors of the past, Foer depicts a post-traumatic world in which his characters are struggling to come to terms with the violence of the past, and with their loss. In what Uytterschout describes as 'a state of hyperactivity and hyper-vigilance' (2010, p. 186), Oskar is preoccupied with inventing and imagining trauma-related possibilities that could potentially have rescued his father:

Sometimes I think it would be weird if there were a skyscraper that moved up and down while its elevator stayed in place. So if you wanted to go to the ninety-fifth floor, you'd just press the 95 button and the ninety-fifth floor would come to you. Also, that could be extremely useful, because if you're on the ninety-fifth floor and a plane hits below you, the building could take you to the ground, and everyone could be safe, even if you left your birdseed shirt at home that day (Foer 2006, p. 3).

Oskar's grandfather, Thomas Schnell, is a survivor of the World War II Dresden firebombing. Uytterschout argues that Thomas, whose grief upon losing his family

and childhood sweetheart during the war has rendered him seemingly unable to speak, 'does not belong anywhere, except in a past that is irretrievably lost to him' (2010, p. 190). He has tattooed his hands with 'YES' and 'NO', and carries notebooks with him by which to communicate, sometimes recycling words or phrases from earlier or other situations when the pages run out: 'if someone asked me, "How are you feeling?" it might be that my best response was to point at, "The regular, please," or perhaps, "And I wouldn't say no to something sweet"' (Foer 2006, p. 28). Thomas's chapters, which are often stream-of-consciousness narratives in the shape of letters to his son, or the pages of his notebooks, literally give shape to the unsayable nature of his traumatic experiences, while at the same time demonstrating the disruption of linear notions of understanding traumatic narratives:

I have so much to tell you, the problem isn't that I'm running out of time, I'm running out of room, this book is filling up, there couldn't be enough pages, I looked around the apartment this morning for one last time and there was writing everywhere, filling the walls and mirrors, I'd rolled up the rugs so I could write on the floors, I'd written on the windows and around the bottles of wine we were given but never drank, I wear only short sleeves, even when it's cold, because my arms are books, too (Foer 2006, p. 132).

As Hegerfeldt contends, the innocence of these characters or their rejection of events as fantastic is 'contradicted by the reader's knowledge that they are true, the resulting tension underscoring the events' outrageousness' (2005, p. 214). In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Thomas recalls how, as bombs were falling around him in Dresden, he thought initially only of his pregnant lover:

I was alone on the street, the red flares fell around me, thousands of them, I knew that something unimaginable was about to happen, I was thinking of Anna, I was overjoyed (Foer 2006, p. 210).

As the scene continues, punctuation is misplaced and then completely absent, and the long and bewildered manner of recollecting situates the reader within the unfolding horror and confusion, so that what is going on is felt or experienced rather than observed. As Hegerfeldt contends, although the reader is aware of the reality of the bombings, another part of them is aligned with Thomas's excitement and disorientation, which unwinds into a state of terror when he notices his 'blood matted hair', 'split and bleeding lips' and 'red, pulsing palms' (Foer 2006, p. 214), and passes the zoo where he is asked to help the keeper to shoot the carnivores:

I killed a cub that was climbing atop a massive dead bear, was it climbing atop its parent? I killed a camel with twelve bullets, I suspect it wasn't a carnivore, but I was killing everything, everything had to be killed ... I killed a zebra, I killed a giraffe, I turned the water of the sea lion's tank red ... I tried to shoot the vultures but I wasn't a good enough shot, later I saw the vultures fattening themselves on the human carnage, and I blamed myself for everything (Foer 2006, p. 213).

Other magical realist narratives might rely on a young or unreliable narrator to emphasise the subjectivity of first-person narratives and underline the distinction between truth and representation. For example, in *The Things They Carried*, a semi-autobiographical collection of short stories about O'Brien's Vietnam War experience, the narrator repeatedly interrupts his own story, unsettling readers with assertions

such as 'This is true'; 'It's all exactly true' (1991, p. 67; 69). O'Brien writes, 'I want to tell you why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth' (p. 179), asserting that he stories his experiences in a way that makes them more authentic than the truth, and demonstrating how narrative can simulate 'felt' experiences. Recalling a similar storytelling technique used by a friend, O'Brien describes how, 'If Rat told you, for example, that he'd slept with four girls in one night, you could figure it was about a girl and a half. It wasn't a question of deceit. Just the opposite: he wanted to heat up the truth, make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt' (p. 87).

Foer's use of dual narrators in *Everything is Illuminated* provides a similar effect that suggests the truthfulness of hyperbolic representation. Lee Behlman argues that the novel 'foregrounds, through a set of untrustworthy narrators, the impossibility of any unmediated, wholly accurate access to the past' (2004, pp. 59-60). Fluctuating, as Collado-Rodriguez describes, 'between a story with mythical overtones ... and an apparently more realistic report' (2008, p. 54), the novel combines two stories, one written by the American Jonathan, which is self-consciously imagined and fictitious, and the other 'real life' and comic, told by the Ukrainian Alex. Jonathan (eponymously named Jonathan Safran Foer) has travelled to the Ukraine bearing a photograph of his grandfather with a mysterious woman named Augustine. With the help of his Ukrainian translator, Alex, Jonathan hopes to find Augustine, who allegedly saved his grandfather from the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Jonathan's chapters imagine what his eighteenth to early nineteenth century ancestors might have experienced. Set in a make-believe Ukrainian shtetl named Trachimbrod, Jonathan's stories are magical realist, interrupted by 'breach[es] of realism' (Hegerfeldt 2005, p. 77) which include a young woman who can categorise sadness and love, and who was born from a river, 'still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside of a plum' (Foer 2002, p. 13).

The Ukrainian translator, Alex, bears an uncannily close resemblance to Sacha Baron Cohen's comedic character, Borat<sup>1</sup>. Readers find him immediately untrustworthy, not only because his grasp of English is clearly unsteady, but due as well to his obvious propensity to exaggerate and mislead. Alex introduces himself this way:

I dig American movies. I dig Negroes, particularly Michael Jackson. I dig to disseminate very much currency at famous nightclubs in Odessa. Lamborghini Countaches are excellent, and so are cappuccinos. Many girls want to be carnal with me in many good arrangements, notwithstanding the Inebriated Kangaroo, the Gorky Tickle, and the Unyielding Zookeeper. If you want to know why so many girls want to be with me, it is because I am a very premium person to be with (Foer 2002, p. 2).

Foer's use of humour demonstrates a recurring trend towards dealing with morally fraught subjects in a morally confronting manner. Indeed, for the majority of the novel, Alex's chapters oscillate between shockingly vulgar and laugh-out-loud funny. However, when Alex translates to Jonathan his grandfather's shattering story of betraying his best friend to the Nazis, the humour is lost. Alex's manner of

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<sup>1</sup> Borat's character appears in the 2006 satirical comedy *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. The film's humour is controversial, and has been condemned for supposedly representing views that are sexist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic. In terms of language style, Baron Cohen's Borat and Foer's Alex are notably alike.

translating has not changed, but now instead of injecting humour it gives the story a naïve and childlike quality. For example, 'The general with the blue eyes put the microphone to his face' (Foer 2002, p. 249). In a paragraph of almost six pages, two of which are one run-on sentence, Alex relates his grandfather's story to Jonathan. The lack of punctuation creates confusion, dread and anxiety:

I pointed at Hershel and said he is a Jew this man is a Jew please Hershel said to me and he was crying tell them it is not true please Eli please two guards seized him and he did not resist but he did cry more and harder and he shouted tell them that there are no more Jews no more Jews and you only said that I was a Jew so you would not be killed I am begging you Eli you are my friend do not let me die I am so afraid of dying it will be OK I told him it will be OK (Foer 2002, p. 251).

The novel's dust jacket proposes that what Jonathan and Alex are looking for 'seems elusive — a truth hidden behind veils of time, language and the horrors of war.' Foer's use of fantasy and humour affords him the unique ability to penetrate these veils and barriers of time, language and war's horror, and represent trauma in a way that literary realism is not able. As Arva argues, 'The deceptive simplicity of magical realist images, their coherence, vividness, and emotional charge, enables readers to see and feel — without necessarily understanding — the indescribable horrors of the past' (p. 75). Foer stories violent and traumatic events of the past in a way that induces the sensation of extremity, and an emotional response or investment from the reader. Francisco Collado-Rodriguez contends that Foer's use of two narrators serves to 'evaluate the power of fiction as an ethical instrument'. Alex and Jonathan's dual narration permits a release of repressed trauma, he argues, and 'positions characters and readers as non-referential witnesses of the events reported' (2008, p. 54). Indeed, the novel is not didactic in its representation of the Holocaust and its effects on both Alex and Jonathan's families. Rather, the reader witnesses the exchange between the hyperbolic, humorous storytelling of Alex, and Jonathan's recreated, magical realist history and, while the narrative styles expose the representedness of all historical accounts, the layers of humour, hyperbole and magic reveal gradually disclosed truths about the past. As Alex observes in a letter to Jonathan, 'With our writing, we are reminding each other of things. We are making one story, yes?' (Foer 2002, p. 144).

### **Exactly as it seemed: Tim O'Brien's road to Paris**

The pattern of 'felt' trauma is one also present in *Going After Cacciato*. In O'Brien's novel, a soldier serving in Vietnam imagines what it would be like to leave the war and walk to Paris, and the distinctions between the real and the imaginary are continually confused. Interestingly, O'Brien, despite his clearly magical realist style, resists the term 'magical realist'. According to O'Brien, 'flights into imagination, fantasy, and daydreams are integral elements of human lives as individuals escape the world, model the words, or explore possibilities for their future actions' (cited in Herzog 1997, p. 22). Critics such as Tobey Herzog have argued, contrary to understandings of magical realism offered here, that the fantastical qualities of O'Brien's work in fact function to "enhance the realism" rather than challenge it. Herzog contends that, by disordering structure, shifting viewpoints, blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, and disrupting the chronological flow of time in his works, O'Brien is 'exploring the realities of the human mind'. Such activities are,

Herzog maintains, not examples of O'Brien's magical realist techniques; rather, 'they are real' (1997, p. 22).

As Arva points out, however, O'Brien and Herzog are, paradoxically, 'confirming rather than denying [O'Brien's] use of magical realism' (2010, p. 103). Indeed, while O'Brien might insist that his novels are all real with no magic or fantasy, he does on the other hand deliberately rupture the realist narratives with flights into the unreal, employing magical realist strategies not unlike Foer's. Private Cacciato deserts his post in Vietnam with the intent of walking to Paris, and the remaining members of his squad, including the protagonist Paul Berlin, are sent after him. The novel shifts erratically between the watchtower and the road to Paris, which at times crosses 'pale Mediterranean waters, the sun's heat, mixed smells of oil and machinery and brine and fish', and then, at the narrator's whim, might include 'a getaway car — why not?' (O'Brien 1999 (1978), p. 255; 243). While the reader is aware that Paris is the soldier's daydream and fantasy, the distinction between the real and imagined is continually dissolved. Even the un-real road to Paris itself is unpredictable:

It was a precisely drawn circle. Within the circle, in red, were two smaller circles, between them an even smaller circle, and beneath them a big banana smile. A round happy face. Underneath it, in printed block letters, was a warning: LOOK OUT, THERE'S A HOLE IN THE ROAD (p. 73).

Indeed, Berlin's fantasy escape road collapses into tunnels and holes, in a state of confusion not unlike that found within *Alice in Wonderland*:

So down and down, pinwheeling freestyle through the dark... Far below he could make out the dim tumbling outline of the buffalo and slat-cart, the two old aunties still perched backward at the rear. He heard them howling. Then they were gone. His lungs ached. The blood stopped in his veins, his eyes burned, his brain plunged faster than his stomach. The hole kept opening. Deep and narrow, lit by torches that sped past like shooting stars, red eyes twinkling along sheer rockface, down and down (p. 82).

Jill Taft-Kaufman describes *Going After Cacciato* as a novel 'in which a young soldier escapes the brutal realities of the Vietnam War by taking an imaginary journey to Paris' (2000, p. 18). Berlin imagines the un-real in intimate detail. For example his lover, Sarkin Aung Wan, —'just a creature of his own making — blink and she was gone' (p. 202) — is almost 'made more real than the real' (Arva 2010, p. 75). Sarkin Aung Wan haunts O'Brien's narrative in a curious way, because although the reader is aware she is a figment of Berlin's chimerical reality, her presence is often more felt and immediate than the 'real' characters of the novel: 'her damp hair felt like seaweed on his leg. Everything so soft' (p. 114). By contrast, many of the 'real life' characters that populate Berlin's 'true' war experience are strangely ineffable or absent. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien describes how the nature of traumatic events has rendered them difficult, if not impossible, to represent using the stylistics of literary realism: 'I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless guilt' (1991, p. 179). The detailed representation of Sarkin Aung Wan compensates for the absence of detail in representations of the 'real faces'. However, contrary to Taft-Kaufman's notion of 'escaping', Paul Berlin is ultimately unable to imagine a happy ending and he cannot disappear from the trauma of the past. 'Things were out of control. Gone haywire.

You could run but you couldn't outrun the consequences of running. Not even in imagination' (O'Brien 1999, p. 226).

Yet despite these fantastic occurrences, O'Brien maintains that his novel is not magical realist. 'I see myself as a realist in the strictest sense,' he argues. 'That is to say, our daydreams are real; our fantasies are real. They aren't construed as otherwise in any of my books' (O'Brien cited in Herzog 1997, p. 80). What O'Brien demonstrates, however, is that there is more than one way to experience reality. O'Brien argues that the unreal is also real, which might also be demonstrated in terms of how a reader responds to the fantastical elements of the text. Regardless of whether the reader might want to reject the magical content they are consuming, if they *feel* something when reading these un-real narratives then they must also acknowledge that the fantastical is producing something authentic, and therefore real or true. O'Brien himself confirms this:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way ... pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed* (1991, pp. 69-70).

By insisting upon the heterogeneity of experience and proposing that reality can be experienced in more than one way, O'Brien's magical realist techniques at once highlight the difficulties in and at the same time offer a unique way of representing experiences of extremity.

#### **An 'attitude towards reality': magical realist and trauma narratives**

As Arva argues, magical realism rejects the notion of a single or fixed version of truth or reality, while at the same time 'constantly exposing its own failure to achieve a thorough and accurate representation of the world' (2008, p. 78). Certainly, the deliberately ambiguous nature of magical realist texts means that they can often be read in a multitude of ways, often causing the reader to 'lose the plot' and feel or experience, rather than objectively observe or understand, occurring events. Indeed, the mode's way of approaching reality means that narratives are often incomplete or indefinite, as experiences of extremity, namely violence and trauma, are. While not purporting to dispute or challenge hegemony in the way of the majority of magical realist literature, O'Brien and Foer's narratives do nonetheless maintain what Luis Leal calls magical realism's 'attitude towards reality' (Leal cited in Chanady 2005, p. 131), playfully exposing the extent to which all reality is fiction or construction, or, in the remembering traumatic events, even an act of reconstruction.

Caruth contends that 'the capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort', or even 'the capacity to simply forget' (1995, p. 151). Indeed, multiplicity and incoherence characterise both magical realist and trauma narratives, and, as Foer and O'Brien's texts demonstrate, the stylistics of magical realism afford a unique ability to represent trauma and horror; events considered difficult if not impossible to represent accurately or with authenticity using objective or realistic narrative modes.

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