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American Magic Realism:

Crossing the Borders in Literatures of the Margins

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The term magic realism exerts, what Fredric Jameson calls, “a strange seductiveness” (302), and is today as prevalent as ever despite attempts on the part of critics to modify or abandon it. (Note 1) It has already been applied to describe European Post-Expressionist painting of the 1920s, Kafka’s works and especially the literature of South America. Recently, the concept of magic realism has been used to refer to the literary expressions of the groups who consider themselves to be marginalized, such as women, lesbians and gays; and also to the literary expressions of the nations that are ethnically or socially marginalized borderlands. Critics and writers have observed the presence of magic realism in the literatures of Canada, India or Nigeria. (Note 2) Little emphasis, however, has been placed so far on this literary mode as a means of literary expression characteristic of the majority of American ethnic literatures whether they be African-American, Native American, Asian American or Latino/a.

Although magic realism has thus had several incarnations, the immediate associations of the term are of course with Latin American literature. In the 1940s and 1950s, the concept came to denote, as we know, an autonomous and distinct literature in Central and South America. “*Lo real maravilloso americano*” was a phrase coined by Alejo Carpentier to refer to the distinctive quality of Latin American reality understood as a place of collision of two different cultures: the one of the natives and the one of the white colonizers. Magic realism reflected the duality that resulted from this cross-cultural intersection and accommodated the popular myths, legends and folklore inherent in the lives of the indigenous people, while adhering at the same time to the conventions of realistic fiction. However, apart from cultural references, magic realism also echoed social and political issues in Latin America. It was a literary reaction to undemocratic, often dictatorial, strategies of the majority of the governments in South America, and, as such, functioned as a voice for the repressed, whose presence was ignored in everyday reality.

Despite arguments made on the part of Latin American critics that it should be considered only within the context of South American and Caribbean reality, magic

realism has been gaining popularity as a means of literary expression for the majority of ethnic literatures in the US since the late 1960s. The US has been the place of confrontation of different ethnic cultures, and the social and political aspects of this confrontation have had multiple implications for the ontological status of the ethnic minorities in America. This has been reflected in their literatures. I would like to discuss magic realism in American ethnic writing by examining two novels by two ethnic writers, the Native American Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1989) and the Chinese-American Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995).

I view magic realism as a mode which crosses the borders between two different forms of reasoning. The very term "magic realism" already suggests a binary opposition between two separate discourses: the realistic and the magical. To apply S. Erin Denney's definition, in their most polarized forms, of the two, "realism" represents those aspects of the world open to empirical investigation and characteristic of the perception of the west-European, industrialized communities; whereas "magic" presupposes the existence of the supernatural in explaining events, characteristic of many ethnic peoples. ("To Be and/or Not To Be"). The coexistence of magic and realism is presented in a matter-of-fact way as being natural, so that "the reader does not react to the supernatural in the text as if it were antinomious with respect to our conventional view of reality" (Channady 23-24). In the fusion of these two opposite epistemological concepts, the former boundaries between the real and the supernatural fade, and the improbable becomes objectively possible.

Although their cultural and ethnic backgrounds are different, both Erdrich and Tan use the literary mode of magic realism in their works. Written from a Native American perspective, *Tracks* displays many formal parallels with *The Hundred Secret Senses*, written from a Chinese-American perspective. The essential structural element in both novels is the collision of two realities: the rational and discursive one, and the irrational and intuitive one. The dichotomy of magic and realism allows *Tracks* and *The Hundred Secret Senses* to be expressions of Erdrich's and Tan's own ethnic identities, while enabling such fiction to remain accessible to the wider audience due to the interesting plot, memorable characters, familiar geographical and historical settings, and the English language in which the novels are written.

David Young and Keith Hollaman observe that "magic realism is not as much a challenge to the conventions of literary realism as it is to the basic assumptions of modern positivist thought, the soil in which literary realism flourished" (3). Using the juxtaposition of two different epistemological systems in magic realism, Erdrich and Tan project their ideological concerns with the socio-cultural and political borders of ethnic communities in the US, such as, English/Non-English, white/colored, Christian/Non-Christian. The "ethnic" is in a constant dialogue with the "whiteness" in *Tracks* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*but "[s]ince the ground

rules of these two worlds are incompatible," Stephen Slemon observes, "neither one can fully come into being and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the 'other,' and each working toward a different kind of fictional world from the 'other'" (11). Such a textual structure echoes the Socratic idea of the nature of thought and of truth itself, according to which truth is not born nor of itself found in the head of the individual person; it is born between people collectively searching for the truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. In the novels the dialogic quality can be observed in a number of dualities which, as I discuss below, affect firstly the narrative structure, which itself shapes characterization, the two thus being interrelated, and secondly the constructs of time and place. As we, the readers, enter the discourse between the two dimensions of reality, we are challenged to stretch out our imagination and to pose questions about our values, ideas and beliefs.

Structurally, both *Tracks* and *The Hundred Secret Senses* are built by alternating stories told by two different narrators. *Tracks* interlaces the narratives of Nanapush, an elder of a Chippewa tribe, and Pauline, a mixed blood Chippewa woman aspiring to be a Catholic nun. *The Hundred Secret Senses* features the stories told by two half-sisters, Kwan, a Chinese-born fifty-year-old woman, and Olivia, the younger biracial coheroine born in the US. The analysis of the narrative structure demonstrates the presence of binary pairs of the narrators who give their accounts of reality from different points of view. The governing principle is "the tendency to equal distribution of value among all elements in a field, whether the field is social, spiritual or aesthetic" (Allen 241). In this structural framework, neither of the narrator-characters is foregrounded and the focus of the action shifts from one narrator to another as the story unfolds. The disproportion between the narrative relations of Nanapush and Pauline, and Olivia and Kwan is informed by the discourse in the novels of two contrary epistemologies, the one of magic and the other of realism, which penetrate the novels.

To illustrate, in *Tracks* Nanapush gives his version of the events from the perspective of an Indian vested in his native culture and hesitant to embrace the ways of the white people. Although Nanapush approves of some changes that the white people bring with them, his narrative exemplifies the novel's roots in Chippewa oral tradition. His story, told to his granddaughter Lulu, assumes the form of a myth, which, according to Paula Gunn Allen, refers "to the sacred world of ritual magic rather than to the external world of machine-verifiable facts" (104). Inherent in the Native American oral tradition, the myth ignores, to some extent, the western unities of time, place and action and follows the rules of a living language, which often results in achronology, repetition and the gradual accretion of meaning. In the oral tradition the myth operates by interlacing the principles of reality with those of magic. In the novel the magic has to be subdued by the framework of fiction, which requires a coherent and readable structure.

A large part of Chippewa oral tradition, as handed down by Nanapush, operates by the principles of magic, the main source of which is Indian medicine. The knowledge of its secrets is passed down from Chippewa ancestors, and concerns the usage of plants and herbs for either ritual or healing purposes. In *Tracks*, the Indian medicine is practiced most effectively by Fleur who uses it to get a revenge on Lazzare for shaving off Margaret's hair, and later when she makes Sophie Morrisey repent for luring Eli, Fleur's husband. Fleur is the medium through which the supernatural works. The Chippewa believe that Misshepeshu, the water monster inhabiting Matchimanito Lake, enforces his commands through her. It is thanks to Misshepeshu that Fleur can drown people, cause tornadoes and order the trees. All of Fleur's magical actions, however, might also have an empirical interpretation, which points to the duality of *Tracks*. After all, the trees might have been cut down by the wind, the men could have drowned in the big waves, and the tornado could have been caused by a sudden change of weather. The novel does not provide a clear explanation.

Nanapush's and Pauline's medicine practices, advised by Moses, are focused on Fleur. Nanapush uses Chippewa medicine to invalidate evil and restore order in Fleur's life after she learns about the loss of both her child and her land. The ceremony he decides to have is to help Fleur regain her power. As Nanapush comments later, however, it might have been either the ceremony or the money her relatives managed to raise to buy the land that cured Fleur. Again, there is more than one explanation of the event, and the magic explains events just as logic does. On the other hand, when Pauline feeds Eli with love medicine it is partly because she is attracted to him, and also because she believes that by so doing she might weaken Fleur's power.

Myth requires audience, to which the sacred knowledge can be passed. When Nanapush tells his story to Lulu, he hopes she will, not only listen, but also participate actively in the myth. Nanapush's story functions as a form of ritual, the traditional purpose of which is to "integrate the individual with his/her fellows, the community of the people with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger communal groups with the worlds beyond this one" (Allen 62). Nanapush reveals to Lulu her identity when he says, "Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared when, along with the first bitter punishments of early winter, a new sickness swept down" (Tracks 1-2); and introduces her to the history of his tribe's dispossession and impoverishment:

> My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know. I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch tree that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager. (Tracks 2)

In the story he tells to Lulu, Nanapush functions as a receptacle of the history of his people. His words have a life-reviving power through which he can save Lulu

when she suffers from frostbite, and preserve the lives of other Chippewa. As a compassionate observer, he not only gives credit to the members of the Kashpaw and Pillager families, but reaches beyond the familial ties and encompasses the cultural heritage of the whole tribe. The word “we” that he uses at the beginning of his story, when he says, “We started dying before the snow, and like the snow we continued to fall” (*Tracks* 1) comes back at the end of his narrative, with his “We gave against the rush like the creaking oaks, held on, braced ourselves together in the fierce, dry wind” (*Tracks* 226). This repetition, Louis Owens suggests, underscores Nanapush’s profound sense of connectedness and tribal community (214). By listening to Nanapush’s story-myth, which Allen calls “a prose record of ceremony” (61), Lulu undergoes a ritual, the purpose of which is to expand her consciousness and integrate her with her history and community. Although Nanapush’s story is the account of the material and cultural deprivation that his tribe has faced, there is hope that the memory of his people, passed on to Lulu in the form of the story, will live on.

While Nanapush struggles thus through his stories and trickery to hold his tribe together, Pauline pictures future events that would, on the contrary, separate the people, as Owens observes (217): “I see farther,” she says, “[and] anticipate more than I’ve heard. The land will be sold and divided ... The trembling old fools with their conjuring tricks will die off and the young, like Lulu and Nector, return from the government schools blinded and deafened” (*Tracks* 204-205). Pauline’s narrative is an expression of an individual struggling with her own nightmares, ambitions and confusions. She does not have any audience. Her story unveils terrible pain and feelings of guilt caused by her denial of her racial and religious identity. In that respect, Pauline’s narrative is unlike the traditional American Indian literature, the purpose of which, as Allen indicates, is “never simply pure self-expression” (55). In her attempts to become fully white and Christian, Pauline inevitably ends up wrestling with her Chippewa gods and beliefs. In spite of her desire to be identified with the white majority of American society, the background of Pauline’s Chippewa past is an integral part of her personality. Although Pauline passionately embraces Roman Catholicism as a socially approved way of spiritual expression, she replaces the magical element of Catholic faith with her tribal beliefs. As a result, she cannot identify herself fully with either one of these religious concepts. Telling the story is for Pauline a means of gaining absolution from the sins committed against both the Christian and the Chippewa code. After all, Pauline finishes her confession as soon as she enters the convent, and with a new name, Leopolda, assumes a new identity.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, it is Kwan, a middle-aged woman of Chinese origin, who displays through her stories the best magical qualities of storytelling in which

the supernatural coexists with the real. To begin with, her narrative consists of three strands. The first one concerns her present life and dates back to 1962 when, as an eighteen-year-old girl, she arrives from a small village in China to join her family in San Francisco. The second one covers an earlier period and relates the memories of her childhood in China up to the time she leaves for the US. The third, most elaborate and convoluted strand of Kwan's narrative goes back in time to the 1850s and encompasses her memories from her past life in Jintian, China. Kwan's narrative is governed by the rules of "achronicity" which Allen defines as "not ignorant of the future anymore than it is unconscious of the past" (150). In this more-than-a-hundred-years-old story Kwan is not Kwan anymore. She is Nunumu, a young woman of the Hakka minority living in southern China in the middle of the 19th century. Nunumu's story focuses not so much on her personal tragedies as on the love story of her mistress, Miss Banner, who has come to China as a translator for a group of American missionaries at the time of the Taiping rebellion (1851-1864). By telling Nunumu's story, Kwan not only resurrects the lives of the dead people, but also provides a "soul channel" through which the spiritual connection between the world of the dead and the world of those alive can be established. Thus, Tan's construction of Kwan's narrative resembles the structure of American Indian story-myth which, as Allen notices, requires supernatural or nonordinary figures as characters, and relies on metaphysically charged symbols that convey its significance and indicate its sacred nature (100).

There is definitely a purpose in Kwan's storytelling. The 19th-century tale is uncovered before Olivia in the form of bedtime stories told by Kwan in Chinese. Through them, Kwan wants to make Olivia aware of her Chinese identity, and teach her how to explore her spirituality by entering the world of ghosts. As a child, Olivia resents these tales while enduring them; however, she unintentionally and subconsciously acquires the language in which they are told. Chinese then becomes the secret language between the two sisters, by means of which Kwan can convey to Olivia anything "from just about any topic to the tragedies of her former life" (*The Hundred Secret Senses* 13). Although it is difficult for Olivia to determine "which part was her dream, which part was mine? Where did they intersect?" (*The Hundred Secret Senses* 32), she gets drawn into the world of ghosts Kwan talks about. Apart from the group of American missionaries Olivia gets acquainted with through Miss Banner, there are also the treacherous Captain Cape, and Yiban Johnson, Miss Banner's lover who never gets a chance to join her in the next world due to Nunumu's fault. As an adult, Olivia is unable to renounce Kwan's ghosts' world: "She had planted her imagination into mine. Her ghosts refused to be evicted from my dreams" (The Hundred Secret Senses 32). Later, when Olivia visits China with Kwan and Simon, she has the impression that she has seen the Changmian village before. As she recognizes the familiar traces from Kwan's tales in China she also finds her own self there:

> I gaze at the mountains and realize why Changmian seems so familiar. It's the setting for Kwan's stories, the ones that filter into my dreams. There they are: the archways, the cassia trees, the high

walls of the Ghost Merchant's House, the hills leading to Thistle Mountain. And being here, I feel as if the membrane separating the two halves of my life has finally been shed. (The Hundred Secret Senses 232)

Unlike Kwan's cyclical and multidimensional narration, Olivia's own story follows a linear pattern with neither flashbacks nor the envisioning of the supernatural. Her account has a relatively narrow scope and encompasses merely Olivia's lifetime from the moment she met Kwan until her sister's death, and focuses primarily on the relationship Olivia has with Kwan and on the tensions in her own marriage. It is a rather limited perspective if compared with Kwan's stories that cover not only large time periods but also embrace different existential dimensions: the one now and the one before. Olivia's story follows the tenets of Western fiction which is "based on nonsacred aesthetic and intellectual precepts such as the importance of the unities of time, place and action, and ... structured to create the illusion of change in the characters occurring over a period of time as a result of conflict and crisis" (Allen 81). Olivia's story does not go beyond a physical, empirically-perceived experience, and she herself is moreover reluctant to accept other ways than those that are rational to solve her problems. She convinces herself by saying, "Be practical, I tell myself. If the frogs eat the insects and the ducks eat the frogs and the rice thrives twice a year, why question the world in which they live?" (*The Hundred Secret Senses* 276).

Olivia's story is not addressed to anyone in particular. It is more appropriate to call it a confession in which Olivia gives an account of all the things that haunt her and gets insight as to how her fears can perish. What repeats in Olivia's story is her unhappiness. Fatherless since she was four and constantly neglected by her oversociable and irresponsible mother, Olivia consciously ignores Kwan's love and tenderness. Unable to see Kwan as her true sister, Olivia easily gets irritated by her ghost talk, resents her relentless optimism and ridicules Kwan's mispronunciation of English words. She cannot understand that as sisters they are, as Kwan puts it, "connected by a cosmic Chinese umbilical cord that's given us the same inborn traits, personal motives, fate and luck" (*The Hundred Secret Senses* 23). What mortifies Olivia in truth is not Kwan, however, but the fear of yielding to her own intuition and letting her true, primary senses rule. Her love for Simon is tainted by the unquiet presence of the ghost of Elza, the young girl Simon had been in love with before he married Olivia. Because of her skepticism and intellectual dissection of facts, Olivia misinterprets reality, fails to see true love and, as a result, magnifies the ghost-like creatures that her imagination generates. She is too embedded in her personal anxieties and suspicions to discover the truth in her life.

Time and place are also influenced by the juxtaposition of magic and realism in *Tracks* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*. The temporal and spatial dimensions

possess a duality that mirrors two equally important ways of perceiving the world: the one inherent in marginalized cultures and the other ingrained in dominant Western society. If we take up time first, in *Tracks* the titles of the chapters account for both the realistic, logical understanding of time and for the Indian perception of that concept. Beside the numbers of the chapters, and the exact dates and names of the seasons written in English, there appear Indian names that are additionally translated into English and that refer to the Indian comprehension of time as a natural phenomenon described in terms of seasonal plants and the sun: e.g., "Miskomini geezis"—"Raspberry Sun"; "Meen geezis"—"Crust on the Snow Sun"; "Manitou geezis"—"Strong Spirit Sun." Interestingly, only chapter seven carries no reference to the word "sun." This seems to be a conscious decision on the part of Erdrich since this chapter, "Pauguk Bebbon"—"Skeleton Winter," elaborates extensively on the poverty and dispossession of land among the Chippewa.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses* the different dimensions of time are strongly connected with the manifold narrative. To illustrate, Kwan lives in two dimensions of time. As Kwan she exists in the twentieth-century San Francisco; as Nunumu, she lives in the nineteenth-century China. She travels freely between centuries and countries. What is more, she can establish contact between the world of Yin and the world of the living. In contrast to the physical modern world where time is measured by means of advanced technologies, in the world of Yin "nobody used a calendar or a clock anymore. The best method was to watch the moon" (*The Hundred Secret Senses* 115). Kwan's perspective on time is much broader than that of Olivia's. She sees time as continuity, as a cosmic cycle that repeats itself and never ends. In such a cycle there appears the chance of another life, and the hope that one can join the people once loved and now dead.

The story told from Olivia's perspective concerns, on the other hand, the present. She perceives time as sequential, and only in relation to herself and her lifetime. According to Allen, such a perception of time supports "allied western beliefs that the individual is separate from the environment, that man is separate from God, that life is an isolated business" (149). Focused on the inquiry into the sense of her marriage and her relationship with Kwan, Olivia hardly ever talks about other areas of life that consume her time, such as work or socializing. Life to her presents time as a fragment accessible to us in the "now" reality. It is only at the end of the trip to China that her view on the passing of time changes. Guided by Kwan into the spiritual realm of Yin people and secret senses, Olivia confesses:

> Now I'm looking at the heavens again. This is the same sky Simon is now seeing, that we have seen all our lives, together and apart. The same sky that Kwan sees, that all her ghosts saw, Miss Banner. Only now I no longer feel it is a vacuum for hopes or a backdrop for fears. I see what is so simple, so obvious. It holds up the stars, the planets, the moons, all of life, for eternity. I can always find it, it will always find me. It is continuous, light with dark, dark within light. It promises nothing but to be constant and mysterious, frightening and miraculous. (*The Hundred Secret Senses* 361-362)

Place, just as time, might be seen from different perspectives and carry more than one meaning. The setting for *Tracks* is the fictional Matchimanito Lake. Although it is doubtful that there is an actual geographical location for this lake, in modern Ojibwa myth Matchi Manito is an evil *manito*, as opposed to Gitchi Manito, the creator (Sergi 281). For the Chippewa, Matchimanito is a sacred place, inhabited by the ghosts of the dead Pillagers: "Those woods were a lonely place full of ghosts of the drowned and those whose death took them unaware" (*Tracks* 35). The Indians avoid Matchimanito and associate it with Mishsepeshu, the water man:

> Our mothers warn us that we'll think he's handsome, for he appears with green eyes, copper skin, a mouth tender as a child's. But if you fall into his arms, he sprouts horns, fangs, claws, fins. His feet are joined as one and his skin, brass scales, rings to the touch. You're fascinated, cannot move. He casts a shell necklace at your feet, weeps gleaming chips that harden into mica on your breasts. He holds you under. Then he takes the body of a lion, a fat brown worm, or a familiar man. He's made of gold. He's made of beach moss. He's a thing of dry foam, a thing of death by drowning the death a Chippewa cannot survive. (*Tracks* 11)

The white men, on the contrary, treat Matchimanito as a land of opportunity for lumberjacks and bankers. Nanapush complains about it at the beginning of the novel: "Every year there are more who come looking for profit, who draw lines across the land with their strings and yellow flags" (*Tracks* 9).

Money is the driving force that brings to Matchimanito more white people who are ready to risk their own lives for the sake of material success: "no matter how many vanished, more came in their stead, and all of them had crosscut saws, sharp axes, and received for their pay both money and food" (*Tracks* 217). There is no hint in the novel that the white men realize the significance of Matchimanito at the time they start their economic invasion. They do not know Nanapush's story. We, as readers, know it though, and can complete the history by gaining insight into both racially and culturally diverse versions of it.

The setting for *The Hundred Secret Senses* changes halfway through the book. In the beginning the place for the narrative is San Francisco, where both Olivia and Kwan live. Although Tan does not focus on the descriptions of place in this section, we get an impression of a big city in which life is supervised by technology: telephones, cameras, walkmen, commercial gadgets. However, as soon as we travel with the novel's narrative to China we enter another world. Olivia describes her first encounter with Changmian in this way:

> Miraculously, Changmian has avoided the detritus of modernization.

> I see no tin roofs or electrical power lines. In contrast to other villages we passed, the outlying lands here haven't become dumping grounds for garbage, the alleys aren't lined with crumpled cigarette packs or pink plastic bags. (*The Hundred Secret Senses* 229)

Struck by its awesome beauty she feels as if she has "stumbled on a fabled misty land, half memory, half illusion" (*The Hundred Secret Senses* 230). Time seems to have stopped in this fantasy land "[u]nspoiled by progress, mired in the past" (Tan 230). The past still lives in the Chinese village, whether in the form of landscape or architecture that hold the memory of the years, or in the form of stories that function as reservoirs for the collective consciousness.

Conclusion

As ethnic writers, both Erdrich in *Tracks* and Tan in *The Hundred Secret Senses* structure their novels on the formal duality of magic realism. In this way they can place their works in the realistic convention of writing associated with western thought and, at the same time, popularize and try to preserve their ethnic cultures embedded in magic. Although in both novels there is no definite resolution between magic and realism, the characters' potential for reconciling the two in *Tracks* and *in The Hundred Secret Senses* is different. Olivia seems to be much more open to Chinese mythology than Pauline to Chippewa myth. Similarly, Kwan embraces the Western reality in a more understanding and forgiving way, whereas Fleur or even Nanapush are more critical of it. The most important outcome of juxtaposing magic and realism, as equally important insights into the nature of the world, is a dialogic quality in the novels of Tan and Erdrich, which allows for a discourse of two contrary, yet coexisting, ways of perceiving the world. This results in questioning the western literary unities of time, place and action, and implicitly challenges the hierarchical social order established by the dominant white society. For American ethnic writers such as Tan and Erdrich, magic realism becomes a tool of literary expression through which they can try to change the way people think about different cultures and expand the notion of humanity, which now encompasses multiple ethnic dimensions.

Notes

1 William Spindler, "Magic Realism: A Typology," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 1 (1993) : 75-85.

2 For a discussion of magic realism in Black Literature see Sandra E. Gibbs, "International Conference on Black Women Writers of Magic Realism," *National Council of Teachers of English: The Council Chronicle* Feb (1993): 17; Geoff Hancock, the first critic who applies the concept of magic realism in the context of

English Canadian fiction in “Magic Realism, or, the Future of Fiction,” *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 24-25 (1977): 4-6; Jean Pierre Durix, who introduces the term “magic realism” in connection with Salman Rushdie’s work in “Magic Realism in Midnight’s Children,” *Commonwealth,*8.1(1985): 57-63; for the discussion on magic realism in Amos Tutuola’s work, see Fredric Jameson, “On Magic Realism in Film,” *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1986): 302.

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