

# Magical realism is the language of the emergent Post-Truth world

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## Abstract

Drawing on a number of new readings of 'Post-Truth', defined as 'Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief', our essay interrogates the extent to which magical realism may be understood as the paradigmatic and quintessential discourse of the Post-Truth era. We paraphrase Homi Bhabha's famous statement, made in the 1990s, that 'magical realism is the language of the emergent postcolonial world', and propose that, in the twenty-first century, magical realism is the language of the emergent Post-Truth world. In this essay we analyze and compare the Post-Truth techniques used in novels such as García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and Murakami's *1Q84*. We combine Matthew d'Ancona's robust call that we should fight against the follies of political Post-Truth with Anne Hegerfeldt's argument that magical realism is designed to teach the general public how to read between the lines of politicians' speeches in order to become a mature defender of truth, and therefore propose that the magical-realist novelist, in effect, ends up telling 'lies that tell the truth'.

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## KEYWORDS

García Márquez, magical realism, Mo Yan, Murakami, Post-Truth, Rushdie

The simplest man with passion is more persuasive than the most eloquent without it.

— François de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, Maxim 8

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the White House Press Room on 21 January 2017 Sean Spicer, the Press Secretary for President Donald Trump, held a press briefing in which he stated that President Trump's inaugural ceremony had attracted the 'largest audience to ever witness an inauguration both in person and around the globe' (2017). Journalists stated that it was not true since the outgoing President's inauguration ceremony had drawn a larger crowd than President Trump, five years before (Janney, 2017). The following day US Counsellor to the President Kellyanne Conway defended Sean Spicer's statement by stating that Spicer was providing 'alternative facts' (Revesz, 2017).<sup>1</sup> This statement led to a media storm; Conway's use of the term was seen as 'Orwellian' and she was accused of promulgating 'fake news'; within days George Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), made it to the No. 1 bestseller-slot on Amazon.com. In this essay we use Kellyanne Conway's oxymoron to rethink the representation of the difference between truth and untruth in four classic magical-realist novels: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Midnight's Children*, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, and *1Q84*. In particular we will be using the term 'Post-Truth' to guide us. As we shall see, though magical realism as a genre appears at first flush to overlap with the rhetorical device of disseminating 'alternative facts', it is in fact a cure against 'fake news'.

## 2 | WHAT IS POST-TRUTH?

Post-Truth is described by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief', and it became Word of the Year 2016.<sup>2</sup> Often associated with Donald Trump's political rhetoric, Post-Truth, it is argued, is more convincing than truth itself (see Peters, 2018, 3–4). Though it 'emerged' in the 'Trump Era' ('The Trump Era', 2020), 'Post-Truth' was first coined in 1992 by Steve Tesich:

We are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. All the dictatorships up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world. (Tesich, 1992, 12)

Matthew d'Ancona takes up a different approach. He proposes that we now live in an Orwellian universe. As George Orwell illustrates in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, '[w]hatever the Party holds to be truth, is truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party' (Orwell, 1978, 171). D'Ancona takes up the baton of Orwell's crusade, exposing 'the declining value of truth as society's reserve currency and the infectious spread of pernicious relativism disguised as legitimate scepticism' (d'Ancona 2017, 2). D'Ancona proposes that we should fight back and not accept the relativism of Post-Truth: 'The truth is out there—if only we demand it' (p. 3). In this essay we seek to combine d'Ancona's robust redressing of Post-Truth with Anne Hegerfeldt's argument that the magical realist writer uses 'lies that tell the truth' (Hegerfeldt, 2005, 199–319), precisely in order to stimulate

the general public into thinking about how to read between the lines of politicians' speeches and actions, and subsequently become a seasoned defender of truth. As we shall see, while magical realism uses the devices used by governments and other powerful commercial enterprises to manipulate the truth (i.e. by disseminating 'fake news'), it does so not in order to replicate but to expose 'fake news' as false information and untruth. Magical realism thereby captures the monstrous magic of reality; as Isabel Allende once put it, 'you can tell the deepest truths with the lies of fiction' (Chaudhary, 2011).

### 3 | WHAT IS MAGICAL REALISM?

Magical realism is normally defined as the portrayal of magical or supernatural events in a dead-pan style as if they were real. It is born in the gap between the belief systems of two very different groups of people, as suggested, for example, by Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967); what for the inhabitant of the 'First World' is magical (a woman who ascends to heaven, ghosts who return to earth, priests who can levitate, gypsies who can morph into a puddle of tar) is real and unremarkable for the inhabitant of the 'Third World'. But what for the inhabitant of the 'Third World' is magical (false teeth, magnets, films, trains, ice) is real and unremarkable for the inhabitant of the 'First World': 'Dazzled by so many and such marvellous inventions, the people of Macondo did not know where amazement began' (Márquez, 1978, 185). The parcelling-up of the world into places where scientific technology is a way of life and other places where it is greeted with amazement suggests that we are dealing with a global mapping that is underpinned by political as well as ocular exclusionism (see Hart & Ouyang, 2005). *One Hundred Years of Solitude* appears to confirm Homi Bhabha's proposition that magical realism has become 'the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world' (Bhabha, 2006, 6–7). It is reasonable to propose that the magical-real formula of the opening chapter of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was the literary virus that took over the decolonised world after García Márquez won the Nobel Prize in 1982 (Hart, 2022). But if we focus on Chapter 15 of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* we are more likely to choose the term 'Post-Truth' as the key term of magical realism.

### 4 | POST-TRUTH IN ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE?

Chapter 15 of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is based on an event that occurred in Ciénaga, a city on the northern coast of Colombia, on 6 December 1928. There had been a strike going on for just over a month of the workers at a banana plantation owned by the United Fruit Company in Ciénaga. The workers demanded better wages, and work conditions. On 6 December 1928 about 3,000 workers had congregated in the main square. The Army were sent in. The workers were asked to disperse. They were given five minutes to do so. They did not leave. They were given one more minute. A voice from the crowd said they did not need the extra minute, at which point the army opened fire.

What happened next is difficult to establish empirically. It is accepted by both sides that some of the workers were killed, but there is a disagreement about exactly how many died. The people's version was that 3,000 individuals were murdered in cold blood. The official report of the disturbances in the Magdalena region authored by General Carlos Cortés Vargas and entitled *Los sucesos de las bananeras* gives the number of dead on 6 December 1928 in Ciénaga as 9. The vastness of the difference between 9 and 3,000 has led historians to dig deeper, but the results have been inconclusive (Posada-Carbó, 1998). What García Márquez does with this discrepancy is to elucidate it via the language of superstition. Superstition is predicated on a disjunction between two groups of people with diametrically opposed belief systems. Thus when the Roman historians dismissed Druidism as a *superstitio vana*, this characterisation invoked a split between truth and untruth. The etymology of *superstitio* instantiates this split for it invokes a 'standing-over' of one level (of belief or of people) over another: *super* (over) + *stare* (stand).

This type of 'standing-over' is instantiated, for example, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by the ghost of one of the main characters, José Arcadio Segundo. Indeed, it is the only time in García Márquez's novel that a ghost takes on a primordial rather than secondary role. When the soldiers start systematically to gun down every single unarmed person in the square, 'José Arcadio Segundo barely had time to pick up the child while the mother with the other one was swallowed up by the crowd that swirled around in panic' (Márquez, 1978, 249). He is in an 'endless and silent train' carrying him to the coast, he walks through the carriages, seeing all the corpses that looked like 'rejected bananas', and, after escaping, he tells an unnamed woman: 'There must have been three thousand of them (pp. 249–251)'. But his version of the story is contradicted by the woman: 'There haven't been any dead here [...] Since the time of your uncle, the colonel, nothing has happened in Macondo. [...] There weren't any dead' (p. 251).

And thus the Colombian writer echoes the government's argument that the story about the 3,000 dead was a 'vain superstition', and incarnates this rejection in the form of the spectre of José Arcadio Segundo—who stated that he had been a victim of the massacre on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December and had witnessed those events. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* we hear about how José Arcadio Segundo spent six months hiding away in Melquíades's room. When the Army arrive and demand the door be opened to allow them to enter, we fully expect José Arcadio Segundo to be discovered. The door is opened and the soldier shines his lantern around the room such that 'Aureliano Segundo and Santa Sofía de la Piedad saw the Arab eyes of José Arcadio Segundo at the moment when the ray of light passed over his face' (Márquez, 1978, 253–254). The official notices nothing and then turns the light on for a second time; again: 'He paused with his glance on the space where Aureliano Segundo and Santa Sofía de la Piedad were still seeing José Arcadio Segundo and the latter also realised that the soldier was looking at him without seeing him' (p. 254). The Army officer concludes: 'It's obvious that no-one has been in that room for at least one hundred years' (p. 254). As readers we then realise that José Arcadio Segundo is 'dead' and that he is a ghost who can only be seen by close members of his family. José Arcadio Segundo, in effect, as a 'politicised ghost', becomes what Homi Bhabha defines as a 'negative transparency' (Bhabha, 1985, 154).

The narrativisation of the supernatural leads to the articulation of a world that is made up of two parallel universes: the world of the people in which 3,000 workers were machine-gunned to death, loaded onto trains and barges and subsequently thrown into the sea—rejected by the government as 'superstition'—as contrasted with the 'alternative facts' of the military version ('this is a happy town and nothing has happened'). *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a novel that presents these two competing versions of reality, and uses the language of the supernatural to articulate that discrepancy in facts. The core event of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the representation of the 'massacre' of the United Fruit banana plantation workers that occurred in December 1928 in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The dynamic of the narrative is built around the ghost of José Arcadio Segundo, whose liminality draws attention to the now-you-see-me-now-you-don't dilemma of the Post-Truth universe. When there are competing narratives the reader/listener/viewer needs to become a competent truth detector. For many Colombians who use their truth detector this means that the government lied when they said that only 9 people died; García Márquez cleverly uses the words of a ghost to send a 'magic envelope' to the government containing the truth about the thousands who were massacred in Ciénaga in December 1928. The Colombian government will be able to refute the idea because, of course, unlike the *pueblo*, it doesn't believe in ghosts.

## 5 | POST-TRUTH IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*?

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is, like García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, simultaneously a novel about a family as well as a story about the birth of a nation. Thus, Saleem Sinai, the 'I' of the novel, was born at precisely the time that India achieved its independence from Britain. Saleem, 'mysteriously handcuffed to history', is also a curious mixture of the colonised and the coloniser: he is like 'an empty pickle jar in a pool of Anglepoured light' (Rushdie, 1995, 9, 19). The three generations—Adam Aziz, Dr Aziz and Saleem Sinai—repeat

ideas and thoughts such that it becomes difficult for the reader to distinguish between them. This is clearly a nod in García Márquez's direction (think of all the characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* who repeat the destiny of their ancestors). This has, of course, implications for how Rushdie portrays history and time in his novel. The onward 'mill of history' (p. 333) is viewed not so much as a teleological march towards a given goal (such as the First World might see it) but rather as a circular vortex in which layers are superimposed on other layers, to produce a sense of time as a kaleidoscope rather than a line of succession from Genesis to Apocalypse: 'Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies and vilifies also' (p. 211).

In some ways Rushdie takes this idea further than García Márquez. For the Colombian as much as the British-Indian writer this 'cosmopolitan' sense of time as a revolving rather than linear experience allows both authors to undermine Western teleology. But Rushdie also explores the palimpsestuous sense of time in the context of monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam: 'On Mount Sinai, the prophet Musa or Moses heard disembodied commandments; on Mount Hira, the prophet Muhammed (also known as Mohammed, Mahomet, the Last-but-One, and Mahound) spoke to the Archangel (Gabriel, or Jibreel, as you please)' (Rushdie, 1995, 163). For some, statements such as these are blasphemous—as Rushdie discovered to his peril when a *fatwa* was decreed as a result of his words—yet they indicate how Rushdie views historical experience as repeatable, layered, palimpsestuous.

Yet Rushdie is not simply playing with reality for the sake of it, as the conclusion of the wonderfully amusing intercalated fairy-tale makes quite clear:

The newspapers—*Jang*, *Dawn*, *Pakistan Times*—announced a crushing victory for the President's Muslim League over the Mader-i-Millat's Combined Opposition Party; thus proving to me that I have been only the humblest of jugglers-with-facts; and that, in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case. (Rushdie, 1995, 326)

This connection between magic and politics is pursued in the chapter entitled 'The shadow of the mosque', in which the illusionism of communism is compared to conjurors' tricks: 'The problems of the magicians' ghetto were the problems of the Communist movement in India [...] There were Trotskyist tendencies among card-sharpers, and even a Communism-thorough-the-ballot-box movement among the moderate members of the ventriloquist section' (p. 399). Taking a leaf out of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, perhaps, Rushdie employs the rhetoric of magic to ram his political point home, persuading his readers that they should beware of believing all they are told by politicians, especially when they are standing next to a ballot box!

## 6 | POST-TRUTH IN *BIG BREASTS AND WIDE HIPS* (1995)?

Mo Yan's novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (1995) is typical of the Chinese writer's work in that, as the Swedish Academy stated when awarding him the Nobel Prize for Literature, his work, 'with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary' ('The Nobel Prize in Literature', 2012). Like Rushdie's novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* tells the story of a single family in order to tell the story of a nation (India in Rushdie's case and China in Mo Yan's case). And, again like *Midnight's Children*, Mo Yan's novel deals frequently with alternative versions of a sequence of events. One of the best examples of alternative realities occurs when the main male protagonist, Jingtong, describes a strange event that occurred when he was working one evening with a young woman, his communist colleague, Commander Long. Their task is to protect the chickens in the coop from a marauding fox that arrives every night and captures one of the chickens without either of them managing to shoot the offending fox (Yan, 2005, 419). Jingtong and Commander Long fire their rifles at the fox every night, but never manage to kill it. Then something very strange happens:

One evening Commander Long got off her usual two shots, which had evolved into a sort of farewell ritual. Amid the intoxicating smell of gunpowder, the two of them stood facing each other. [...] Hearing a grunt from Commander Long, he saw that her face had grown long and scary: the glare of her teeth seemed a terrifying white. And there was more: a bushy tail swelled the seat of her pants like an expanding balloon. Commander Long was a fox! (p. 423)

The female fox then tries to rape Jintong:

Jintong fought to step out of her grip, but reached up and grabbed his belt, tugging so hard she snapped it and pulled down his pants. When he bent down to pull them up, she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. In the grappling that ensued, she somehow managed to undress him. Once that was done, she tapped him on the temple; his eyes rolled back into his head and he lay flat on the floor like a beached fish. Commander Long nibbled every inch of Jintong's body, but was unable to release him from his terror. [...] Enraged by her failure, she ran back into the adjoining room, grabbed her pistol, tucked the tunnel between her legs, and shoved two yellow bullets into the chamber. Then, pointing the weapon at a spot below his belly, she said: 'There are two paths open to you. You can get it up, or I'll shoot it off.' The glare in her eyes was all the proof he needed to know that she was serious. The iron-hard breasts were bouncing around on her chest. Once again Jintong watched as her face lengthened and a bushy tail emerged behind her, slowly, until it reached the floor. (pp. 423–424)

The fox/Commander Long fails to persuade Jintong to make a man of himself, and finally, she

turned her gun on herself [...] Not until that moment did Jintong finally comprehend the seductiveness of a woman's body. The cold spot between his legs suddenly swelled with heated blood. [...] Jintong saw a puff of burnt ochre smoke emerge from her temple hair as the dull crack of a pistol sounded. [...] Jintong held her in his arms, overcome by remorse, and granted her final wish as her life slipped away. (p. 424)

This sequence of events has a magical-realist logic that is obvious to any reader versed in the conventions of magical realism. Colonel Long is part-woman part-fox and her cover is blown when she ill-advisedly attempts to seduce her fellow human friend, Jintong, a misdemeanour that leads to her death. But this aura of magical realism in Mo Yan's text is then punctured by the arrival of the military authorities. They investigate the circumstances in which Commander Long died and, after a summary inquiry, accuse Jintong of raping and then killing her (Yan, 2005, 425). He is a man, after all, and she is a woman. Jintong does not defend himself adequately. He simply states that he didn't rape her and he didn't kill her; he 'made up his mind not to reveal the ugly details of what had happened' (p. 426). These 'ugly details' are, of course, the magical-realist details of how Commander Long managed to transform herself into a fox, and then attempt to rape him: 'She tried to force herself on me, and when I resisted, she killed herself. That's all he would reveal under the pressures of the relentless questioning' (p. 426).

Note that the text does not provide any explanation as to why Jintong does not reveal the surely crucial details about Colonel Long's ability to transform herself into a fox. The reader might surmise that this is because he believed that it would be dangerous to tell the 'truth' because this might mean he would be accused of being mad. Or it might be because he was ashamed of the role he played in her death, and did not want to reveal all the details. Or it may be that he thought that perhaps he had experienced a vivid hallucination and that Colonel Long had not in fact turned into a fox. But we, as readers, simply do not know. There is no resolution to this conundrum because the plot is then overwhelmed by the unexpected arrival of 'an ocean of water, all the way to the horizon' (Mo Yan, 2005, 426) which forces the two military officers to abandon the premises and beat a hasty retreat, taking their

prisoner with them. As if to confirm that this was quite simply a magical-real narrative, we hear about how Colonel Long's corpse seems to have a mind of its own:

Long Qingping's corpse floated out of the room and followed him. When he sped up, so did the corpse, and when he made a turn, the corpse followed suit. Long Qingping's corpse nearly made him soil himself out of fright. Finally, her tangle of hair was caught in the wire fence around the war relics, and Jintong was free of her. (p. 427)

Since this is in effect the last time that Jingtong and Colonel Long are mentioned in the same sentence, the reader is left to speculate about what 'really' happened. There are three possibilities, which are (a) the magical-realist option; (b) the realist option; and (c) the hallucinatory option. The first (i.e. 'a') is reasonably simple: Colonel Long was half woman-half fox, and she attempted to seduce Jingtong, but she failed in her endeavour; this is the version that, as readers, we 'saw'. The realist version (i.e. 'b', the Occam's razor theory) is the predictable one—which the reader did not 'see' but may believe is likely—in that it proposes that Jingtong raped and killed Colonel Long but imagined something different (i.e. that she tried to seduce him) in order to justify his actions. This is the version that the Army believe actually occurred. The third option allows us to countenance the hypothesis that Jintong is not only an unreliable narrator but also a victim of the overwhelming vividness of his 'hallucinatory' imagination. Hallucination is, after all, a key rhetorical technique in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, and this is also indicated by the fact that the members of the Nobel Prize Committee spoke of the 'hallucinatory realism' or, more correctly, 'hallucinatory sharpness', of Mo Yan's work in their justificatory statement.<sup>3</sup>

The third option (i.e. 'c') offers a combination of the first two options: the magical-realist and the realist. It covers a variety of possibilities, including a version whereby Jingtong had sex with Colonel Long, hallucinated that she was a fox, and was instrumental in her death if not the actual physical cause of that death. That *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* opens up the possibility of this third hallucinatory option points to an important distinction between Mo Yan's fiction and that of García Márquez. Whereas in the Colombian's work, the 'hallucination' is always objectively and empirically valid as far as the narrator's perspective is concerned, in Mo Yan's fiction the reader is actively engaged in determining—as occurs with the events that led to Colonel Long's death—whether a given event is the result of one character's hallucination or whether it is objectively valid, that is, seen and accepted by all characters in the novel including the narrator. The important point here is that *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* leaves open the possibility of there being two realities, one believed by Jintong and the other believed by the Army. Though the parallel-universe nature of the anecdote has some resonance with García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in the sense that there is a discrepancy between the perspective of the people and that of the Army, it is also clear that Mo Yan has drawn on a very common motif prevalent in Chinese folk literature, even while giving it a Post-Truth twist. Jintong, caught as he is in the echo-chamber of military discourse, becomes a paradigm of contemporary subjectivity lost in a Post-Truth world.

## 7 | POST-TRUTH IN 1Q84?

Given that Murakami's novel, *1Q84* (2009), called a 'masterpiece of magical realism' by Wendy Faris (2004, 115–122), is, by the author's own affirmation, inspired by George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it would appear to be an ideal candidate for a discussion of the use of Post-Truth and/or doublethink. Even though some reviewers questioned whether there was any connection between the two novels (see Lorentzen, 2011; Maslin, 2011), *1Q84* provides a rewriting of George Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in that it describes the techniques of linguistic manipulation used by totalitarian regimes in order to subdue, pacify, control and sometimes destroy their citizens. The characters in Murakami's novel often find themselves caught up in a world in which they find it difficult to differentiate between truth and untruth, rather like Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The 'Little People'—whom

Murakami has said, in an interview, that he does not fully understand even though he believes they really do exist (Anderson, 2011)—play a similar role to ‘Big Brother’ in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Their aim is to brainwash everyone into thinking that they are living in 1984, even though the world has changed and they are actually now living in the ‘alternative’ and ‘fake’ year 1Q84. This idea emerges in Book 2, Chapter 13, in the conversation between Aomame and the Leader of the Little People:

‘1Q84’, Aomame said. ‘Are you talking about the fact that I am living now in the year called 1Q84, not the *real* 1984?’

‘What the real world is: that is a very difficult problem,’ the man called Leader said as he lay on his stomach. ‘What it is, is a metaphysical proposition. But *this* is the real world, there is no doubt about that. The pain one feels in this world is real pain. Deaths caused in this world are real deaths. Blood shed in this world is real blood. This is no imitation world, no imaginary world, no metaphysical world. I guarantee you that. But this is not the 1984 you know.’ [...]

‘Like a parallel world?’

The man’s shoulders trembled with laughter. ‘You’ve been reading too much science fiction. No, this is no parallel world. You don’t have 1984 over there and 1Q84 branching off over here and the two worlds running along parallel tracks. The year 1984 no longer exists *anywhere*. For you and for me, the only time that exists anymore is this year of 1Q84.’ [...]

‘And in this year of 1Q84, there are two moons in the sky, aren’t there?’

‘Correct: two moons. That is the *sign* that the track has been switched. That is how you can tell the two worlds apart. Not that all of the people here can see two moons. In fact, some people are not aware of it. In other words, the number of people who know that this is 1Q84 is quite limited.’ (Murakami, 2012, 655–656)

The magical-realist ‘dimension’ of 1Q84 is the *Air Chrysalis* novel which is being rewritten as we read the novel, and, in a sense, it functions like Melquiades’s manuscript in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, that is to say, a pre-existing manuscript referred to on various occasions in the novel, and the bearer of secrets about that world. Melquiades’s manuscript is sphinx-like in that it foretells what will occur to the people of Macondo, while *Air Chrysalis* provides the description of another world which offers some coded knowledge about the world inhabited by characters such as Tengo and Aomame. But there are also some clearly Borgesian elements in Murakami’s novel. In the same way that Borges’s fiction, *Tlön, Uqbar, orbis tertius*, describes the appearance of Tlönian objects in the real world, so objects or people *Air Chrysalis* world start appearing in the ‘real’ world inhabited by Tengo and Aomame. An early indication of this invasion of 1Q84 into 1984 occurs when Aomame seems not to have noticed that the policemen seem to be carrying more powerful weapons around with them on the street. Although used in a philosophical sense by Borges, this idea of things from another world appearing in this one takes on a political edge in 1Q84. A War of Words can, of course, quickly become a War of Worlds.

So how should we read Murakami’s novel? The fact that we are reading a novel in which characters such as Tengo and Aomame are actively involved in trying to find out why there are two moons, and who the Little People are, and how it is that they seem to be controlling the world, allows us to interpret their quest in the same way that we interpret Winston’s quest for the truth in Orwell’s 1984. Murakami is writing this novel to test our ability to see how the real is being concealed under the fake-real, and to read between the lines of the ‘official version’ that is fed to us by the media and by governments.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

We have looked in our essay at four canonic magical-realist texts—García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and Haruki Murakami's *1Q84*—focusing on very different spaces of the globe—Latin America, India, China and Japan—and we have tested the hypothesis that these texts can be reread in light of the growth of a new concept within twenty-first-century global politics, namely, Post-Truth. García Márquez's comments about the 1928 Banana Massacre in his autobiography, *Vivir para contarla* (2002), epitomise the complexity of this issue:

Later, I spoke with survivors and witnesses and searched through newspaper archives and official documents, and I realized that the truth did not lie anywhere. Conformists said, in effect, that there had been no deaths. Those at the other extreme affirmed without a quaver in their voices that there had been more than a hundred, that they had seen bleeding to death on the square, and that they were carried away in a freight train to be tossed into the ocean like rejected bananas. And so my version was lost forever at some improbable point between the two extremes. But it was so persistent that in one of my novels I referred to the massacre with all the precision and horror that I had brought for years to its incubation in my imagination. That was why I kept the number of the dead at three thousand, in order to preserve the epic proportions of the drama, and in the end real life did me justice: not long ago, on one of the anniversaries of the tragedy, the speaker of the moment in the Senate asked for a minute of silence in memory of the three thousand anonymous martyrs sacrificed by the forces of law and order. (Márquez, 1963, 3)

García Márquez speaks here about his own version being 'lost forever at some improbable point between the two extremes', and this surely is the point about the four novels that we have analysed in this essay, namely, that the truth of what actually happened is as elusive as the existence of the Little People in Murakami's *1Q84*. The elusiveness does not, however, exonerate political wrong-doing whether in actions or in words. As Matthew d'Ancona reminds us:

In the long decay of public discourse that has finally brought us to the Post-Truth era, the political class and the electorate have conspired in the cheapening and enfeebling of what they say to one another. [...] This is not an appeal to sentimentality, but precisely the opposite. It is a call to arms, a reminder that truth is discovered not distributed, that it is an ideal to be pursued not an entitlement to be lazily expected. (d'Ancona, 2017, 82–83)

In a world in which it is becoming more and more difficult to discriminate between the good and the not-so-good in organisational hegemonies (whether governmental, political, commercial, corporate, civic, non-profit or altruistic), a world in which 'alternative facts' jostle with 'fake news', it is important that literature—even outlandishly magical-real literature—should have its part to play. As Salman Rushdie noted:

Democracy is not polite. It's often a shouting match in a public square. We need to be *involved* in the argument. If we are to have any chance of winning it. And as far as writers are concerned, we need to rebuild our readers' belief in argument from factual evidence, and to do what fiction has always been good at doing—to construct, between the writer and the reader, an understanding about what is real. (Rushdie, 2018)

Literature has a very important role to play in the modern world of what Rushdie calls 'impolite democracy' and, we would argue, magical realism even more so. We have noted above, for example, that magical realism—particularly

in the work of García Márquez and Murakami—comes perilously close in its own praxis to ‘alternative truth’ itself. The Colombian writer’s use of the words of a ghost, that is, José Arcadio Segundo, and the Japanese writer’s description of an Air Chrysalis associated with the Little People, at first glance, sound like the mad inventions of ‘fake news’. But since García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* intimates that José Arcadio Segundo is—paradoxically enough—telling the truth and Murakami, in *1Q84*, is clearly using the Little People as a minor but no less sinister version of Big Brother, it becomes clear that magical realism, far from replicating fake news, is actually a cure against fake news.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These ‘alternative facts’ resonate, of course, with the ‘truthful hyperbole’ used approvingly by President Trump in his ghosted autobiography, *The Art of the Deal*; see David Smith (2020)
- <sup>2</sup> Consequently, ‘it has also become associated with a particular noun, in the phrase post-truth politics’; Oxford University Press, *Word of the Year 2016* (2016) (retrieved from <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016>).
- <sup>3</sup> The statement in the original Swedish used by the Nobel Prize committee as the justification of the award of the Nobel Prize in 2012 states: ‘som med hallucinatorisk skärpa förenar saga, historia och samtid’ (my emphasis; retrieved from [https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/press\\_sv-71.pdf](https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/press_sv-71.pdf)), which, literally, means, ‘who with hallucinatory sharpness merges folk tales, history and the contemporary’ (my emphasis), which is slightly different from the English translation which runs as follows: ‘who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary’ (my emphasis; retrieved from <https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/press-84.pdf>).

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