

Magical Realism in Max Frisch's Works
With Special Reference to Three of His Plays:
Count Oederland, The Fire Raisers and Biography: A Game

By

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Abstract of the Research Paper
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The purpose of this study is to prove Max Frisch's use of magical realism in most of his plays, and how this helped him to present and confront serious political, social and psychological issues at his own time. This sheds more light on the significance of magical realism as a genre in modern drama. This paper researches into the definition and history of magical realism as a genre, and how it is applied to Max Frisch's drama with special reference to three of his plays spanning his dramatic career: *Count Oederland, The Fire Raisers and Biography: A Game*.

الواقعية السحرية فى أعمال ماكس فريش

مع الإشارة الى ثلاثة من أعماله المسرحية : "الكونت اودرلاند"،
"مشعلو الحرائق"

و"قصة حياة : لعبة "

الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو إيضاح استخدام ماكس فريش للواقعية السحرية فى معظم مسرحياته، وكيف ساعده هذا على تقديم قضايا سياسية واجتماعية ونفسية مهمة فى عصره ومواجهتها، الأمر الذى سيلقى مزيدا من الضوء على أهمية الواقعية السحرية كتيار درامى حديث وكيف نما ليساير الواقعية، ويتناول البحث تعريف الواقعية السحرية وايضاح تاريخها، وكيف تطبق بمهارة فى دراما ماكس فريش مع الإشارة الى ثلاثة من أعماله المسرحية التى تعكس تاريخه المسرحى وهى: "الكونت اودرلاند" و"مشعلوا الحرائق" و"قصة حياة : لعبة "

Magical Realism in Max Frisch's Works

**With Special Reference to Three of His Plays:
*Count Oederland, The Fire Raisers and Biography: A Game***

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Drawing on theories of magical realism, this paper proposes that the artistic mode of magical realism can be validly applied to the drama not of a Latin American writer, but to the drama of European playwrights such as Max Frisch. The study elucidates and contextualizes the theoretical implications of magical realism in theatre through an analysis of three selected plays written by the Swiss playwright, Max Frisch. The three plays are: *Count Oederland, The Fire Raisers* and *Biography: A Game*. This study draws on the theories of well-known writers of magical realism to articulate the new form of magical realist theatre.

Magical realism is the term that continues to get its appeal from the sense of seductiveness which Eva Aldea confirms in the preface to her book *Magical Realism and Deleuze*:

What exactly is it that makes the appearance of the unusual, strange, and supernatural so alluring when it is described in that deadpan, matter-of-fact voice we have all become so familiar with since the Latin American literary

boom reached the Anglo-Saxon readership in the 70s?¹

With the passage of time, the use of the term has expanded to become a means of representing issues and worries related to natural or man-made disasters, political oppression, religious fanaticism, urban alienation, and fears about the end of the world. It has become a strong weapon of resistance used by the marginalised against those in power. Mariano Siskind affirms:

The historical determination that framed the efficacy of magical realism to forge a sense, shared by writers and readers across the world, of the genre's potential to create the necessary conditions to repair the historical harms produced by different forms of oppression and exclusion.²

Therefore, it is of great importance to clarify that this genre which can be simply defined as "a literary genre or style associated with Latin America that incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction- called also *magical realism*."³

Anne Hegerfeldt has also defined certain techniques that distinguish a magical realist work and determine magical

¹ Aldea, Eva. Preface. *Magical Realism and Deleuze: The Indiscernibility of Difference in Postcolonial Literature*, by Aldea, London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004. Print.

² Siskind, Mariano. *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America* Illinois: Northwestern Up, 2014, p. 85. Print.

³ www.Merriam-Webster.com

realism as a mode. First, there is "the adaptation of the realist mode to fantastic elements" (Hegerfeldt 66). In a magical realist work, there are non-realistic elements such as dreams, metaphors and lies that are presented in a matter-of-fact way and described in too much detail so that they look as if they were normal or real. In this sense, fictions are acknowledged as part of human experience (68). Second, there is "literalization of metaphor", which means "allowing abstract nouns to acquire a distinctly material presence"(69). Therefore, the abstract turns into concrete. The third feature that Hegerfeldt refers to is that magical realist fiction tends to "adopt a marginalised, peripheral or ex-centric point of view" (70); this turns magical realism into a postcolonial project. Then, she emphasises the fact that magical realism is a mode that focuses on knowledge and knowledge production as it "shows how all paradigms of knowledge production, rational-scientific or otherwise, can be helpful as well as harmful"(76). The last technique that she offers is the inversion of the first one; it means treating reality as if it were magical.⁴ Most of these techniques are found and applied to the Swiss playwright Max Frisch.

Max Rudolf Frisch is a Swiss dramatist who was born in Zurich on 15 May 1911. Max Frisch came at a critical time when Switzerland went through two monstrous wars that changed the history of mankind. However neutral its stance was, Switzerland felt the impact of the First and Second

⁴ Hegerfeldt, Anne. "Contentious Contributions: Magical Realism Goes British"
[www. Janushead.org/5-2/ hegerfeldt.pdf](http://www.Janushead.org/5-2/hegerfeldt.pdf) 2007 Accessed on 27 July 2017, pp. 62-86

World Wars.⁵ He also came at a time when drama went through great changes in its history, and this helped it to break away from the dominating realism in the early twentieth century. This is the reason why fantasy took the shape of symbolist drama that went on developing over the years. Most of his plays are concerned with certain common themes like identity, image and perception, love, and worries about upcoming threats⁶; these are issues that are often dealt with in magical realist works. That is why; a magical realist reading is applied to three of his dramatic works showing how the tenets of this genre can be thoroughly traced in them.

As for *Count Oederland* (1951), it is based on the story of Martin, a public prosecutor and a representative of law and order. He identifies with a bank clerk he is putting on trial for murdering the porter of a bank with an axe out of no real reason but sheer boredom. Fascinated by his maid, Martin takes to the woods where he is haunted by the fairytale legend of "Count Oederland" who killed by his axe anyone who opposed him. Martin himself turns into an axe-wielding killer who finally turns into a nationwide rebellious movement leader. However by the end of this play, that hero gets nominated to become the president, and the audience are left wondering whether this is a mere prosecutor's dream

⁵ White, Alfred D. *Max Frisch, the Reluctant Modernist*. Lampeter/Lewiston/ Queenston. The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995, pp. 12-30. Print.

⁶ Styan, J.L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice Vol 2*: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 52-60. Print.

or a fable grounded in reality!⁷ It is the same feeling of hesitation that Tzvetan Todorov called the hesitation between the readers and the characters when presented with questions about reality⁸. It seems that the whole play gets its themes and images from the Swiss Folklore emphasising the fact that it has roots in magical realism.

Under this fantastic surface of the play, there lies a latent political critique and philosophical basis. As a Swiss German, Frisch is harshly satirizing his own society with its belief in self-control as Martin calls it the "the Madhouse of order". For him, the quest of freedom could lead to ruin when it becomes a mass movement. Rejection of power could lead to another kind of power. Kierkegaard's influence is apparent in this play with its existential ideas as Kierkegaard is considered the father of existentialism. Nietzsche's influence is also clear as his ideas of *Will to Power* and *Man and Superman* are abundant in the play. The whole play seems to show the close proximity of order and chaos in man's soul and in society in general.⁹

After an interval of six years which Frisch mainly devoted to prose writing, he came back once again to the stage with his most renowned play *The Fire Raisers* (1958).

⁷ Frisch, Max. *Three Plays: The Fire Raisers, Count Oederland, Andorra*. Translated by. Michael Bullock. Methuen & CO LTD, 1962. Print.

⁸ Freixas, Erik Camayd. "Theories of Magical Realism". *Magical Realism (Critical Insights)*. Ed. Ignacio Lopez-Calvo. Ipswich, Massachusetts. Salem Press, 2014, pp. 3-18. Print.

⁹ Jurgensen, Manfred. "The Drama of Frisch". Probst and Bodine, pp. 4-30.

It is Frisch's epic parable comedy¹⁰. It tells the story of Biedermann, the protagonist, whose house is penetrated by two arsonists. They tell him that they are hawkers and persuade him to stay for the night. His consent on their stay in his house is of inexplicable nature which is characteristic of magical realism. Then, they fill the attic with petrol tanks and set fire to the whole house. In the afterpiece or the epilogue, Biedermann and his wife find themselves in Hell. They discover that the arsonists are Beelzebub and the Devil who get angry at the mass murderers being allowed to go to Heaven. The Devil refuses to conduct Hell for a "small fry" like Biedermann¹¹. Hence the fantastic is blended with the realistic intrinsically.

The afterpiece of the *Fire Raisers* is no more than an afterlife piece of fantasy which, according to Stableford, "is a subgenre of fantasy featuring secondary worlds in which humans are reincarnated after death"¹². Here fantasy is employed in a comic ironic way reminding us of Dante's *Inferno*. Moreover, the play is considered by many critics as a political and social critique representing Nazism, Communism, or the threat of nuclear war. However, from a universal point of view, the play stands for evil in any guise, and Biedermann represents the ordinary man who hopes to

¹⁰ Boyd, Amanda Charitina. "Max Frisch's Biedermann und Brandstifter and Die grofe Wut des Philip Hotz". Berwald, pp. 39-58.

¹¹ Frisch, Max. *Three Plays: The Fire Raisers, Count Oederland, Andorra*. Translated by. Michael Bullock. Methuen & CO LTD, 1962. Print.

¹² Stableford, B. *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*. Lanham Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2005, p 2. Print.

avoid that evil by coming to terms with it¹³. Therefore, the whole play can be studied as a magical realistic play, showing how inattention to imminent danger can lead to the annihilation of mankind and into a Hellish destination.

Again in the *Fire Raisers*, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's influence is apparent. Man's responsibility for his own actions is a very important theme that lies behind the catastrophe of the whole play. It is also the individual who has the power to change the whole society. Frisch also applies a lot of techniques which Nietzsche refers to in his book *Birth of Tragedy*. Frisch always mixes between elements of myth and reality. He reintroduces the use of masks and the chorus in his plays but in a new light. Elements of the absurd are also clear in this play since life stays meaningless unless we give it a certain meaning. Moreover, the influence of Brecht and his use of the "alienation effect" are apparent in this play as well as in most of Frisch's plays. This play was the first play to bring Frisch an international fame, and it made find his way to the form that he had really been in need of; the parable¹⁴.

Biography: A Game (1967) is one of Frisch's two last plays in which he asks a simple question through the character of Dr. Hannes Kürmann, the protagonist: what would you do if you could live your life over? This play is the culmination of Frisch's earlier dramas, "and emerges as a

¹³ Boyd, Amanda Charitina. "Max Frisch's Biedermann und Brandstifter and Die grofe Wut des Philip Hotz". Berwald, pp. 39-58.

¹⁴ Boyd, Amanda Charitina. "Max Frisch's *Biedermann und Brandstifter and Die grofe Wut des Philip Hotz*". Berwald, pp. 39-58.

total theatre". In a meta-theatrical frame, which resembles Pirandello's "mind game" plays, Hannes is offered a chance by the play Director to relive his own life changing or omitting whatever events in it. Time reversal (recurrence of past life) is the most prominent feature of the play and a clear proof of the use of magical realism. This makes the entire play look like a timeslip fantasy that shows the protagonist often slip back to an earlier point in his own biography to change it or to leave it as it is.

Repetition or reliving past events in one's life is another important theme in the play. By reliving the past and changing it, it is not just the private sphere that will be affected but the social one as well.¹⁵ This is a fear that Kürmann expresses when he says, "If we can begin once again, we all know what we have to do differently". It is a clear reference to "attempts to change the sociopolitical structure which determines the lives of individuals"¹⁶. This emphasizes the fact that there are social and political dimensions that underlie any magical realistic work of art.

In sum, it has been proved how magical realism can be applied to the drama of a European playwright, Max Frisch, who wrote most of his works in the most disputed era in human history (the two World Wars) when European drama witnessed the prevalence of surrealism and Absurdism.

¹⁵ Jurgensen, Manfred. "The Drama of Frisch". Probst and Bodine, pp. 4-30.

¹⁶ Frisch, Max. *Biography, A Game*. Translated by. Birigit Schreyer Duarte. Seagull Books, 2010.Print.