

## "Exploring the Elements of Magical Realism in John Updike's Novel *Brazil*"

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**ABSTRACT:** Although an obsessive meditation on a multiracial society, John Updike's *Brazil* is a magic-saturated reworking of the most romantic love story of them all, the Celtic legend of Tristan and Iseult. Apparently, Updike uses the medievalist legend as a vehicle to explore some typical Updikean themes: the social politics of love, class conflict, the question of gender and patriarchy, immorality and violence, etc. This paper is an attempt to point out how Updike digs into myth and uses the techniques of 'magical realism' to weave a narrative of his two young Brazilian lovers, Isabel and Tristão, who try to stay together despite various forces that conspire to keep them apart, notably opposition from their families. Updike's utilization of 'magical realism' will be analyzed in light of the five primary characteristics of this mood as suggested by Wendy B. Faris in her seminal work *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of the Narrative*. This paper is also meant to highlight how Updike's use of this device gives him an opportunity to hypothesize about the social and emotional consequences of a reversal of races. It is here that the link Updike creates between the indigenous peoples and the characters becomes key, for it allows the central characters, Isabel and Tristão, to experience the magic, and thus finally delve into what race means in their lives and for their identities. This paper argues how the characters manage, through magic too, to explore ethnic identity; an identity they previously ignored or abandoned. For all, this abandonment has negative consequences, leading to their devaluation of self. Isabel thinks that her being black and Tristão being white will solve much of their problems, but in reality it only makes them worse and Tristão ends up killed in the end.

**KEYWORDS:** Updike, Brazil, Magical Realism, Mythology, Amazonia, Race

### I. INTRODUCTION

Brazil, Updike's only novel that bears the title of its setting, is nearly devoid of references to America or contemporary Western history in general. Rather, the author digs into myth and uses the techniques of "magical realism" to weave a narrative of two star-crossed couple. The novel is part travelogue and part research project, complete with bibliography. It is part reality and part fantasy, part history and part mythology. It exists both in real time and in the timeless and vanishing world of the jungles. Updike imagines Brazil as having one foot in the haunted colonial and indigenous past (in the Mato Grosso wilderness) and another in the mechanized, spiritless bourgeois future (urban São Paulo). Besides, Brazil attempts to account for the structure of race and class relations that has pervaded Brazil during the 1960s and the 1970s. It is also an impressive guidebook of a complex nation fused by its myriad races and forged by a violent history.

### II. DISCUSSION

John Updike's *Brazil* (1994) is a departure from the author's realistic tradition<sup>1</sup>. It is only the second novel in the author's long oeuvre to be set outside the United States. The first is definitely *The Coup*, which is set in the fictional African state of Kush. *Brazil*, a similar leap of imagination, is also Updike's only novel that bears the title of its setting. In this novel, Updike removes himself from the American landscape altogether, but unlike *The Coup*, *Brazil* is nearly devoid of references to America or contemporary Western history in general. In so doing, he

expertly weaves an eclectic mix of ingredients into this unconventional love story. These ingredients include explicit erotica, murder, betrayal, infidelity, adventure, fate and magic.

Updike uses Rio de Janeiro as a playground, where young Tristão meets Isabel on the Copacabana beach. They are from different social classes and different races that symbolize *Brazil* in general, due to the mixture of backgrounds. In a way, Updike paints a picture of how *Brazil* fits the stereotype of a Third World country. The novel welds together the lives of Tristão and Isabel, racial and economic opposites who fall in love and then travel more or less together across geography and time. Recounting the lovers' tragic trajectory from heedless passion to degrading toil to false security to ironic, brutal death, Updike draws a panoramic picture of Brazil, depicting a country in social and economic chaos with a huge, despairing underclass and a largely heedless wealthy population. The novel begins in Brazil in the 1960s and follows the twenty-two-year relationship and adventures of the socially mismatched Tristão, a black street boy, and Isabel, a bored white beauty from a well-connected Brazilian family. The couple meets, falls in love, and then embarks on a series of new lives: first in middle-class São Paulo, then in a gold-mining camp, and, finally, deep in the wilderness. They experience dramatic interracial love relationships marked by the ways the lovers manage to exchange their colors and races, thus allowing for Tristão to be white and Isabel to be black. This change is not rationalized in terms of the fictional world the characters inhabit, which is in all other respects a closely observed representation of contemporary South America; it is exactly the kind of unexplained literary device that can be associated with 'magical realism'.

Although an obsessive meditation on a multiracial society, *Brazil* is also a magic-saturated reworking of the most romantic love story of them all, the Celtic legend of Tristan and Iseult. In his interview with Charlie Reilly in 2002, Updike points out that his attraction of writing a novel like *Brazil*, or his earlier novel *The Coup*, is that "with modern fiction as we understand it, with realistic domestic fiction, you're in danger of losing so much of what narration can do. Fiction is a form of traditional tale-telling, and the old myths embody such wonderful stories. The modern tale-teller takes a great risk when he turns his back on the legacy of all those centuries" (245-246). Updike, thus, digs into myth and uses the techniques of 'magical realism' to weave a narrative of these two young lovers who try to stay together despite various forces that conspire to keep them apart, notably opposition from their families. *Brazil* is also the story of two skins, one black and one white. It is the story of color—the color of skin, the color of love, the color of the visible world. The author merely uses the medievalist legend as a vehicle to explore some typical Updikean themes: the social politics of love, class conflict, the question of gender and patriarchy, immorality and violence, etc.

Literally, Updike's thirst to escape from the American landscape landed him on the beaches and rain forests of Brazil. Although the author is not usually considered a fantasy writer, several readers and critics have seen 'magical realism' in *Brazil*. The fact that *Brazil* forages in the landscape of 'magical realism' is appropriate to a novel set in Brazil: the genre is closely associated with the volatility and romanticism of Latin America. That it is Updike doing the foraging is something of a mystery. The writer is widely recognized as a realist who rarely ventures outside or strays from this personal domain. However, in *Brazil* he switches from master-of-fact realism to 'magical realism' with an ease and extreme audacity.

Updike believes that writing a fiction with "no elements of fantasy or adventure" would needlessly limit the "potential of the modern novel" (Reilly, 246). It seems that he finds these "elements of fantasy in Brazil, which is "not only a tinted area on the map", but a conceptual state of well-being that "lured me forward, into its luminous green depths, into its *magical* emptiness". It also seemed "one of the last earthly spaces that held room for the imagination" which fiction needs (*More Matter*, 829). Besides, Brazil remains for the author "one of the few places on earth where facts have not ousted possibilities" (*More Matter*, 123). Updike once tells Laura Mansnerus, in his short interview with her, that he sets his novel in Brazil simply because "the interest in fables is part of Brazilian nature" which still has an "enormous" and "mysterious" hinterland. He further states that he finds urban Brazilians live in a "very magical country" (27). Thus, Brazil, which he has visited once in his lifetime, drew the author twice; firstly because of the similarities he sees with the United States in terms of racial issues, and secondly because of its mystery.

Broadly, 'magical realism' is a literary genre, where there is a seamless blending of magical occurrences within a realistic setting. It differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. The magical element, then, is an extraordinary occurrence or event that is outside the boundary of natural or scientific laws—something for which there is not rational explanation, as it is the case with Isabel's and Tristão's exchange of skin colors in *Brazil*. In doing so, the author employing 'magical realism' searches out a hidden potential in the natural world or in human actions, and often describes the commonplace as mysterious. Realities seem to be deformed, but the reader perceives essential truths as a result of this distortion.

Moreover, in works of 'magical realism', magical events are often narrated in great realistic detail without the narrator registers surprise or commenting on their strangeness. The term, according to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, first appeared in 1925 in the German art critic Franz Roh's discussion of new realist painting as it reactivated mimetic techniques in reaction to the abstract qualities of Expressionism (281), which seeks to convey personal inner experience through the distortion of natural images. Joan Mellen assumes that it is only "in 1949 that 'magical realism' comes to mean a narrative technique used in Latin American literature". During the 1920s, and 1930s, she adds, many Latin American writers went to Paris, where "they were influenced by the surrealist movement". Aware of how literature could derive from dreams and the unconscious, "they married the methods of Surrealism to the magic realities of their own continent" (9).

Yet the appearance and coinage of 'magical realism' in art history, Wendy Faris notes, "plagues the term with an erosion of clear distinctions". The term, therefore, "carries burdens from visual history that its verbal embodiments cannot well bear". Following this, Faris adds, the term has "migrated from continent to continent and has suffered from inexact definitions", but it continues to hold a "strange seductiveness for both readers and critics" (39). The Columbian novelist Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), for which he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1982, is widely considered the consummate masterpiece of this genre. Despite magical realism's being anchored in the Latin American environment, the device has been borrowed by writers all over the world. Among the major works that attest to its widespread distribution are Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980), and Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days* (1981). There are many more; the list is instantly growing.

Thus, 'magical realism', which Updike once calls "a now widely available elixir" (*Odd Jobs*, 560), has become very important as a mode of expression worldwide, especially in postcolonial cultures, because it has provided the literary ground for significant cultural works. Authors from all over the world implement this style to focus on aspects and hardships of reality that they might not otherwise have a voice for. Each author of a magical realist work, thus, incorporates his own varied cultural beliefs, myths, traditions, and histories, knowing these factors deeply enhance the reader's understanding of the text. However, there are also more "universal" elements in magical realist works, experiences and/or emotions common to readers regardless of nationality, race, or culture. One does not need to know a particular history or myth to know what it is like to be "lost" in the world, to fear death, to wonder about gender roles and stereotypes. It is often these more accessible experiences and emotions which give the literature its appeal, while the historical and/or cultural components provide a curiosity for more knowledge and a deeper understanding of the text. Thus, within its texts, marginal voices, submerged traditions, and emergent literatures have developed and created masterpieces.

In one of the best studies on 'magical realism', *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of the Narrative*, Wendy B. Faris suggests five primary characteristics of this mood. First, the magical realist text contains an "irreducible element" of magic; second, the description in magical realism detail is a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity (7). In dealing with *Brazil*, it is important to note to what extent these characteristics, or part of them, appear in the work or not. Whatever the case, Updike's attempt to employ this device is a new testament to his abilities to get beyond his traditional boundaries and conventional techniques.

The "irreducible element", as the first characteristic of magical realism, is explained by Faris as something we cannot explain "according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse", that is, according to logic, familiar knowledge, or received belief (7). Therefore, the reader has difficulty collecting evidence to settle questions about the status of events and characters in such magical realist fictions. As far as this characteristic is concerned in *Brazil*, the supernatural phenomena which usually take place in the romance in the guise of fairies and wizards are present. The chosen element is the magic as the only possible way for the couple to free themselves from the slavery Tristão had been subjected to. Even magic is somehow naturalized in Updike's narration— an element that lies between the impossible and the possible: "Magic... has its rules and limits, like the nature from which it derives... Its arena is the personal soul, not a nation or a people" (176-77)<sup>2</sup>. Here, the narrative voice reports extraordinary magical events, which would not be normally verifiable by sensory perceptions in the same way in which other ordinary events are recounted. Updike's account involves concretely detailed descriptions of phenomena that are not articulated in such details or so completely integrated into everyday reality in other narrative traditions— mythical, religious, folkloric. "Magic is a way of adjusting Nature", the shaman tells Isabel, "When something here is placed *there*, something there must be placed *here*" (italics Updike, 186). This "irreducible element" here goes beyond the canny which exists as an accidental element in various kinds of narratives. The shaman tells Isabel that her transformation will take seven days to be another woman with another

color and another physique. Actually, the magical treatments, which involved painting Isabel over her entire body with the black dye called 'genipapo', continued for seven days "to cover the dwindling intervals of pale skin"<sup>3</sup>. On the seventh day, Isabel was "a blackish brown, darker than coffee beans but lighter than strong coffee, everywhere but on her palms, the soles of her feet, the skin beneath her nails, and the insides of her eyelids" (190). This 'irreducible element' is further assimilated into the realistic textual environment, rarely causing any comment by narrators or characters, who model such an acceptance of readers. There is no comment from Tristão on his becoming white and Isabel turning black. Even when the couple returns to Brasília, her father does not give any comment on his daughter's new complexion. When Tristão notices that, he inquires: "Do you see...any physical difference in her?...Is her complexion, to be specific, as you remember it?", but "Salomão blinked and said nothing" (228). He just thinks that this change is the result of a tanning his daughter is exposed to in the jungle.

A second characteristic of 'magical realism' is that its descriptions detail a strong presence of phenomenal world. This, according to Faris, is "the realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory" (14). This characteristic appears in several ways. The realistic descriptions create a fictional world that resembles the real one we live in, often by extensive use of detail. The attention to sensory detail continues and renews the realistic tradition. Thus, in addition to including magical events or phenomena, such as the race-change in *Brazil*, magical realist fictions include intriguing magical details. In other words, this phenomenal world allows the magical to grow within the real. A graphic illustration of this commingling phenomenon is, according to Farsi, "the way in which magical events are usually grounded textually in a traditionally realistic, even an explicitly factual, manner" (15). In *Brazil*, we find that Updike tries hard to mythologize Brazil as magical where everything is possible. While the opening and closing sections of the novel take place in urban centers, its key fantasy events take place deep in an unnamed interior region of the country. At the same time, Updike carefully situates his novel in the events surrounding Brazil during the military rule and the changes that followed. His opening paragraph marks *Brazil* as a fairy-tale as well as a historical novel: "One day not long after Christmas Day years ago, when the military was in power in far-off Brasília..." (3). In addition, the couple's vast circular journey becomes a means of exploring the multiple layers of Brazilian history; they voyage not only into the country's interior but into its past, down through the strata of its colonial history to the numinous world of its original inhabitants. The author's rewriting of modern Brazilian history, including his references to the corruption, inflation, and social injustices that took place during the military regime, and his inclusion of mythical components, are related. This combination, according to Faris, "implies that historical events and myths are both essential aspects of our collective memory" (16). Thus, the solid grounding of magical events in such real events persists even when the fantastical element shows its colors quickly and clearly.

A third quality of 'magical realism', as suggested by Faris, is that before categorizing the 'irreducible element' as 'irreducible', the reader may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of two events, and hence experiences some unsettling doubts. This hesitation frequently stems from the implicit clash of cultural systems within the narrative. Faris argues that the question of belief is central here because some readers in some cultures will hesitate less than others, "depending on their beliefs and narrative conditions" (17). The matter of unsettling doubt is difficult in this respect because many variations exist. Hesitation may blur the 'irreducible element', which is not always so easily perceived as such. However, this all depends on the reader's understanding or doubt of the events he reads in a magical realist work.

In a way, magical realist scenes may seem dreamlike, but in fact they are not, but the text may tempt the reader to categorize them as dreams. Faris thinks that a magical realist narrative almost seems to "bring up the possibility of interpreting what they chronicle as a dream in order to forestall that interpretation, after having first aired it as a possibility". She further adds that this strategy, "while allying the reader's doubts, causing them to hesitate" (18). In this way, readers are literally instructed by a magical realist text to either hesitate or doubt, because they are unsure about the nature of the events and in wonder and awe at their remarkable properties. In *Brazil*, readers of the narrative may doubt the magical transformation of Isabel and Tristão. Their doubt can be counted on more than one level, most important, because they wonder how Tristão who stays seventeen days away from the Indian magician can be affected by this magic and becomes white! This may be plausible with Isabel, but not with Tristão. At the same time, readers of *Brazil* may hesitate to believe that Isabel's father fails to recognize the change of his daughter's complexion. This hesitation makes readers wonder whether the events the novel relates are possible and therefore could be true or impossible and therefore could be wrong.

The fourth feature of magical realist works is when readers experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms or two worlds. In this way, the narrator himself is often captive between these two worlds or realms, not really belonging to one or the other. In terms of cultural history, 'magical realism' often merges the ancient or indigenous with the modern world, as it is the case in *Brazil*. This merging integrates the magical and the material,

the realist and the fantastic. When Isabel goes to the Indian shaman, she meets a people so remote that she is the first white person they have seen. Updike writes that the ‘Tupi’ people “stared at Isabel as if she were unhuman<sup>4</sup>. Ianopamoko’s voice gently tapped and zipped on and on, explaining, pleading, demanding. At one point she lifted Isabel’s long shining hair in both hands, as if weighing it, and at another she briskly rubbed her moistened fingers over Isabel’s skin, demonstrating that its pallor was not painted on” (180). Inside the shaman’s tent, he is “impressed by how manfully...” Isabel looks (184). Moreover, in the Brazilian bush, the couple encounters another indigenous Indian tribes known as *Guaicuru*—devils incarnate, who “have taken to Arabian horses like magicians, using neither saddles nor stirrups; they mount up in a single leap” (169) In the harsh uplands, they also meet headhunters known as the ‘bandeirantes’, a roving band of religious zealots, half-native and half-white, tyrannize the aborigines they seek to convert<sup>5</sup>. They wear “scuffed and tattered patchworks of leather and cloth... Their clothes showed years of weather and wear...A number carried muskets and blunderbusses. They murmured with enchantment to hear Isabel speak... Ages had passed since they had heard the voice of a white woman” (164). They also speak a formal, archaic language, rendered by Updike in Elizabethan tones: “From thy gaunt looks, thou hast long been in search of a meal” (163).

The fifth, and final, characteristic of ‘magical realism’ is that magical realist fictions disturb received ideas about time, space, and identity. The splendid confusion of time, history, and racial identity marks *Brazil* as the boldest and most imaginative for Updike. A great part of the novel resembles a kind of ‘time travel’ through several centuries in the history of Brazil. The story often follows in a medieval epic mode that consumes many years and entails dangerous travel. The couple prospect for gold at Serra do Buraco and cross the MatoGrosso, reaching the headwaters of the Amazon, places where no white man has yet been. When they escape the gold fields, they direct themselves even deeper into the jungle, to places where both white skin and black skin appear strange—even, after a while, strange to themselves. The lovers are always imperiled, fated by their color to experience hardships. As Tristão and Isabel make their way further toward the dark center of the continent, they seem to travel further away from reality. This story parallels the oppression and economic transformation of Brazil during the military dictatorship (1964-1985) and its aftermath, offering a panoramic vision of a society in transformation. Thus, having penetrated the deepest, darkest jungles, Tristão and Isabel turn back toward civilization. Updike’s symmetries are clear and insistent. Eventually, we know, it will be back to the beach in Rio de Janeiro for these two.

The disruption of identity is also clear in *Brazil*. Rather, this merging and changing of identities is central to the magic in the narrative. The deconstructive of individuality, with their reversal of skin colors, achieves a partial, at least social, exchange and merging of identity. The Indian shaman immediately begins teaching Isabel about race and identity. Her pale color startles him. As Ianopamoko explains, the people “have never seen anyone your color, with hair like sunlight. White men have not shown themselves in this part of the world” (183). However, race quickly becomes a non-issue. The people begin calling Isabel “Maira,” who, according to Ianopamoko, is “a prophet like the Jesus of the Portuguese” (183). Even the shaman, who is the most powerful man in the tribe, accepts Isabel. He recognizes her as a kindred spirit, someone with whom he can directly talk. Furthermore, the shaman sees Isabel’s latent qualities and knows she must explore them for the magic to work. It is for this reason that he agrees to help Isabel, telling her, “You have a man’s big spirit. A warrior’s fury to live (188). The shaman feels a kindred bond with Isabel, and this bond paves the way for a deeper understanding between the two. After smoking with the magician, Isabel suddenly can understand his language—she has, in a sense, become one of them with the smoke eating “away at the boundary between their minds” (185). Through his words, the shaman forces Isabel to take a look at herself, opening the path for her own self-discovery. Through the pipe, the shaman has allowed Isabel to see that there can be harmony and understanding among all peoples.

The same can also be applied to Tristão and Isabel. Throughout the novel, the couple is unable or unwilling to explore their ethnic identities, indigenous magic proves the key for their transformation. Upon encountering the magical, they are forced to renegotiate and redefine their own ideologies, whether they are related to race, gender, or even humanity. It is here that Updike creates a link that allows them to experience the magic, and thus finally delve into what race means in their lives and for their identities. With her new race, Isabel is an empty canvas, ready to discover who she truly is. The mental change in Isabel begins immediately. As soon as she sees herself, she believes “she looked now more like the warrior the shaman had told her her sex concealed” (191). Whereas the white Isabel only saw weakness in herself, the black Isabel finally sees more. The end result is, more often than not, characters who are stronger and who have a deeper understanding and awareness of the initial issues they faced. They are no longer “lost,” but rather feel a secure sense of themselves. What we see within the transformations is a reformation of identity based on the characters’ new racial foundations.

However, Isabel does not fully understand the ‘Tupi’ magic, believing it is a cure-all. She asks why the tribe doesn’t use it to save themselves from the persecution of the Portuguese. Ianopamoko tells her that “[m]agic

cannot be general... It cannot be... political. Its arena is the personal soul, not a nation or a people” (177). Yet it is not until much later that she realizes just the meaning of these words. Before that, Isabel expects that the shaman’s magic will simply make Tristão white, like her, thus eliminating all of their problems. However, the shaman quickly tells her that “[m]agic is a way of adjusting Nature... Magic can merely transpose and substitute” (186). Therefore, Isabel’s only option for saving Tristão is a substitution. Just as she becomes black over seven days, Tristão becomes white. While she knows this will be the outcome before she undergoes the magical treatments, Isabel does so without understanding that the magical can only transform the individual it affects. Even after her transformation, Isabel is still asking why the shaman does not use his magic to save his people. Similar to Ianopamoko, the shaman replies, “the past cannot be changed, and the past and the future are like the roots and the branches of one solid tree... magic is good only for the fruit, in the moment that it is falling” (192). Thus, while the ‘Tupi’ and their magic transform Isabel and Tristão physically, the couple is the fruit, and only individually can they come to an understanding of what their alteration truly means. The ‘Tupi’ give the couple the tools for their mental transformations, knowing Isabel and Tristão must learn how to use them. Since the magical affects the “personal soul,” the couple must follow their own path, one that calls for the exploration and understanding of ethnic identity. In addition to the above mentioned list of five characteristics suggested by Wendy Faris, magical realist texts often contain within them repetition as a narrative principle. This repetition is often used structurally or symbolically, in conjunction with mirrors or their analogues, to create a play of shifting references. In other words, repeated elements of various kinds create a narrative hall of mirror. This feature can be easily detected in *Brazil*. At the end of the novel, when Tristão is killed by a contemporary equivalent of his youthful self, complete with a T-shirt that is virtually identical to the one he used to wear when he was young. This repetition takes place on the beach where Tristão first meets Isabel. While she now encounters the dead body of her husband, a small black boy very similar to Tristão, returns Isabel Tristão’s stolen wallet with a “photograph of teen-aged Isabel and Tristão with their heads together” (259). ‘Magical realism’, then, is a style that authors use to question assumed notions of reality, material context, culture, and value. It is the magic of the style that often acts as a cultural agent, pushing questions and possibilities about the world to the forefront.

Thus, the elements of Updike’s style, coupled with the use of magical realism, and of diction, render his fictional Brazil a strong addition to the writer’s output. Some critics, however, blame Updike for utilizing this device in his fiction. Tom Shone, for instance, proclaims that Updike’s employment of this mode is unconvincing and even unnecessary. He wonders: “What need for magic realism has a writer whose own homegrown realism is conjuring trick enough?” He adds, *Brazil* “achieves all that it sets out to do; it’s just that what it sets out to do isn’t worthy of Updike” (21).

Erich Eichman, an American book editor, believes that the idea of the novel—the challenge it posed—was “more compelling” than its execution. A part of Updike’s problem is that he does not give himself over to the genre of magical realism which he apes in this work, but remains grounded in “the realist tradition of which he is a contemporary master”. He also wonders about the reaction of subscribers to the *Book of the Month Club*, which featured *Brazil* as a main selection (30).

As such, Helmbrecht Breinig tirades against the whole work in general and Updike’s utilization of ‘magical realism’ in particular. He assumes that “the magic beliefs and practices of the aboriginal population and the everyday life of an industrial society, the people out of the seventeenth and those of the twentieth century are brought together in a manner that only partially fulfils the communicational contract of any variety of magic realism” (252). James Woodall, however, thinks this trick is “an amusing twist on the theme of miscegenation” in *Brazil* (5).

Yet, perhaps the toughest review of the novel comes from Earl Rovit, an American academic and author of several novels. In a lengthy article published in the *Sewanee Review* in the fall of 1994, Rovit blemishes Updike and his *Brazil* with every possible imperfection. He claims that *Brazil* is a “dull-spirited” and a “cartoon-fable” work set “against the background of a lush hothouse *Brazil*” (678-679). It seems that the critic does not see any merit in *Brazil* whose narrative tone he describes as “so arch and distanced to suggest that Updike is denying responsibility for the novel even in the act of relating it”. Rovit further assumes that locating the novel in *Brazil* is a “thoroughly arbitrary act on Updike’s part” as the social texture of the narrative is “rendered as the kind of unpersuasive caricature that even an intelligent tourist is likely to fall prey to”. He judges Updike’s use of the ‘magical realism’ device as a failure because Updike is not part of the culture he transforms. Rovit exemplifies the prominent Colombian novelist, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who succeeds with his ‘magical realism’ because “his style and vision are so deeply rooted in the climate, topography, and remembered history of the world that he transforms” (678).

Whatever the case, Updike's utilization of 'magical realism' in *Brazil* may be less successful than those of Latin American models but it, however, attests to his avowed readings of South American literatures. It also signals an important moment in the history of 'magical realism' in North American fiction.

### III. CONCLUSION

In *Brazil*, Updike combines characters out of medieval epic and magic in the sense that South American writers have employed in their fiction. But most surprising of all, the novel makes a breathtaking swerve into 'magical realism'. To give exotic resonances to his narrative, Updike mimics the accents and idioms of magical realism, the favorite technique of so many Latin American writers. However, Updike would not give up completely the realist tradition of which he is a contemporary master. The magical within *Brazil* functions as a cultural influence, providing a path through which characters and readers can change their ideologies. Its imprint moves beyond the scope of postcolonial Brazil, but reaching out not just to a particular culture or ethnic group, but more broadly, to the American culture as well. Besides, Updike's style in *Brazil* is powerful and intricate. The Brazil described by him is an exotic, half-legendary country, fashioned out of the author's reading in South American history, myth, and fiction. He has assimilated an astonishing amount of knowledge about native tribal customs and lore, including magic. The fine scenic descriptions and grimly detailed sensual antics are normally Updikean. In some respects, the book is a picaresque tale that appears to be a deliberate pastiche of eighteenth-century style. Updike also adopts a kind of elevated dialogue that is an odd mixture of contemporary slang, Portuguese-in-translation, and the language of epic. Yet such tactics as the extensive description of flora and fauna and the use of Portuguese often confuse the story rather than enhance it.

### IV. NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>By the 1990s, most literary critics and readers of Updike had come to consider *The Coup* a magnificent anomaly in Updike's catalog. Only in rare instances did the author venture out of his 'comfort zone' so boldly as he had done in that novel. In 1992, Updike spent a week in Brazil. His Brazilian publisher was marketing a new translation of the 'Rabbit' tetralogy and asked the author to do some interviews in São Paulo. From there Updike traveled to Rio de Janeiro and to a mining town in the backcountry. A few months later he started work on the novel *Brazil*, which his afterword characterizes as being based on the medieval love tragedy of Tristan and Iseult as told by the French author Joseph Bédier (1864–1938). Like *The Coup*, *Brazil* caused something of a stir when it appeared in 1994. Taking a break with this novel from the North America in which his imagination is so at home, Updike not only heads south into Latin America, but decides to try and communicate in the fictional lingo of the locality. It is a rare example of a literary leap into an alien culture, a contemporary novel in which a writer leaves all tradition behind to pierce through to another world entirely—to an unfamiliar land with another past, another geography, other legends and characters unlike any he has created before.

<sup>2</sup>John Updike. *Brazil*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1994. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup>'Genipapo' is a tropical American tree that yields useful timber. Its fruit has a jellylike pulp that is used for flavoring drinks and for making a black dye.

<sup>4</sup>The "Tupi" were one of the main ethnic groups of Brazilian indigenous people. Darcy Ribeiro, a prominent Brazilian anthropologist, believes that the 'Tupi' tribes first settled in the Amazon rainforest, but started to spread southward and gradually occupied the Atlantic coast. Ribeiro refutes the myths launched against the 'Tupi' tribes that they imposed themselves on others, creating chieftainships and forcing the people living there to serve them. Rather, he thinks that what changed the course of the 'Tupi' people's lives is the advent of a new protagonist into their world, namely the Portuguese explorers. The newcomers, Ribeiro validates, were "super-aggressive and capable of acting destructively in many different ways, mainly through the deadly infection that decimated the preexisting population to the point of extinction" (9-10). Ribeiro goes on to document that when the Portuguese first arrived to Brazil in 1500, the number of the 'Tupi' population was estimated at one million people, nearly equal to the population of Portugal at that time. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, the 'Tupi', like other natives from the region, were divided into tribes, assimilated, enslaved, or simply exterminated by Portuguese settlers, nearly leading to their complete annihilation, with the exception of a few of isolated communities. Ribeiro adds that when the 'Tupi' tribes were fighting against the Portuguese or against each other, they, if victorious, used to take prisoners for cannibalistic rites and go on their way. If defeated, they try to escape with the aim of regrouping their forces for new attacks"

(13). Yet when they were decimated and therefore incapable of attack or defense, the survivors fled beyond the frontiers of civilizations. The remnants of these tribes are today confined to Indian reservations or acculturated to some degree into the dominant society.

<sup>5</sup>According to M. Elizabeth Ginway, the 'bandeirantes' were "trailblazers, slave catchers, and men of fortune who set out to explore the interior of Brazil to claim territory for the Portuguese in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There are no modern-day 'bandeirantes', although the term is used for product names" (330).

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