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"Unveiling Capitalism: Magical Realism and the Struggle for Autonomy in *Tropic of Orange* and
"TV People"

1. Introduction

Both *Tropic of Orange* by Karen Tei Yamashita and "TV People" by Haruki Murakami offer unique perspectives on magical realism and its application for societal critique. Despite their radical differences in style, tone, and influence, Yamashita and Murakami both delve into the subtle movements of people, things, and ideas. Their unique application of magical realism exposes the dehumanizing effects of late-stage capitalism and the dangers of profit prioritization. By employing a philosophical approach in line with Michel Foucault's theories, they reveal the hollow nature of capitalism, prompting the reader to question power structures and the commodification of people. Their approach, while unique, is not novel. Authors like Franz Kafka have been using elements of magical realism to critique capitalism and economic hegemonies since the genre's inception. Both Yamashita and Murakami critique an unstable consumer society in their respective worlds, using magical realism and drawing from tangible historical contexts to critique globalization, neoliberalism, and individual alienation.

1.1 Introduction to Magical Realism

Defining magical realism as a literary model is a complex undertaking, as there are many diverging opinions on its history, critique, application, and future in literature. Maggie Ann Bowers, for example, discusses the complexity of the terms 'magic realism, 'magical realism,'

and ‘marvelous realism’ (Ann Bowers 2). While she identifies magical realism’s social and politically transformative power, she cautions readers against a one-size-fits-all application of magical realism in literature. Tommaso Scarano offers perhaps the most concise definition of magical realism, offering that the mode challenges the readers’ perception of reality by blending supernatural elements with the banal (Scarano 12). Unlike fantasy or science fiction, where the supernatural is identified as such, Scarano argues that magical realism can uniquely portray fantasy as inherent to reality rather than an invasion of what we consider authentic (Scarano 12). In magical realism, fantasy becomes banal, offering the reader to examine the nature of reality and the author a vehicle to critique complex social and political issues fundamental to the human experience.

1.3 Introducing Haruki Murakami’s “TV People”

Haruki Murakami’s “TV People” begins with his signature anonymous narrator discussing his dislike of Sunday evenings, when small, silent people invade his home, bring a Sony color TV, and ignore his presence entirely (Murakami 198). His wife and colleagues do not seem to notice the TV people despite their physical manipulation of the world around them. The night after returning from work, he dreams that he is in a work meeting where he must continue talking or will turn to stone and die (Murakami 212). Upon waking, a TV person physically manifests out of the screen and cryptically tells the narrator (who at this point is beginning to doubt his existence): “It’s a shame about your wife...It’s gone too far: She’s out there” (Murakami 214). The narrator, struggling for words, is left in existential uncertainty.

1.4 Introducing *Tropic of Orange* by Karen Tei Yamashita

Tropic of Orange, by Karen Tei Yamashita, is a vibrant novel tying together seven discrete storylines of characters who appear to be unconnected. However, as the novel

progresses, the reader discovers how each storyline is inextricably tied to the others. Over seven days, the characters' stories are centered on an apocalyptic L.A. freeway fire and the importation of fatally tainted oranges. *Tropic of Orange* explores globalization, environmental crisis, and sociopolitical struggles. Rafaela flees Mexico with her infant son Sol after discovering a child organ smuggling ring as her husband Bobby pursues the American dream. Gabriel, a Chicano journalist, pursues a story with the Japanese-American TV executive Emi, who is fatally shot. Buzzworm, a reformed Vietnam veteran, seeks to assist the destitute of L. A and Manzanar, a former surgeon, and Emi's estranged grandfather, conduct the chaos from his bridge. Arcangel, a mythical and ancient character, moves north with Rafaela's son and a symbolic orange, ultimately facing the wrestler "SUPERNAPTA" in a cataclysmic wrestling match as the Tropic of Cancer continues to move ever further north with the orange.

2. Critiquing Capitalism: Magical Realism as a Vehicle for Dissent

2.1 Magical Realism as a Function of Social Critique

In Maggie Ann Bowers' *Magic(al) Realism*, she analyzes the inherently subversive nature of magical realism by referring to the vastly diverse applicability of its application (Bowers 63). She argues that the inherent dichotomy between "magic" and "real" forces an equally serious reading of both and results in a dissolution of the barrier between what is acceptable to critique in popular culture (Bowers 64). Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris even argue that the inherent nature of magical realism is subversion and "encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures" (Zamora and Faris 6).

The often destabilizing and surreal realities embodied in stories like *Tropic of Orange* and "TV People" use magical realism as a vehicle for indictment against the monolith of capitalism and globalization to shed light on critical issues. The distorted reality of the Tropic of Cancer

moving physically north or the Sony TV setup in the narrator's living room forces readers to question what they have previously taken for granted. Capitalism, for example, often considered a naturally occurring economic system, looms large as a target for Yamashita and Murakami.

2.2 Alienation and Consumerism in Murakami's "TV People"

Haruki Murakami's stories are a masterclass in subversive critique of an insidious disease of consumerist fetishism and the dangers of late-stage capitalism. Murakami writes against the backdrop of his experiences in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s and presents the surreal as the banal. In "TV People," Murakami creates a space for readers to consider how a character's seemingly ordinary action can be subversive against the ever-present forces of capitalism and consumption (Rahman).

Born in 1949, Haruki Murakami was heavily influenced by the student protests in post-war Japan, specifically in the 1960s and 1970s. Students were primarily driven by dissatisfaction with the U.S. military and economic influence in Japan after WWII and were concerned about the Japanese government and growing economic disparities (Strecher 66). After the culmination of the student protests, Japan experienced rapid economic growth, referred to as the economic "bubble" of the 1980s (Strecher 67). After the student movement's decline, Japan underwent rapid economic growth, culminating in the asset price bubble of the 1980s. Matthew Strecher argues that Japan's economic boom and resulting social and political tensions influenced Murakami's sense of a loss of self and individual autonomy in modern Japan (Strecher 66-67). Strecher reflects on Murakami's identity and how he considers an interpretation of individuality as a result of shared generational hardship. For example, the fallout of the Zenkyōtō movement was mass consumerism (Strecher 66).

Strecher also notes a tension in Murakami's work between the rapid rise to wealth in Japan and a commensurate death of individual identity (Strecher 265). Strecher draws significant historical and social parallels between the WWII generation in America and Japan and their children (the "Baby Boomers" in the U.S.) who, by comparison, knew little hardship. Strecher reflects on Murakami's identity and how he considers an interpretation of individuality as a result of shared generational hardship. For example, the fallout of the Zenkyōtō movement was mass consumerism (Strecher 266). The confluence of these shifts in national and individual identity is, Strecher asserts, what initially launched Murakami's work into focus, striking a chord with those tired of constant consumerism and an eroding identity (Strecher 266). The constant presence of Sony TV in "TV People" is a potential metaphor for technology and consumerism invading the collective identity (Murakami 209).

Murakami's faceless and nameless narrator in "TV People" offers the reader a glimpse into the dissociation of the individual, which is a keystone of his work. Susan Napier observes the satire of corporate Japan in "TV People" as the narrator's passive coworkers seem to accept the presence of the TV people without question or concern (Zamora and Faris 472). This remarkable passivity of the coworkers and the narrator reflects a bleak view of a world obsessed with "things" (the TV) and profit.

Murakami's disillusionment with political failure and ultimately futile economic success reflect a loss of autonomy as the narrator accepts a bizarre reality ultimately out of his control. Murakami's use of magical realism, expecting the reader to accept the surreal as quickly as the narrator does, reflects common critiques of capitalism, where individuals are often subsumed by an economic system much like the TV people themselves: faceless, nameless, and uninterested.

2.3 Yamashita's Critique of Globalization and Exploitation

Like Murakami, Yamashita was influenced by an era of economic and political upheaval. *Tropic of Orange* is a complex and often chaotic story that exemplifies the “literalization of metaphor” that Begoña Simal-González contends is a key aspect of magical realism (Simal-González 129). The orange, a key import to the United States, literally pulls the Tropic of Cancer north as it continues its journey.

After ratifying the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, trade and production on the Mexican border increased significantly. *Tropic of Orange*, written in 1997, uses magical realism and metaphors like Arcangel and the Orange to critique the hyper-consumption and societal pressures of capitalism and neoliberalism (Palmer). *Tropic of Orange* examines the commodification of people, borders, and bodies and articulates the threat of over-commodification and the disenfranchisement of the individual in favor of profit.

One of the fantastic elements in *the Tropic of Orange* is the literal movement of the Tropic of Cancer North. As the line of demarcation between the north (the United States) and south (Mexico) continuously shifts, so does the stability of Los Angeles. Not only does the orange moving north disrupt borders, but the cocaine-tainted oranges also migrating kill several citizens (Yamashita 90). Using the “magic” orange, Yamashita challenges agreements like NAFTA as mechanisms to exacerbate wealth inequality and the determination of both physical and economic borders (Lee 73).

While not a supernatural moment, Yamashita’s surreal description of the L.A. highway takeover emphasizes her critique of the instability of neoliberal capitalism’s promise of free trade (Balachandran). The homeless community takes over abandoned cars and, almost satirically, creates its own urban economic and social environment (Yamashita 186). The highway network, traditionally a space used to accelerate capitalism, becomes a space of resistance, where the L.A.

homeless community creates an alternate way of living (Blyn 199). As Buzzworm notes, several homeless people living in abandoned cars are “urban gardening,” planting, and even home decorating in their new abodes (Yamashita 187).

Possibly the most potent example of Yamashita’s use of magical realism is the messianic character Arcangel and his culminating wrestling match against SUPERNAFTA. Arcangel is introduced as a mystical performance artist who has been alive for centuries (Yamashita 44). Our first introduction to his powers is when he tows a broken-down car using tow hooks inserted into his flesh (Yamashita 66). As he travels north with the orange and Sol (Rafaela’s son), he continues to promote his match against the wrestling champion “SUPERNAFTA.”

SUPERNAFATA is a clear allegory communicated through magical realism to highlight labor exploitation and neoliberal capitalism. The savior of the people, Arcangel, is sacrificed to SUPERNAFTA in their final clash (Yamashita 225). The viciousness of the match demonstrates neoliberalism’s subjugation of marginalized populations and frames capitalism as a violent spectator sport. Not all is lost, however, as Arcangel can defeat SUPERNAFTA in his final breaths, and both wrestlers die. While bleak and often violent, Yamashita’s novel offers hope as her characters struggle for their lives and families.

3. Foucault and Power in Capitalist Structures

Michel Foucault’s theories on biopolitics, disciplinary power, and neoliberalism provide an illuminating lens through which to view capitalism and individual agency in both *Tropic of Orange* and “TV People.” Through their use of magical realism and the literalization of metaphor, both authors expose the artificiality and hollowness of profit-driven capitalism, consumerism, and the commodification of the individual. Ultimately, the application of

metaphor and magical realism supports a Foucauldian analysis of the dangers of hidden capitalism as a mechanism for control.

3.1 Biopolitics and Bodies as Commodity in *Tropic of Orange*

In Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, he describes bio-politics as the effort of the State to not only exert its power through laws and punishment but also through identifying the management of human life "as a distinct political problem" (Means). As early as the 17th century, Foucault argues, these biopolitics have encouraged an era of bodily subjugation and governance, ushering in an era of "bio-power" (*History of Sexuality*). In its fundamental form, "bio-power" is the vehicle through which the State strips individuals of their physical agency.

Foucault further expands on this theory in *Society Must Be Defended*, arguing that power is managed and value is assigned based on economic and social hierarchies (*Society Must Be Defended*). He argues that bio-power is a management tool of the modern state that decides whose life has value and which does not.

Yamashita offers a visceral application of bio-power in the *Tropic of Orange* by introducing a sub-plot of children's organ smuggling. From a power hierarchy perspective, Yamashita's trafficked children exist as raw materials for a capitalist exchange. Their value is reduced to economic advantage, and the implication is that the children are all from Mexico, and their organs are heading north to America. At one point, Rafaela overhears a smuggler saying, "Tell them to be careful...not just any starving two-year-old" (Yamashita 102). These children have been malnourished or disenfranchised, solidifying the theory that in pursuit of profit, the poor are rendered disposable in service to the wealthy.

The grotesqueness of the children's organs as a metaphor for economic and social disparity is framed within Yamashita's greater critique of neoliberalism and capitalism.

Globalization and the resulting chaos in *Tropic of Orange* reveal secret violences that devastate poor and disenfranchised populations.

3.2 Surveillance and Autonomy in “TV People”

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault cites the “Panopticon Prison” designed by Jeremy Bentham (*Discipline and Punish* 189). The prison allows for 360-degree surveillance at all times, resulting in natural order and compliance. The inmates, Foucault notes, always believe they are being watched. This concept of a conscious acknowledgment of surveillance is one of the fundamental tenets of power; it should be “visible and unverifiable,” which results in automatic behavior regulation of the inmates (*Discipline and Punish* 189). Murakami’s narrator derives this same sense of surveillance from the TV people in his house. They can enter at will and make themselves entirely at home without invitation or preamble (Murakami 196). Their apparent omnipresence extends Foucault’s idea of surveillance to the consumerist state, where capitalism and consumption are no longer simply physical but psychological.

The TV people never explicitly coerce or force the narrator to do anything, but their continued presence drives him deeper into unease and paranoia. Like the inmates in Bentham’s panopticon, one can see the narrator’s behavioral regulation and internalization of control even without direct coercion. The fact that this coercion comes from a TV set-up crew (Sony, specifically) can be extrapolated to the inherent control levied upon a population by the need to consume.

Framed within Murakami’s experience with State oppression and economic disparity in post-war Japan, it is fascinating to observe the parallels between the narrator’s passivity and acceptance and the normalization of capitalist values in Foucault’s philosophy. While not explicit

in “TV People,” the narrator’s almost bizarre apathy to supernatural happenings can indicate a shift from external control (whether the government or a corporation) to the internal discipline of consumerism as a shaping force.

4. Conclusion

Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* and Haruki Murakami’s “TV People” utilize magical realism to illuminate late-stage capitalism's often toxic and unseen effects. By integrating surreal elements like shifting geographical borders, men with superhuman strength, and eerie, omnipresent TV people, Yamashita and Murakami offer a compelling critique of the destruction of individual agency by economic systems prioritizing profit over people. Both influenced by economic crisis and transformation, Yamashita and Murakami apply a Foucauldian interrogation of power constructs and capitalist structures' commodification and exploitation of disenfranchised populations. “TV People” presents a narrative where consumerism erodes individual autonomy, with the anonymous narrator slowly giving in to apathy and external control. *Tropic of Orange* viscerally demonstrates the brutality of globalization, including the biopolitical regulation of bodies and the displacement of the poor and homeless.

Magical realism serves as a powerful subversive and disruptive force in both stories, challenging the benefits and naturalness of capitalism while offering readers a chance to examine the true nature of reality. By disturbing our equilibrium, Yamashita and Murakami cast a harsh light on neoliberal economies but present a hopefully possible resistance. Ultimately, *Tropic of Orange* and “TV People” reveal that capitalism’s most profound illusion is its claim to inevitability, a claim that magical realism, by its inherent nature, boldly rejects.

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