

The Magic of Reality in «*Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*» (The Old Man Who Read Love Stories) by Luis Sepúlveda*

[*English version*]

La magia de la realidad en «*Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*» de Luis Sepúlveda

A magia da realidade em «*Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*» (O velho que lia romances de amor), de Luis Sepúlveda

Received on 21/06/ 2024. Accepted on 20/02/2025

› How to cite:

Kyriakoulakou, A. (2026). The Magic of Reality in «*Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*» (The Old Man Who Read Love Stories) by Luis Sepúlveda.

Ánfora, 33(60), 289-314.

<https://doi.org/10.30854/4hdx7095>

Universidad Autónoma de Manizales. L-ISSN 0121-6538.

E-ISSN 2248-6941.

CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Antonia Kyriakoulakou**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3455-6157>

Greece

Abstract

Objective: To discover the trend of the *magic of reality* through the analytical study of the novel «*Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*» (The Old Man Who Read Love Stories) by the Chilean writer Luis Sepulveda.

Methodology: Bakhtinian methods as well as a comparative analysis of this trend with dominant

trends of Boom and Post-boom period, academic documents, several editions of the novel, extracts from the narrated story and literary interviews were used. **Results:** Certain dichotomies and ethical messages that show the author's literary symbolism on protection of the Amazon jungle, its tribes and animals are examined. There are

* This article derives from the research "The Magic of Reality in *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories* by Luis Sepúlveda", started at the Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR) and completed at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED). Funding: There was no external funding source. Declaration of Interest: The author declares that there is no conflict of interest. Availability of Data: All relevant data are found in the article.

** PhD student at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Madrid. Email: akyriakou2@alumni.uned.es

answers to the questions regarding the existence of the trend in the *magic of reality* in the aforementioned novel by Luis Sepúlveda. **Conclusions:** Through the life of the old man Antonio Proaño within the Amazon jungle, it becomes clear that the magic of reality is found within the dialogue and daily incidents of the novel's protagonists, which focus the power of the words that represents the Latin American magical environment.

Keywords: Magic of reality; realism; The Old Man Who Read Love Stories; the writer Luis Sepúlveda (obtained from the Thesaurus of Language and Literature).

Resumen

Objetivo: encontrar la tendencia *magia de la realidad* a través del estudio analítico de la novela *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* del escritor chileno Luis Sepúlveda.

Metodología: se hizo uso de métodos bajtinianos y la elaboración de un cuadro de análisis comparativo de dicha tendencia con las dominantes del periodo Boom y Posboom, investigando documentos académicos, varias ediciones de la novela, extractos de la historia narrada y entrevistas literarias. **Resultados:** se examinan ciertas dicotomías y mensajes éticos que muestran el simbolismo literario del autor sobre el tema de la protección de la selva amazónica, sus tribus y animales. En este sentido, se hallan respuestas a las preguntas planteadas sobre la existencia de la tendencia *magia de la realidad* en la mencionada novela de Luis Sepúlveda. **Conclusiones:** a través de la vida del viejo Antonio Proaño dentro de la selva amazónica, se hace claro que la magia de la realidad se encuentra dentro de los diálogos y los incidentes diarios de los protagonistas de la novela sepulvedana, que enfocan el poder de las palabras que representan el entorno mágico latinoamericano.

Palabras clave: magia de la realidad; realismo; *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*; el escritor Luis Sepúlveda (obtenidos del Tesauro de lengua y literatura).

Resumo

Objetivo: identificar a tendência da magia da realidade por meio do estudo analítico da novela «Un viejo que leía novelas de amor» (O velho que lia romances de amor), do escritor chileno Luis Sepúlveda. **Metodologia:** utilizaram-se métodos bakhtinianos e a elaboração de um quadro de análise comparativa dessa tendência com as dominantes dos períodos do Boom e Pós-Boom, investigando documentos acadêmicos, diversas edições da novela, trechos da narrativa e entrevistas literárias. **Resultados:** analisam-se certas dicotomias e mensagens éticas que evidenciam o simbolismo literário do autor em relação ao tema da proteção da selva amazônica, suas tribos e animais. Nesse contexto, encontram-se respostas às perguntas formuladas sobre a presença da tendência magia da realidade na referida obra de Luis Sepúlveda. **Conclusões:** por meio da vida do velho Antonio Proaño na selva amazônica, torna-se evidente que a magia da realidade está presente nos diálogos e nos incidentes cotidianos dos protagonistas da novela de Sepúlveda, ressaltando o poder das palavras que representam o ambiente mágico latino-americano.

Palavras-chave: magia da realidade; realismo; Un viejo que leía novelas de amor; o escritor Luis Sepúlveda (extraídos do Tesauro de Língua e Literatura).

The Magic of Reality in Sepulveda's Novel

A literature review of the work of Luis Sepúlveda, mainly, his novel «*Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*» (Hereinafter, *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*), and his different publications reaches certain conclusions about the author's own literary style, the “magic of reality”. At the same time, certain questions arise about the disappearance of this literary style, leading to a search for possible answers.

The author's own affirmation of the existence of his literary style, the "magic of reality" is found on the cover of the first edition of this novel. Although the Sepulvedian trend has disappeared throughout the re-editions of his work, academic studies from the time of its various publications were found that affirm the existence of Sepúlveda's literary style. In particular, there are texts by the scholars Juan Gabriel Araya Grandón, Carlos Morello Frioli, and Joaquín Marco, which were difficult to locate in the current period of this research. Professor Juan Araya Grandón (2000) mentions that:

Being Sepúlveda a prominent writer of the Post-Boom of Latin American literature, he separates himself from the García Márquez-style magical realism, by eliminating its exoticism and tropicalism and by incorporating magic as one more component of our way of being and of our society. His narrative is characterized by a new formula expressed in the phrase “magic of reality.” Among the members of his generation, Osvaldo Soriano, Paco Ignacio Taibo, Ramón Díaz Eterovic, Mempo Giardinelli, Leonardo Padura Fuentes, Hernán Rivera Letelier, and others were mentioned. (p. 1).

Meanwhile, Frioli (1993) states that “[...] the magic of reality lies in the vision that the narrator offers of the Ecuadorian Amazon jungle and, specifically, in the deep knowledge that the main character, Antonio José Bolívar Proaño, gradually acquires of it” (p. 345). For his part, Joaquín Marco (2010) states that:

Luis Sepúlveda proclaims on the inside flap of his novel *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories* (Sepúlveda, 1993) a new trend that has separated itself from magical realism and is emerging forcefully in a credible way — the magic of reality. (p. 1).

The novel *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, as its own author declares, is the result of his life experience with the Shuar people. It was an UNESCO expedition that Sepúlveda accepted to evaluate the impact of colonization on this town. During this expedition, he shared the life of the Shuar for seven months and

came to understand Latin America as a multicultural and multilingual continent, where the Marxism he had been taught was not applicable to a rural population that depended on its surrounding natural environment. There he discovered their marvelous way of life as a unique balance within themselves and the nature. He worked in close contact with indigenous organizations and developed the first literacy plan of the Peasant Federation of Imbabura, in The Andes. The following excerpt from the interview with the authors Josefina Ribalta and Fernando Cross shows Luis Sepúlveda's own opinion on the ecological issue, as the core of the aforementioned novel:

F.C: And that respect for nature, for the balance of the environment — did you always have it, or did it arise as you grew older, “gathering experiences,” becoming “old”?

L.S.: No, the truth is that it has always existed. I was fortunate to have a wonderful grandfather. He was an Andalusian anarchist; in Chile, he was one of the early environmentalists who got involved in many lost causes to preserve certain spaces. The “old man” spoke of that right he called “the recovery of ecological dignity,” the right that human beings have to decide on the possibility of harmonious coexistence with the environment that surrounds us, which, translated into political terms, meant: what do we do with our raw materials without having to mortgage the future? And then, over time, I gained a more scientific rationalization of environmental problems and the terrible consequences they have for the entire human species, the profound ecological crisis of our time. (Sepúlveda, 1995, p. 9).

Regarding the Chilean poet Carmen Yáñez, life partner of Luis Sepúlveda, she has offered, via email, her own perspective on Sepúlveda's *magic of reality* (Yáñez, 2021). The novel in question narrates the life of an old man, Antonio Proaño, within an ambivalent environment in which the mayor neither respects his town nor its territory, mediates in illegal hunting of animals, and the extermination of forests to meet exaggerated and unreasonable resource demands of the Western world. It is a reflection of the colonial era, in which representatives of Western states such as Spain, Portugal, and the United States did not hesitate to exterminate hundreds or even thousands of natives of the Latin American continent to forcibly obtain treasures that would increase their wealth. A crime that continues today, with the devastation of the Amazon and its peoples. Professor Claudia Marcela Páez Lotero (2023) states that:

In this novel by Luis Sepúlveda, the old man Bolívar Proaño loves the Amazon deeply and witnesses the severe environmental damage caused by agriculture, livestock, logging, and mining and oil exploitation. [...] It addresses the effects of human colonization, agricultural, oil, and timber exploitation on the ecosystems of that region and on indigenous communities. (p. 5).

Methodology

It is well known that in every literary analysis it is increasingly common to observe that any literary research depends not only on the personality of the researcher but also on the methods used to highlight it (Fokkema *et al.*, 1993). In this case, this research is based on literary criticism and the contribution of Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, using his notions of "subject," "reflection," "polyphony," "dialogue," "carnivalization," "social evaluation," and the concept of "chronotope," to identify and demonstrate Sepúlveda's literary consciousness in his aforementioned work (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 216). The "social subject" is combined with "ideological objects," within the criticism phase of a literary work and forms a unit that "reflects" the reality of the social aspect. In this way, social ideologies are transformed into the creation of that social subject, previously referred to, forming the "ideological environment" of Bakhtin's theory (Poderti, 2019).

In this sense, the examined novel is presented as an ideological world unique to the reader, contributing a product of social consciousness. This is what is appreciated as Sepúlveda's main communicative intention through the *magic of reality*. Therefore, interviews, academic essays and reference books are studied to define both the emergence and disappearance of this literary style in the author's work, as is done in this research to identify traits of the magic of reality in the referenced novel (Kyriakoulakou & Martínez, 2024).

Analysis

The main element of the research is based on the brief historical overview of the editions of the novel under consideration, as noted by Maximiliano Alarcón in his interview “*The story of the 1st ‘handcrafted’ edition of Luis Sepúlveda’s masterpiece, before a French publisher launched him to fame*” (Alarcón, 2020):

According to official records, this work was first published in France in 1992, however, there was an earlier edition in Chile published in May 1990, which was withdrawn from the market before reaching popularity. (Paragraph 3).

We are, in all likelihood, facing one of the finest literary creations of this new narrative founded on what is called the ‘magic of reality,’ through which Sepúlveda and other authors seek to differentiate themselves from that which gave rise to “magical realism”. (Paragraph 4).

The previous paragraph corresponds to the prologue of the 1990 edition and was written by journalist Juan Pablo Cárdenas, at that time director of *Análisis* magazine and the main person responsible for the first printing of the book.

Following, a brief analysis of the various editions of the referenced novel is presented.

In Figure 1 (A-F), there are images from the 1st Chilean edition (Sepúlveda, 1989a) to the more recent editions (Sepúlveda, 2019). This affirms that, in the first editions by Tusquets, from its *Colección Andanzas*, the Sepulvedian trend of the magic of reality appears: “Sepúlveda is inscribed in this new Latin American literary current which, in his own words, ‘has separated itself from magical realism’ and credibly presents the magic of reality” (Sepúlveda, 1988, p. 1). Meanwhile, the edition shown in Figure 1 (D) is accompanied by a green paper ribbon that says: “Departing from magical realism, this novel reveals to us the *magic of reality*.” From these four editions, the existence of the magic of reality is concluded. However, in the later editions (E and F) by Tusquets, not only has the green paper ribbon been removed, but every mention on the cover or in the prologue of the novel has been eliminated. Now, in Figure 2 (A) there is a mention of this trend in blue, whereas in the other 2(B) there is none. Thus, questions arise that will be addressed in this research by examining the available material.



Figure 1. Various editions of the novel *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*.

Source: (A) The first publication in Chile (Sepúlveda, 1989a), (B) The first publication in Spain (Sepúlveda, 1989b), (C) The first publication in France (Sepúlveda, 1992). (D) The third Tusquets edition (Colección Andanzas) (Sepúlveda, 1993), (E) The twenty-seventh Tusquets edition (Colección Andanzas) (Sepúlveda, 1996), (F) The twenty-fourth Tusquets edition (Colección Maxi) (Sepúlveda, 2019).

A

LUIS SEPULVEDA

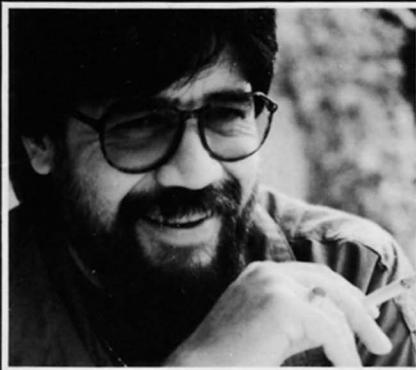


© Gerd Gehard

Luis Sepúlveda nació en Ovalle, Chile, en 1949. Muy joven aún decidió ser viajero como quien decide ser oficinista. De Punta Arenas a Oslo, de Barcelona a Quito, de la selva amazónica al desierto de los saharauis, de las celdas de Pinochet al barco *Greenpeace*, recorrió casi todos los territorios posibles de la geografía y las utopías. Y, mientras viajaba, escribía. Publicó el primero de sus 10 libros a los veinte años. Ha recibido, entre otros, el Premio Gabriela Mistral de poesía 1976 y el Premio Rómulo Gallegos de novela 1978. Y, después de *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*, Premio Tigre Juan (Oviedo, 1989), traducida a 14 lenguas, merecedora de varios otros premios internacionales, convertida en *best-seller* y vendidos sus derechos para cine a Jean-Jacques Annaud, nadie puede ignorar ya a este autor, cuya obra nos enorgullece acoger a partir de ahora en nuestro catálogo. Sepúlveda se inscribe en esa nueva corriente literaria hispanoamericana que, según sus propias palabras «se ha separado del realismo mágico y se plantea, de una manera creíble, la magia de la realidad».

B

LUIS SEPULVEDA



© Gerd Gehard

Luis Sepúlveda nació en Ovalle, Chile, en 1949. Muy joven aún decidió ser viajero como quien decide ser oficinista. De Punta Arenas a Oslo, de Barcelona a Quito, de la selva amazónica al desierto de los saharauis, de las celdas de Pinochet al barco de *Greenpeace*, recorrió casi todos los territorios posibles de la geografía y las utopías. Y, mientras viajaba, escribía. Publicó el primero de sus 11 libros a los veinte años. Ha recibido, entre otros, el Premio Gabriela Mistral de poesía 1976 y el Premio Rómulo Gallegos de novela 1978. Y, después de *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*, Premio Tigre Juan (Oviedo, 1989), traducida a 14 lenguas, merecedora de varios otros premios internacionales, convertida en *best-seller* y vendidos sus derechos para cine a Jean-Jacques Annaud, nadie puede ignorar ya a este autor, cuya obra nos enorgullece acoger a partir de ahora en nuestro catálogo. En 1994 *Tusquets Editores* publicó *Mundo del fin del mundo*, que, en 1989, había obtenido el Primer Premio de Novela corta *Juan Chabás* en Denia, Alicante y *Nombre de torero* (Andanzas 209 y 220).

Figure 2. Flaps of the Colección Andanzas editions (Sepúlveda, 1993; 1996).

Source: (Sepúlveda, 1993; 1996).

Note: (A) Third edition. In blue (by the author of the article) is the author's reference to the "magic of reality" (Sepúlveda, 1993). (B) Twenty-seventh edition. The previously mentioned reference was replaced by anaphoras to new publications of the author's novels (Sepúlveda, 1996).

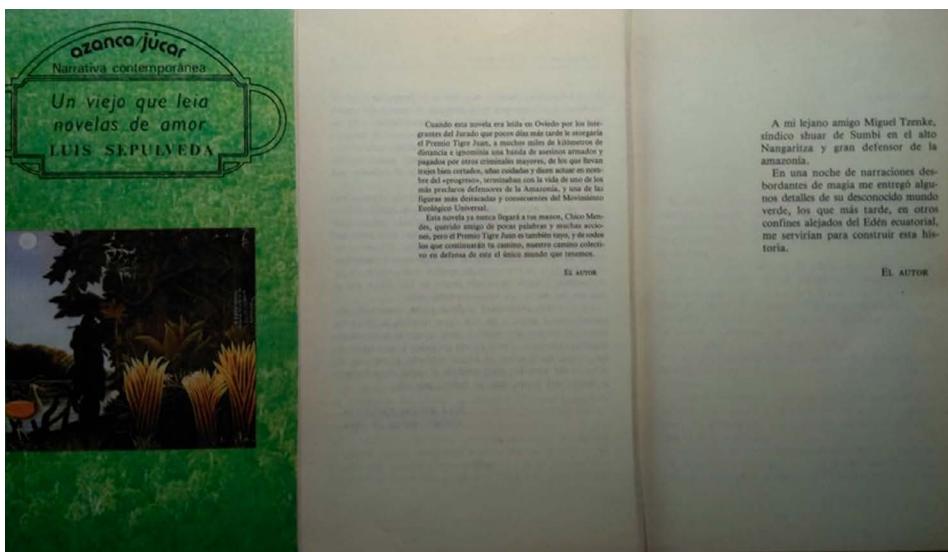


Figure 3. 1989 Edition.

Source: Sepúlveda, 1989.



Figure 4. The 1989 and 1993 editions of *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, in which “the magic of reality” is mentioned.

Source: Sepúlveda, 1993; 1989.



Figure 5. Covers of other French editions.

Source: Sepúlveda, 1992.

In *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, themes of love, respect for nature, the environment, and the tribes of the Amazon stand out. There is a particular interest in depicting the destruction of the Amazon jungle, its peoples, and its animals. Historically, this novel was published in 1989, and is the result of the personal experience of the Chilean writer who was exiled in 1977, for political reasons. In the same year, as previously mentioned, Sepúlveda undertook a study mission on Amazonian populations" in Brazil. From this study and his six-month stay with the Shuar tribe in the Amazon of Ecuador, the Ecuadorian Amazon, the author narrates the relationship of a man with the nature, as well as the significance of artisanal weapons in human survival; meanwhile, the dominant theme of the work is love, expressed through the protagonist.

The author's own "self" is represented by his protagonist, Antonio Proaño, since they share the same human and ecological interests. According to Michele Lefort (2000):

Luis Sepúlveda novelizes his knowledge of the environment and of the people to create a humanist fable, moralizing for our time, one of the first consciously ecological novels that denounces the destruction of the natural world by timber-exploiting companies. He proposes a reflection on "the magic of reality," the expression is the author's own, and on the magic of the narrative, both the autobiographical pretext of the novel and the escapist narrative, the "old man's" readings, thanks to which he manages to survive the tragic experiences he would like to forget. (pp. 143-149).

The style of the novel is based on a scenic and polemical attitude that extends the realism of the 1940s and older narrative schemes of Latin American literature, influenced by Francisco Coloane and Hemingway, in their memory. The work is divided into eight chapters, each headed and lettered. Key characters include the protagonist, Antonio José Bolívar Proaño; the dentist and friend of the protagonist, Rabicundo Loachamín; the Shuar; the town; the hunters and the *gringos*; the mayor; the little tiger (La Tigrilla); the protagonist's wife, Dolores Encarnación del Santísimo Sacramento Estupiñán Otavalo (DESSEO); and his friend, Nushiño. The main theme is the relationship of a man with nature.

Regarding narrative aspects, the narrator is in third-person omniscient, focalized on the protagonist as the writer's alter ego. The narrator's "I" approaches the jungle and its inhabitants, the Shuar. Time is linear but frequently interrupted by flashbacks. In the Aristotelian and Bakhtinian *chronotope*, there are two spaces: the Amazon jungle and the Ecuadorian town "El Idilio". Consequently, there is a "diachrony" of the narrated story and a "synchrony" with the tale of the Amazon jungle". "As in the epic poems of Homer or Virgil, the work does not develop chronologically but, so to speak, emotionally, placing the reader from the beginning in *in media res*, at a key moment to understand its subsequent development" (Tausiet, 2007, p. 2).

The writing style is simple, with careful and lively language, using clear and well-documented vocabulary. The images are presented without hidden or incomprehensible messages or concepts; the messages that the author wishes to convey revolve around ecological and cultural themes, as mentioned earlier.

As is well known, the work engages with the parallel history of a double fall: that of Satan (whose divine wrath will cast him into the farthest abyss of Heaven, to the anguished depths over which the fallen angel will reign for all eternity, wounded in his pride and plotting endless revenge) and that of Adam and Eve (who will be expelled from the earthly Paradise and cast into mortality, into a world already inhabited by ruin, finitude, and sin). Thus, the rebellious angel causes the perdition of the new creature (who will always carry within it this dual nature, angelic and infernal) and opens a new playing field for his eternal dispute with God. (Milton, 1667, p. 23).

The evocation of the Arcadian ideal is notable in Sepúlveda's selection, which refers to the toponym "Idilio" in the narrated story. "Idilio" derives from the short poem called a "romance," belonging to bucolic poetry and referring to the theme of the "lost paradise." Both references are tied to Greek mythology. Peloponnesian Arcadia in the Peloponnese was the domain of Pan, a virgin wilderness home to the god of the forest and his retinue of dryads, nymphs, and other nature spirits.

It was a version of paradise, being the dwelling of supernatural entities, not an afterlife for deceased mortals. Both the Greek poet Theocritus (3rd century BCE) and the Roman poet Virgil, in his *Eclogues* and *Divine Comedy*, influenced medieval European literature, and Arcadia became a symbol of pastoral simplicity. Therefore, Garcilaso de la Vega revised the theme, and the name Arcadia came to refer to any idyllic place or paradise.

Nicolas Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* is a famous painting reminding the viewer that even in the blissful utopia of Arcadia, the "lost paradise," death still exists. This connects to the novel in question, which narrates the story of the life, love, and death of "an old man who read love stories" in "*El Idilio*"; a place resembling the "lost paradise of Eden," which, according to its author, requires global attention worldwide, to survive within a natural world dramatically exploited by a period of irrational decisions eradicating the flora, fauna, and tribes inhabiting the Amazon jungle.

It is not surprising that Sepúlveda decided to publish his novel translated into English with the Arcadia publishing house in the U.S. (Souviron, 1996). Sepulveda (1993) states that of Miguel Tzenke's Eden, only his parody remains: "El Idilio, that dreadful port town that is the very opposite of what it claims to be, a hell of ugliness and physical and moral solitude" (p. 3). The "magic of the jungle and its inhabitants" shows the author's ecological intention, as well as his aim to separate from his literary style any exotic or tropical elements, the basic ingredients of magical realism.

Next, basic characteristics of the two contemporary literary movements at the time of the novel's publication are presented, situated in the Latin American Boom and Post-Boom periods, compared with Sepúlveda's own literary style. These are magical realism, with basic exponents such as Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa and Julio Cortázar; and the *marvelous real* with Alejo Carpentier as an exponent. In this way, the author of this article elaborates her own comparison of the three trends —magical realism, the *marvelous real*, and the magic of reality— showing differences and similarities in a comparative table (Table 1).

A first conclusion from the comparison is that "magical realism" is the presentation of what is possible but improbable, whereas marvelous real is a folkloric and methodological substratum of Latin America, richer and better preserved than the European. As for the "magic of reality", it is a pure style, without detours or pernicious contamination.

Table 1. Comparison between The Three Trends.

Magical Realism	Marvelous Real	Magic of Reality
An international trend, emerging in 1918. It depicts a real world in which, suddenly, something improbable occurs. An artistic trend that favors Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, based on the ideas of archetypal theories, in the sense that all epochs merge into a moment of the present.	A Latin American regional trend that depicts the culture and beliefs of native peoples, presenting them with a dramatic and fantastic notion that combines to create an original and unreal ensemble of ethereal, European, and other cultures.	An international trend related to the literary work of its founder, the Chilean author Luis Sepúlveda. It presents Sepúlveda's literary intention to "separate the waters" from that which gave rise to magical realism and "marvelous real".
The reality in the narrative is shown with fabulous and fantastic elements, often exaggerating the apparent. In this perspective, the writer needs to create a supernatural atmosphere without intending to separate from the natural world, thus taking reality as the foundation.	It is a narrative in which certain events escape rational explanation and contribute to everyday life. Something that could be understood as magical, supernatural, or improbable in other cultures is presented as completely natural. It originates in certain regions of Latin America and has indigenous and African roots. The notion of realism is shown as an alteration of reality itself.	The magic of reality in narrative moves between the clarity of his style, thanks to his gift of reducing words, and his simple and vivid language without oddities or technically invented magical elements.
<i>Magical realism</i> seeks to present reality itself as if it were magical.	The <i>marvelous real</i> operates within the natural and avoids any action that might provoke unpleasant feelings, fear, or terror in the audience, through an unusual event.	The <i>magic of reality</i> focuses on representing the magic of indigenous peoples themselves – their way of life, their beliefs, and their balance within their physical environment, the Amazon jungle.

Magical Realism	Marvelous Real	Magic of Reality
The narrator assumes the role of a player, attempting to provoke strange feelings in the audience.	It ceases to be the unknown and is incorporated into the real. Realism emerges as an alteration of reality. In this sense, it is presented as marvelous thanks to the role assumed by the narrator.	The writer lives within the narration told by his narrator, as the alter ego of the protagonist. In this way, he emphasizes the reality of events according to his ethical, political, and social thinking, avoiding exaggeration in the characters and the occurrences that arise in the story.
The prose is clear and precise.	The prose is characterized by a Baroque style.	The prose is clear and precise, and each narration moves within the magic of reality itself.
It presents what is possible, but improbable.	It constitutes a folkloric and methodological substratum of Latin America, richer and better preserved than the European.	A pure style, without detours or pernicious contamination.
Examples: <i>Pedro Páramo</i> by Juan Rulfo, and <i>One Hundred Years of Solitude</i> by Gabriel García Márquez.	Examples: <i>Chac Mool</i> by Carlos Fuentes, and <i>The Kingdom of This World</i> by Alejo Carpentier.	Examples: <i>The Old Man Who Read Love Stories</i> , <i>Story of a White Whale</i> , <i>The End of the Story</i> , <i>World at the End of the World</i> , among others by Luis Sepúlveda.

Discussion

In the analyzed story, there is an intention to present ecological and cultural messages through dichotomies. The well-known expression "civilization versus barbarism" predominates. The protagonist Antonio Proaño's act of reading becomes a key element of the novel's structure, as he enjoys reading aloud every day, seeking to relax and escape from the loneliness of the final years of his life. Foreign cities do not escape his attention, admired for their beauty and the modern way of life of their inhabitants. He enjoys the rhythm of love affairs and seeks marvelous elements within them.

Likewise, a contrast emerges between, on one hand, the "ignorance" of the mayor and his companions, and, on the other, the "wisdom" of Proaño, who

has cultivated his intimate feelings of love through reading novels. In this way, Antonio acquires a double dimension in love: the natural and the literary. This dual dimension allows him to act as a hunter compelled by necessity, yet connected and in communication with *Tigrilla* throughout the hunt. Both the old man and *Tigrilla* become embroiled in a struggle for survival, which ultimately costs the life of the animal and breaks Antonio Proaño's heart, due to his violent act against such a beautiful and magnificent creature of the Amazon.

The narrative presents specific ethical themes expressed by the author. On one hand, ignorance versus wisdom is shown through the mayor and his companions versus the "wise" old Antonio Proaño. On the other, the protagonist's dual dimension of love—natural and literary—is displayed through his hunting of the *Tigrilla*, in communicative connection with her, illustrating the survival struggle between man and animal. Ultimately, the *Tigrilla* dies, and the "old man's" heart breaks.

In the jungle culture there is a remembrance of the past.

Inverting the established dichotomy, which extends to Proaño himself, Sepúlveda identifies the culture of indigenous peoples, who live peacefully in harmony with their natural environment, as "civilized," and Europeans and North Americans, who destroy everything in their path for temporary economic gain, as "barbaric." It is important to note that the dichotomy "civilization vs. barbarism" dates back to the time of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, when it was believed that Argentina's greatest problem was the dilemma between "civilization" and "barbarism". Civilization was associated with urban life, European influence, and progress, while barbarism was associated with rural life, backwardness, the "Indian," and the "gaucho"¹.

The following example illustrates Sepulveda's literary intention to "separate the waters" from the origins of magical realism and *the marvelous real*. Specifically, it focuses on the political life of the town of Idilio through its mayor, the assumed highest authority. At this stage, the magic of reality consists of presenting events with lively and clear language, reflecting the magical life in Idilio, as shown in the following excerpt:

The mayor, sole official, highest authority, and representative of a power too distant to provoke fear, was an obese individual who sweated without rest [...] He arrived with the obsession of collecting taxes for incomprehensible reasons. He attempted to sell fishing and hunting permits in an ungovernable territory (Sepúlveda, 1989, p. 12).

¹ According to the historian Fernando Assunção (1978), the figure of the "gaucho" in Argentine, Paraguayan and Uruguayan cultures, as well as in the Rio Grande do Sul region (Brazil) and in Chilean Patagonia, is considered a national icon that represents rural tradition and customs (p. 16).

The *magic of reality* moves in the narrative with a clean style, a product of the author's talent for expressing himself with few words and with simple, vivid language, free from oddities or technically invented magical elements, far from folkloric stylistic or linguistic embellishments. Thus, his prose is clear and precise and each narration operates within the magic of reality itself, while his style remains pure, without detours or harmful contamination. This trend appears in the representation of the indigenous peoples' own magic; their way of life, beliefs, and balance within a natural environment like the Amazon jungle; as illustrated by the example: "The old man approached the corpse, bent down, moved its head and opened the wound with his fingers" (Sepúlveda, 1988, p. 13).

At the same time, he uniquely combines the tradition of the magic in love novels with the *magic of reality* in the Amazon jungle. This is reflected in the typical dialogue between the protagonist Antonio José Bolívar Proaño and the dentist, who provided him with love novels during each of his visits:

“Are they sad?” -the old man asked.
“Enough to cry rivers,” —assured the dentist.
‘With people who truly love each other?’
‘Like no one has ever loved.’
‘Do they suffer much?’
‘I could hardly bear it,’ the dentist replied.”

But Doctor Rubicundo Loachamín did not read the novels [...] (Sepúlveda, 1988, p. 16).

“I wanted to be one of them, without actually being so”. Luis Sepulveda lived in the Amazon with the Shuar, in his effort to be one of them. Ultimately, he could not fully integrate, so he lives within his narration; through his narrator, he relives his memories from the personality of the protagonist Antonio Proaño.

According to Bakhtin, language is a critical literary instrument. The Bakhtinian analytical literary method, with its "epistemological metaphors," helps locate Sepúlveda's ideas about respect for the Amazonian environment and its animals, as well as the Shuar tribes that preserve, who maintain rules of balance between their natural surroundings and way of life. From this, it can be deduced that the novel presents the social ideology of the time to the reader, as Bakhtin states, reflected in Sepúlveda's humanistic and ecological ideas. Bakhtinian theory holds that literary facts contain an ideological form, whose linguistic realization reflects the social ideologies of the work's time. Regarding Bakhtin's notions of ridicule and carnivalization, these appear in the mayor's description and dialogues; a ridiculed, amorphous figure who often makes mistakes in speech. In

this sense, following Bakhtin's theory on carnivalization as an ancient cultural code, polyphony and dialogue (Bajtín, 1999, pp. 38-42), the author presents situations that invite critical reflection, in line with his socialist-anarchist political perspective:

Upon entering the hut, through the rain layer he could see the solitary, obese silhouette of the mayor under the umbrella on the dock, like a huge, dark mushroom freshly grown on the planks. (Sepúlveda, 1993, p. 36).

Similarly:

Antonio José Bolívar Proaño refused the possibility of being the father of a carnival child. (Sepúlveda, 1988, p. 19).

As Bakhtin shows, in relation to law, laughter, seriousness, ridicule, the face and the mask, Sepúlveda expresses in his novel the parodic through the “hyperbole and scatology” of the figure of the mayor, whom he presents in a burlesque and carnivalized way (Rodríguez, 2001, p. 42).

In depicting environmental devastation, irony and almost mockery appear, used by the author as part of his social critique woven throughout the narrative: “Antonio José Bolívar Proaño kept them at bay, while the colonists destroyed the jungle, constructing the masterpiece of civilized man: the desert”. (Sepúlveda, 1993, p. 27).

Sepulveda's ethical messages represent dichotomies such as “civilization vs. barbarism”, mentioned previously and “love and death.” The latter dichotomy is expressed through the protagonist's love in the author's invented story. The novels speak of the otherness of love: love for others, for the creatures of nature, between Shuar women and men, and between Antonio Proaño and his wife Dolores Encarnación. A love that embraces all beings respecting nature. Her full name is Dolores Encarnación del Santísimo Sacramento Estupiñán Otávalo, with initials forming the acrostic DESSEO (Heymann, 1997, p. 154). This love is antithetical to her acrostic, as she dies at 20, childless and unrespected. Thus, Antonio chooses exile rather than the humiliation of a gang rape in his hometown, due to having no children in his marriage. Among the Shuar, fraternal love binds him to Nushiño, through which Antonio becomes a kind of Cain, condemning his friend to restless death wandering the jungle, and himself to new exile; as exemplified:

“Bad way to leave,” —muttered Nushiño with a grimace of pain, tremblingly showing him his curare gourd— “No, I'll leave in peace, comadre. I will walk

like a sad blind bird, bumping into trees until my head hangs from a dry branch. Help me, compadre". The Shuar surrounded him. He knew white men's customs, and Nushiño's weak words told him the time had come to repay the debt incurred when they saved him after the snake bite. [...] He had never held a firearm, but seeing the man reach for a machete, he instinctively placed his finger at the right spot, and the discharge caused a flutter of startled birds. (Sepúlveda, 1988, p. 26).

The old man Proaño's love for the Tigrilla, mad with grief for her injured companion, is also the catalyst for the hunt, leading him to kill the tiger to shorten its suffering in a final act of tenderness before the ultimate confrontation with the Tigrilla; a kind of epic ballet presided over by Eros, culminating in a predictable Thanatos.

"It was pure, with no purpose other than love itself, and without jealousy". (Sepúlveda, 1988, p. 24). This expresses the author's love for the Amazon, its peoples, and wild animals; a love for the jungle depicted as a humid, warm womb, in both Eden and "green hell," where life and death are endlessly cyclical. Love and death are inseparable, except in his brief past life with the Shuar, when he experienced pure love for its own sake, without possession or jealousy. Painful love is part of Antonio Proaño's story; he lived it but feels the need for it to be told repeatedly, as the words in his love novels sometimes allowed him to forget human barbarity. For him, novels were the only balm left, or, as he says, the antidote against the poisonous venom of old age.

In *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, Sepúlveda, through the protagonist "the old man," shows the real roles within nature. Antonio Proaño broke the Shuar's sacred laws twice, killing first the "gringo" and then the Tigrilla with a pistol instead of a blowpipe. This depicts Shuar "civilization" versus the "barbarism" of Europeans and North Americans. Civilization lives through respect for nature and its inhabitants, while barbarism is represented by those who kill indiscriminately for ephemeral profit.

For the author, the Amazonian reality is so unimaginable that it must be recounted credibly, domesticated in fiction through the magic of reality in words. The Amazon, as named by the Spaniards who believed they had discovered a people resembling mythological Amazons, is a great source of myths, but these are absent in this book. The Amazon is domesticated almost entirely through the combined use of articles, lowercase, and accent shifts, making the vast Amazon —a limitless, ownerless land—a world more to our measure.

In this context, the book's dual dedication gains true value, honoring two defenders of the Amazon: the unjustly murdered man of action and the man "of overflowing magical stories" who entrusts words with the power to reveal "his unknown green world," the magic of his reality. Sepúlveda is their spokesperson,

transmitting this magic through writing, as his compatriot Coloane did with the oral stories of the Tehuelche, Yaghan, Ona, or Alakaluf (Lefort, 2000).

Finally, the *magic of reality* continues in the 21st century, recalling its founder Luis Sepúlveda; not only through his own words and works, but also through compatriot authors such as Isabel Allende and through interesting scientific encounters.

One example occurs 40 years after Sepúlveda's stay among the Shuar, in Quito, in an interview for Magazine Ecuador with Tzama Tigre Tzamarenda, a Shuar Amazonian native educated by his ancestors to be a guardian of the Amazon. Lucid and humorous, he has been a leader, warrior, painter, and shaman for over 30 years. When asked:

“What role have women held before and now in your society?”

— Women have always been and will always be the complement of men; sacred, they are the strength and origin of life, the foundation of the home, while men are like the roof. They bear all the weight, and we protect them with our lives, giving that pure, unconditional love. (Tzamarenda, 2021, para. 6).

This reflects the Shuar concept of love, as Sepúlveda expressed in *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*: "It was pure love, with no purpose other than love itself. Without possession and without jealousy" (Sepúlveda, 1988, p. 25).

Another example is Isabel Allende's interview with *Bohemia*, where the journalist concluded: "Isabel Allende continues to sit and create tirelessly. Even after death, she will inspire new generations of writers who, like her, appreciate the *magic of reality*" (Allende, 2000, p. 2).

Poet Carmen Yáñez, in a personal letter, recalls:

Lucho used to take long walks in nature; it was his way of breathing the world. Listening to birds, observing their paths and migratory flights. They would perch on the trees surrounding our lush garden. Always with his dogs that accompanied him throughout life. This was the prelude to a new literary project or the continuation of one. (Yáñez, 2021, p. 1).

Moreover, the science of biologist Sir Richard Dawkins intersects with Sepúlveda's literary magic of reality in his scientific book *The Magic of Reality*, stating:

I want to show you that the real world, as understood scientifically, has magic of its own, a kind of poetic magic: an inspiring beauty that is the most magical

because it is real and we can understand how it works. Compared to the beauty and magic of the real world, supernatural spells and illusionist tricks seem cheap and vulgar. The magic of reality is not supernatural nor a trick, but—simply—it is wonderful. Wonderful and real. Wonderful because it is real. (Dawkins, 2018, p. 257).

This represents an interesting convergence between Sepúlveda's literary magic of reality in his novel and Dawkins' scientific concept.

Finally, academic José Carlos Aranda highlights in his academic blog entitled *An Old Man Who Read Love Stories: Keys for a Critical Commentary*, saw that the novel emphasizes the “magic” of reading as central. It opens doors to unknown worlds, fosters imagination and reflection, and acts as a social marker distinguishing readers from non-readers. Reading is portrayed as a sentimental refuge and a tool for self-knowledge, contrasting literal illiteracy with functional illiteracy, emphasizing the effort to learn to read versus knowing how but not reading; the latter equates to not knowing how to read (Aranda, 2011). Aranda underscores the magic of nature, central to Sepúlveda's creation of his literary style, *magic of reality*. Sepúlveda states:

The magical part, the miracle inherent to the Latin American spirit, occurred through other things. For example, through the reflection of humans on their surrounding natural environment, or through the infinite survival mechanisms humans invent under given conditions. (Sepúlveda cited by Zerán, 1997, pp. 363-364).

Conclusions

For Luis Sepúlveda, inspiration comes from the magic of nature and its people, which he called the “magic of reality”. He was, indeed, a storyteller among his family, friends, and audience, as he was an eternal traveler around the world, often encountering the perspectives of the marginalized. He often repeated one of his favorite phrases: “History is written by the victors, while literature has the duty to give voice to the losers”. Throughout his political life, he was imprisoned under Pinochet's dictatorship, an experience that remained present in his personal, political, activist, and literary works. The researcher of this article, after reading the beautiful letter by poet Carmen Yáñez, considers it a wonderful window into

the author's creative and literary thinking, whose magic permeates every moment of his literary life.

The novel *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories* embodies a creed of respect for life, nature, and human dignity. At the same time, it conveys ideas close to respect for ecological balance, humanistic values, and tolerance.

Hence, it is worth exploring possible answers to questions regarding the disappearance of the mention of "magic of reality" in later editions of the work and the recognition of Sepúlveda's literary style. What really happened between the editions of the *Andanzas* collection (from the first edition in 1993 to the twenty-seventh in 1996) in which the reference to the magic of reality disappeared from the book jackets? Why did Sepúlveda agree to remove from the official circulation of *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories* his affirmation regarding his new literary style, the magic of reality?

A possible answer to the first question could be that the author was pressured by Spanish publishers to align with the dominant literary styles of the time —magical realism and *marvelous real*— in order to continue publishing his novels. This is illustrated in an excerpt from his interview with Chilean scholar Faride Zerán:

I voluntarily distanced myself from the possibility of writing in the line of magical realism, although it was almost an imposition. I remember the years '78, '79, or the 1980s, when I first went to Spanish publishers with a manuscript, and the first question they asked was, 'Who do you write like?' It is true that a stereotype existed, but if we look at the literature written by the great masters like Gabo, there is a reflection and poetic interpretation of a particular reality in which the magical element is privileged, and, to my dismay, the anecdote is valued above objective truth, above the possibility of a more or less coherent and concrete approach to certain aspects of reality. (Zerán, 1997, p. 353).

Regarding the second question, the author may have chosen to communicate directly with his readers through his literary works, which reflect the magic of reality as his literary style. Luis Sepúlveda demonstrates, through the simplicity of the plot, life as it is —neither exaggerated nor imagined, but simple, as reality itself is— within a social and political context representative of the magic of reality in Latin America.

At the same time, his vision looks toward the future, imagining new literary creations and human societies more in harmony with the natural environment. The referenced novel represents the author's attempt to communicate with his readers and provide them with social awareness. Sepúlveda, as an activist in his personal life, discovers in his own literature everything necessary to set himself in

motion and to enact his own human revolution against the ills of his era. Through his magnum opus, *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, Luis Sepúlveda dreams of an idealized, just, and balanced world, where citizens and the environment are at the forefront of political, economic, and strategic decisions worldwide, with fundamental pillars of fraternity, solidarity, equality, and social justice.

References

Alarcón, M. (2020). *La historia de la 1º edición 'artesanal' de la obra cumbre de Luis Sepúlveda, antes de que una editorial francesa lo lanzara a la fama*. Interferencia.

Allende, I. (2020). *La magia de la realidad*. Bohemia.

Aranda, J. (2011). *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor: Claves para un comentario crítico*.

Araya, J. (marzo 29 de 1999). *Luis Sepúlveda: Un escritor de fin de siglo*. La Discusión.

Assunção, O. (1978). *El gaucho: estudio socio-cultural* (Vol. 1). División.

Bajtín, M. (1999). *Estética de la creación verbal* (T. B Bubnova, Trans.; 10ma ed.). Siglo XXI.

Dawkins, R. (2018). *La magia de la realidad' - Cómo sabemos si algo es real*. S.L.U. ESPASA LIBROS.

Fokkema, D., Angenot, M., Bessière, J. y Kushner, E. (1993). *Teoría literaria* (Spanish Edition) (V. Núñez, I., Trans.; 2a ed., Vol. 1). Siglo XXI Editores.

Heymann, C. (1997). *Les Chemins de la lecture dans Un viejo que leía novelas de amor*. Les Langues Néo-latines.

Kyriakoulakou, A. y Martínez, I. (2024). Una mirada bajtiniana en la novela *Un viejo que leía novelas de amor* de Luis Sepúlveda. En D. L. Drosos, M. Monserrat Llairó, M. Tsokou, A. Alexopoulou, E. Paraskeva, V. Kritikou, &

E. Pandis Pavlakis (Eds.), *Estudios y homenajes hispanoamericanos* (Vol. VII, pp. 87-96). Ediciones del Orto.

Lefort, M. (2000). Un viejo que leía novelas de amor, de Luis Sepúlveda: Après le “réalisme magique,” la “magie de la réalité.” *América. Cahiers du CRICCAL*, 2(25), 143-149.

Marco, J. (2010). El “Realismo Mágico” y lo “Real Maravilloso.” En D. Puccini & S. Yorkievich (Eds.), *Historia de la cultura literaria en Hispanoamérica* (pp. 583-615). F.C.E.

Milton, J. (1667). *El Paraíso Perdido* (E. L. Castellón, Trans.). Abada.

Morello, C. (1993). La magia de la realidad en *Un Viejo que Leía Novelas de Amor* de Luis Sepúlveda. *Nueva Revista del Pacífico*, (38-39), 339-349.

Poderti, A. (2019). *Mijail Bajtín: Recorrido teórico y propuestas fundamentales*. Conference.

Sepúlveda, L. (1988). *Un Viejo que Leía Novelas de Amor* (1a ed.). Júcar.

Sepúlveda, L. (1989a). *Un Viejo que Leía Novelas de Amor*. Emisión.

Sepúlveda, L. (1989b). *Un Viejo que Leía Novelas de Amor*. Júcar

Sepúlveda, L. (1992). *Un Viejo que Leía Novelas de Amor*. Éditions Métailié.

Sepúlveda, L. (1993). *Un Viejo que Leía Novelas de Amor (con la cinta verde de la editorial: ¡tercera edición! Alejándose del realismo mágico, esta novela revela la magia de la realidad)* (3a ed.). Tusquets Editores.

Sepúlveda, L. (1995). *Luis Sepúlveda: El "viejo" que escribe novelas de amor / entrevistado por Josefina Ribalta y Fernando Cross*. A Propósito.

Sepúlveda, L. (1996). *Un Viejo que Leía Novelas de Amor* (27a ed.). Tusquets.

Sepúlveda, L. (2019). *Un Viejo que Leía Novelas de Amor* (24a ed.). Tusquets.

Souviron, B. (1996). Arcadia y Nuevo Mundo: un capítulo de la historia de Utopía. *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, 53(1), 199-213.

Tausiet, M. (2007). Paraíso interior. *Revista de Libros*, (121), 38-41.

Tzamarenda, T. (2021). *Entrevista a Tzama Tigre Tzamarenda es un nativo amazónico originario de la nación Shuar en el Ecuador/ Entrevistado por Amaruk Kayshapanta*. Magazine Ecuador.

Yañez, C. (2021). *La cantera del mundo imaginario de Luis Sepúlveda*. Anexo.

Zerán, F. (1997). *Desacatos al desencanto: Ideas para cambiar de milenio*. LOM.

Appendix

"The Quarry of Luis Sepúlveda's Imaginary World" (Yáñez, 2021)
(by Luis Sepúlveda's life partner, the poet Carmen Yáñez)

Lucho used to take long walks in nature; it was his way of breathing in the world. Listening to the cawing of the birds, observing their flight paths, their migratory journeys. The birds would sometimes perch on the branches of the trees surrounding our lush garden. Always accompanied by his dogs, who were his companions throughout his life.

This was the prelude to a new literary project or the continuation of an existing one.

The beautiful fables he wrote always carried an ethical message, timely and weighty for a world caught in the voracity of consumption and power, and the consequences of inequality: diversity, recognition of otherness, and concern for the environment, conveyed through the voices of his real or fictional characters.

His imagination was immersed in lyrical prose, for the quarry from which it came was the world of image and poetry.

He used to say that he was more than a narrator; he was a storyteller, a citizen of the world who observed through the eyes of the marginalized, those who could not raise their voices. He came from that territory, and he never forgot it. Not even after his death. For his necessary words endure.

Gijón, December 19, 2021
Carmen Yáñez
(sent by email to the author of the article).

