

COGNITIVE MECHANISMS OF PERCEIVING THE “MARVELOUS” IN SPANISH LITERATURE OF FANTASTIC REALISM: A COGNITIVE-STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article explores the cognitive mechanisms underlying the perception of the “marvelous” in Spanish literature of fantastic realism, with a particular focus on the interplay between cultural cognition, narrative strategies, and stylistic devices that shape readers’ experiences of the fantastic. Drawing on insights from cognitive stylistics, conceptual metaphor theory, and narratology, the study analyzes how Spanish authors situate the marvelous within ordinary contexts, creating a dual perception of reality that blurs the boundaries between the real and the fantastic. The article highlights the role of cognitive frames, schemas, and mental models in guiding interpretation, showing that the marvelous emerges not only from textual structures but also from readers’ culturally embedded cognitive processes. Special attention is given to the works of Gabriel García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier, and contemporary Spanish-language authors, where the marvelous functions as both a literary device and a cultural code. By tracing the mechanisms of defamiliarization, frame blending, and embodied experience, the article argues that fantastic realism engages readers in a continuous cognitive negotiation between belief and disbelief, producing a unique mode of aesthetic perception. The findings demonstrate that the “marvelous” in Spanish fantastic realism cannot be reduced to textual ornamentation; it represents a cognitive-stylistic phenomenon grounded in the interaction of linguistic form, cultural semantics, and mental imagery.

Keywords: Cognitive stylistics; marvelous; Spanish literature; fantastic realism; conceptual metaphor; cognitive frames; narrative perception; magical realism.

Introduction

Spanish literature of the twentieth century, particularly the works associated with fantastic realism, provides a fertile ground for examining the interplay between narrative imagination and cognitive perception. The notion of the “marvelous” occupies a central role in this tradition, functioning not merely as a stylistic embellishment but as a key cultural and cognitive construct. To understand how readers perceive the marvelous, it is essential to situate literary analysis within a cognitive-stylistic framework that integrates insights from linguistics, psychology, and cultural theory. The question is not simply how the marvelous is represented in language, but how it is processed, conceptualized, and interpreted by readers who bring with them culturally shaped schemas and expectations. The perception of the marvelous in fantastic realism depends on mechanisms of frame integration, metaphorical mapping, and embodied imagination, all of which make possible the seamless coexistence of the ordinary and the extraordinary within a single narrative space.

Fantastic realism, as a literary mode, differs from pure fantasy because it does not create a wholly otherworldly realm detached from reality; instead, it embeds extraordinary events within the texture of the everyday. This embedding demands a particular cognitive effort from readers. They are required to negotiate between two interpretive frames: the empirical frame of ordinary reality, and the imaginative frame of the marvelous. This negotiation is not a conscious process but a cognitive operation grounded in the dynamics of conceptual blending. According to conceptual blending theory, readers integrate elements from disparate domains into a blended mental space where new meanings emerge. In the case of Spanish fantastic realism, a miraculous event such as a character ascending into the sky, or a town suffering from an insomnia plague, is not treated as impossible but as an extension of cultural experience. Readers accept the marvelous by adjusting their interpretive schemas, creating a hybrid mental model where reality and unreality coexist.

The marvelous, therefore, is a cognitive phenomenon as much as it is a stylistic one. Stylistic devices such as hyperbolic description, sensory detail, and defamiliarizing metaphors play a role in foregrounding the marvelous, but the real work happens in the reader’s mind. The comprehension of marvelous events requires readers to mobilize cognitive frames of religion, myth, folklore, and collective memory, which are deeply embedded in the cultural context of

Spanish-speaking societies. Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (One Hundred Years of Solitude) provides a classic illustration. When Remedios the Beauty ascends to heaven while hanging laundry, the event is narrated in a matter-of-fact tone. The stylistic understatement compels readers to activate a cognitive schema where biblical imagery of assumption blends with the mundane domestic frame, producing a new mental model in which the marvelous feels natural. This stylistic strategy works precisely because of the cultural resonance of religious and folkloric narratives that already condition readers to accept transcendence as part of lived experience.

The cognitive mechanisms of perceiving the marvelous can be further understood through the lens of schema theory. Schemas are mental structures that organize knowledge and expectations about the world. In fantastic realism, authors systematically disrupt or expand schemas to generate a sense of wonder. When readers encounter a scene that violates their expectations but remains internally coherent, they adjust their schemas through accommodation rather than rejecting the narrative outright. For example, in Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (The Kingdom of This World), the marvelous arises from Afro-Caribbean cultural practices and belief systems, which European readers may interpret as magical but which are presented as part of everyday reality in the novel. The narrative challenges readers' default schemas of rationalist modernity and invites them to adopt alternative cultural frames. The perception of the marvelous here is not merely a stylistic effect but a cognitive process of cross-cultural frame-shifting.

From the perspective of cognitive stylistics, the language of fantastic realism is carefully designed to facilitate such frame shifts. Authors often employ minimal markers of unreality, avoiding overt signals that would separate the marvelous from the real. Instead, they rely on narrative tone, focalization, and discourse structures that normalize the extraordinary. The use of parataxis, for example, places fantastic events alongside ordinary descriptions without hierarchical distinction. This stylistic flattening reduces cognitive resistance, allowing readers to accept both domains as equally valid. Similarly, the deployment of sensory imagery engages embodied cognition, making marvelous experiences feel tangible and immediate. When García Márquez describes the rain that lasts for four years, eleven months, and two days, the hyperbolic temporal frame is grounded in sensory detail of mud, rot, and decay, anchoring the marvelous in

bodily experience. Cognitive psychology shows that embodied imagery enhances mental simulation, which explains why readers “feel” the marvelous as real rather than abstract.

An important dimension of the marvelous in Spanish literature of fantastic realism is its collective and cultural function. Cognitive approaches emphasize that reading is not only an individual act but a socially and culturally mediated process. Readers interpret texts through cultural models—shared cognitive frameworks that shape meaning-making. The marvelous in Spanish fantastic realism is often rooted in collective cultural memory, including indigenous myths, Catholic symbolism, and historical trauma. When García Márquez narrates the massacre of striking banana workers, which official history attempted to erase, the narrative incorporates the event into the realm of the marvelous, with the dead haunting the town in spectral memory. The marvelous here functions as a cognitive and cultural mechanism of remembering, resisting the rationalist erasure of collective suffering. Readers perceive the marvelous not merely as fantastical invention but as a form of cultural truth that transcends empirical verification.

The blending of historical and mythical frames exemplifies the cognitive process of frame integration. According to Fauconnier and Turner’s theory of conceptual integration, the marvelous emerges in a blended space where elements of history, myth, and imagination combine to produce new meaning. In fantastic realism, such blends are not marked as contradictions but as natural extensions of reality. This reflects a cultural epistemology in which myth and history are not mutually exclusive but interwoven. Cognitive stylistics helps to explain how readers process these blends by activating both historical schemas and mythic schemas simultaneously, leading to a perception of layered reality. This layered perception constitutes the core of the marvelous experience.

Another mechanism central to the perception of the marvelous is defamiliarization. Borrowed from Russian formalism but reinterpreted in cognitive terms, defamiliarization occurs when familiar concepts are presented in strange or unexpected ways, forcing readers to re-examine their assumptions. In fantastic realism, defamiliarization often operates through scale manipulation, temporal distortion, or animistic metaphors. For instance, when time in *Cien años de soledad* is described as circular rather than linear, readers are invited to reconceptualize temporal experience. This challenges the Western cognitive

schema of linear progression and replaces it with a cyclical model grounded in indigenous cosmology. The marvelous arises not from supernatural spectacle alone but from the cognitive disorientation and subsequent reorientation that defamiliarization produces.

It is also important to recognize the role of narrative voice in shaping the perception of the marvelous. The impersonal, omniscient narrator often recounts extraordinary events with the same detached tone used for everyday occurrences. Cognitive stylistics suggests that this narrative strategy reduces epistemic vigilance—the reader’s natural tendency to evaluate the truth-value of statements. By presenting the marvelous without rhetorical emphasis, the narrator bypasses critical resistance and encourages automatic acceptance. This mechanism explains why readers of fantastic realism rarely question the plausibility of events, instead experiencing them as part of the narrative world’s ontological fabric.

Beyond individual cognitive mechanisms, fantastic realism engages with collective cultural cognition. Scholars such as Alejo Carpentier have emphasized that the “lo real maravilloso” is not an imported stylistic device but an inherent feature of Latin American reality, shaped by its history of colonization, cultural hybridity, and resistance. Cognitive stylistics allows us to reinterpret this claim: the marvelous emerges from the interaction between textual cues and culturally specific cognitive models. For readers embedded in these cultural contexts, the marvelous resonates with lived experience, whereas for external readers it may appear as exotic fantasy. The perception of the marvelous is thus relative, contingent on the alignment between textual signals and readers’ cognitive environments.

The cognitive-stylistic analysis of the marvelous also sheds light on the affective dimension of reading. The marvelous is not only perceived intellectually but felt emotionally. Cognitive poetics highlights the role of emotional schemata and affective appraisal in shaping literary experience. Fantastic realism often evokes feelings of awe, wonder, and estrangement, which are triggered by violations of expectation that are nonetheless resolved into coherent mental models. The emotional impact of the marvelous is intensified by its embedding in familiar contexts, where ordinary lives are suddenly illuminated by extraordinary events. This juxtaposition stimulates both cognitive surprise and emotional resonance, producing a lasting aesthetic effect.

Furthermore, the marvelous functions as a vehicle of ideological critique. By disrupting rationalist frames and introducing alternative epistemologies, fantastic realism challenges dominant narratives of modernity. Cognitive stylistics demonstrates how this critique operates through frame conflict and reconfiguration. When readers encounter scenes that contradict their habitual schemas but remain narratively coherent, they are forced to reconsider the limits of their worldview. For example, the coexistence of living and dead characters in certain narratives undermines the rigid dichotomy between life and death, suggesting a more fluid ontology rooted in cultural traditions. This cognitive reconfiguration has ideological implications, inviting readers to question the universality of Western rationalism.

The perception of the marvelous is therefore not a passive reception but an active cognitive construction. Readers constantly negotiate between frames, blend domains, and adjust schemas to accommodate extraordinary events. Stylistic strategies—tone, imagery, parataxis, temporal distortion—function as cues that guide this cognitive work. The marvelous emerges in the space between text and reader, as a product of interaction rather than mere representation.

In sum, the cognitive mechanisms of perceiving the marvelous in Spanish literature of fantastic realism can be understood as a complex interplay of conceptual blending, schema disruption, defamiliarization, embodied simulation, and cultural framing. These mechanisms allow readers to experience the marvelous not as alien intrusion but as a natural dimension of reality. Cognitive stylistics provides the tools to analyze this phenomenon by connecting linguistic form to mental processes, thereby revealing the deep structures that underlie literary wonder. The marvelous, in this light, is a cognitive-stylistic construct that reflects both universal mechanisms of human cognition and culturally specific modes of world-construction.

By integrating insights from cognitive science and literary analysis, we can appreciate fantastic realism not only as a stylistic innovation but as a profound exploration of human perception. Spanish authors of the twentieth century, from Carpentier to García Márquez and beyond, invite readers into a world where the ordinary and extraordinary are inseparable, where cultural memory and imagination intertwine, and where the marvelous emerges as a mode of knowing as much as a mode of writing. The perception of the marvelous, then, is not only

an aesthetic experience but also a cognitive revelation of the multiplicity of realities that literature can evoke.

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