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The Kingdom of This World:
Alejo Carpentier
Re-Stages History

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The Kingdom of This World:
Alejo Carpentier
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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The Kingdom of This World is known for its Prologue, which proposes the concept of the “real marvellous” to understand Latin America and its history.

This notion of the real marvellous influenced what would later come to be called magic or magical realism.

The novel is also interesting both for the ways in which it claims a regional identity, which would include the French Caribbean as well as Spanish America, and for its portrayal of history and historical events from diverse perspectives.

The novel, as a form that is inherently polyphonic and open to the idea that fiction can supersede reality, emerges as a more appropriate vehicle for history than does “history” itself.

By offering the chance to play out the same scene from different perspectives, it allows us to “replay” history and thus to let loose forces and energies that remain invisible in more orthodox accounts.

Aware of the extent to which history is performance or spectacle, Carpentier is keen both to show how it is seen differently by diverse classes of spectators, and to expose the hidden labour that goes into any such public representation, and how its outcome could change.

The novel's foreground is taken up either by more minor personages or by characters who are largely the products of Carpentier's own imagination.

The story is at its end, but a history of struggle and resistance will continue so long as there are still men (and women) such as Ti Noël to protest against the impositions of masters both old and new.



**THE REAL
MARVELLOUS**

“Toward the end of 1943, I had the good fortune to be able to visit the kingdom of Henri Christophe—the poetic ruins of Sans-Souci, the massive citadel of La Ferrière, impressively intact despite lightning bolts and earthquakes—and to acquaint myself with the still Norman-style Cap-Haitien.”

(Prologue)

“After feeling the in no way false
enchantment of this Haitian earth, after
discovering magical presences on the red
roads of the Central Plateau, after hearing
the drums of Petro and Rada. . .

. . .I was moved to compare this marvelous reality I'd just been living with the exhaustingly vain attempts to arouse the marvelous that characterize certain European literatures of these last thirty years." (Prologue)

“The marvelous, obtained through sleight-of-hand, through bringing together objects ordinarily never found in the same place: the old, lying tale of the fortuitous encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on an operating table, which engendered ermine spoons, the snails in the rainy taxi, the head of a lion on the pelvis of a widow in surrealist exhibitions.” (Prologue)

“With each step I found *the real marvelous*.
But I also realized that the presence and
authority of the real marvelous was not
a privilege unique to Haiti but the patrimony
of all the Americas.” (30)

“But what is the history of all the Americas
but a chronicle of the real marvelous?”
(Prologue)

What elements of the novel would you call “marvellous,” and how does Carpentier convey that they are at the same time also “real”? How does his account of the Haitian Revolution make good on his promise to write “a chronicle of the real marvelous”?

What elements of the novel would you call “marvellous,” and how does Carpentier convey that they are at the same time also “real”? How does his account of the Haitian Revolution make good on his promise to write “a chronicle of the real marvelous”?



“Those heads seemed as real—although their fixed stare was so dead—as the talking head an itinerant mountebank had brought to the Cap years before [. . .]. By an amusing coincidence, in the window of the tripe-shop next door there were calves’ heads, skinned and each with a sprig of parsley across the tongue, which possessed the same waxy quality.” (4)

“It amused Ti Noël to think that alongside the pale calves’ heads, heads of white men were served on the same tablecloth. Just as fowl for a banquet are adorned with their feathers, so some experienced, macabre cook might have trimmed the heads with their best wigs.” (5)

“The morning was rampant with heads, for next to the tripe-shop the bookseller had hung on a wire with clothespins the latest prints received from Paris. At least four of them displayed the face of the King of France in a border of suns.” (5)

They circulate as part of a global concatenation of image and flesh, human and animal, ideal and real, whose tensions and contradictions become most evident at the periphery.

“The Mandingue Negro would tell of things that had happened in the great kingdoms of Popo, of Arada, of the Nagos, or the Fulah. [. . .] They were kings, true kings, and not those sovereigns wigged in false hair who played at cup and ball and were gods only when they strutted the stage of their court theaters, effeminately pointing a leg in the measures of a rigadon.” (7, 8)

Different traditions come together and
clash, collude and collide.

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clash, collude and collide.

What seems marvellous or impossible from
one perspective is totally real from another,
which imagines the other reality to be mere
artifice and threadbare performance.

“While in western Europe dance-related folklore has lost all its magic, spirit-invoking character, it is rare that a collective dance in the Americas does not contain a profound ritual meaning that creates around it an entire initiatory process. . . .

. . .the *santería* dances in Cuba or the prodigious Black version of the feast of Corpus, which may still be seen in the town of San Francisco de Yare in Venezuela.” (Prologue)

“The Kingdom of This World, despite Carpentier’s best intentions, remains dependent on problematic representations of Haiti as a land of exotic otherness.”

(Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert)

Surely it is the *conjunction* or interplay between the European and the African, the West and its Other, that gives us the real marvellous or marvellous real.

It is the fact that in the Americas, two (or more) perspectives rub up against each other and clash, shattering the notion that they can harmoniously be contained within the same organic totality, that provokes the surprised awe and wonder that Carpentier attempts to recreate in this novel.



HISTORY REPLAYED

For Carpentier, Haiti is both shockingly different and strangely familiar.

“In response to the revolution, a cordon sanitaire was drawn around the island to interrupt the flow of information and people. The colonial authorities in Cuba prohibited the introduction of ‘French’ slaves and even the mere mentioning of the events in Haiti.” (Sibylle Fischer)

“The only newly independent state in the Americas to have unequivocally abolished racial slavery (and until the 1830s, the only postslavery state in the New World), Haiti was also the only one that was not invited to the Pan- American Conference in 1826.” (Sibylle Fischer)

By placing Haiti front and centre of his reimagined vision for the entire Americas, Carpentier is recovering the country as the source of alternatives that its neighbours—and great powers further afield—had long anxiously tried to suppress. He puts Haiti in view again, at centre stage.

“As though talking from loge to loge in a huge theater, the women, fans in their mittened hands, chattered loudly, their voices delightfully excited.” (43)

“The Negroes awaited the performance that had been prepared for them, a gala function for Negroes on whose splendor no expense had been spared. For this time the lesson was to be driven home with fire, not blood, and certain illuminations, lighted to be remembered, were very costly.” (44)

“This was what their masters did not know; for that reason they had squandered so much money putting on this useless show, which would prove how completely helpless they were against a man chrismed by the great Loas.” (45)

“The bonds fell off and the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead, until it plunged into the black waves of the sea of slaves. A single cry filled the square:

“The bonds fell off and the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead, until it plunged into the black waves of the sea of slaves. A single cry filled the square:

‘Macandal saved!’” (45-46).

“Very few saw that Macandal, held by ten soldiers, had been thrust head first into the fire, and that a flame fed by his burning hair had drowned his last cry.” (46)

“Carpentier remains moored to a European version of ‘reality,’ while his wonderment with the Haitian ‘marvelous’ amounts to an exoticizing Othering.” (Ali Tal-mason)

“Yet the authority of the narrator has been irreversibly compromised. The clashing communities of Carpentier’s narrative, held together earlier in the chapter with the finesse of a sympathetic and knowledgeable narrator, are now held together with the brute artifice of ‘ten soldiers’” (J. Bradford Anderson).

We may prefer instead to accept
the marvellous, the fictive salvation
(no less fictive than its opposite)
of the spirit of rebellion.

It is in the nature of play that
there is another chance.


It is in the nature of play that
there is another chance.

“Play it again, Sam!”

The Kingdom of This World, which portrays the arrival of Boyer's surveyors in terms of "this endless return of chains, this rebirth of shackles, this proliferation of suffering" (171-72), can seem to be saying that resistance is futile, that history is an eternal return of the same.

But then something escapes.

Macandal and Ti Noël show the power
of the fleet of foot, of those willing and
able to change shape and try again,
rolling the dice once more in the hope that,
this time, freedom will come!



MUSIC


Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

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