

*Vera Elisabeth Gerling (Düsseldorf)*

**Translational Variants.**

**Alejo Carpentier's Viaje a la semilla in Cold War Germany: between  
Magic Realism and Surrealism**



**Editors:**

**Viktorija Bilić**

**Anja Holderbaum**

**Anne Kimmes**

**Joachim Kornelius**

**John Stewart**

**Christoph Stoll**

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## Translational Variants.

### Alejo Carpentier's *Viaje a la semilla* in Cold War Germany: between Magic Realism and Surrealism<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract:

The reception of a text, and therefore its translation as well, is always inevitably influenced by its discursive context and the corresponding interpretative approach. The European reception of Latin American literature is still heavily influenced by the asymmetries established through their former relationship as colonial master and subject. The idea of something "alien" to one's own culture in this case serves as a means of stabilizing one's self-perception.

Prior to their reunification this reception has been far from homogenous in the two German states. Using *Viaje a la semilla* by Alejo Carpentier as an example, the following analysis will depict the underlying inherent interpretations of the translations published in the FRG and the GDR, and examine their relationship to the different reception strategies in East and West Germany.

Die Rezeption von Texten und mithin von deren Übersetzung ist unausweichlich gebunden an den diskursiven Kontext und die sich darin verortenden Interpretationsansätze. Die europäische Rezeption der Literaturen aus Lateinamerika ist nach wie vor deutlich beeinflusst durch die Asymmetrien, die auf dem ehemaligen kolonialen Machtverhältnis von Herr und Knecht fußen. Etwas als zur eigenen Kultur „fremd“ anzusehen, dient dabei der Stabilisierung der Selbstwahrnehmung.

Vor der Wiedervereinigung verlief diese Rezeption in den beiden deutschen Staaten höchst unterschiedlich. Die Erzählung *Viaje a la semilla* von Alejo Carpentier dient hier als Beispiel, um die verschiedenen, den jeweiligen Übersetzungen in BRD und DDR inhärenten Interpretationen nachzugehen und ihren Bezug zu den unterschiedlichen Rezeptionsstrategien in West- und Ostdeutschland zu untersuchen.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2009 a first version of this article was published in German language in the following book: Susanne Gramatzki et al. (eds.). *Trennstrich oder Brückenschlag? Über-Setzen als literarisches und linguistisches Problem*. Bonn: Romanistischer Verlag. 241-260.

**Keywords:**

Alejo Carpentier; Latin America; literary translation; colonial discourse; translation strategies; reception strategies; Cold War

Alejo Carpentier; Lateinamerika; Literaturübersetzung; Kolonialdiskurs, Übersetzungsstrategien; Rezeptionsstrategien; Kalter Krieg

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**1 Asymmetries in Reception and Translation: Latin American Literature in Germany**

Translation occupies an important role in the context of dependence and emancipation, of peripheral and dominant culture, and the construction of identity. On the one hand this involves the selection mechanisms that define which texts are to be translated and which are not. On the other hand it concerns the translation process itself, where one culture usurps another: according to Spivak, the very idea that a translation can be a representation of the other is based on the colonial attitude maintaining the belief in the Western subject and the colonial object (cf. [Spivak 1994](#)). Correspondingly, Venuti calls it "[the] greatest scandal of translation" that every translation is always affected by asymmetries and cases of dominance and dependence in transmitting the translated text to the target culture:

Translation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures. The selection of foreign texts and the development of translation strategies can establish peculiarly domestic canons for foreign literature, canons that conform to domestic aesthetic values and therefore reveal exclusions and admissions, centers and peripheries that deviate from those current in the foreign language.

([Venuti 1998](#): 67)

In the field of Translation Studies it has been acknowledged for a long time that there is no translation free of interpretation. Accordingly, Frank states that translating literature "[...] does not mean translating language, neither translating text, but *interpreting* – though this may not have been planned beforehand or is even not fully coherent – a work of literature"<sup>2</sup> (Frank 1989: 5). Just as an interpretation can be subjected to change, a translation can be as well, but new versions are not inevitably necessitated only by the languages' different paces of development.<sup>3</sup> It is rather the change in the patterns of understanding and the discursive context in which the translations and the interpretations based on them are situated.

The change of the cultural context alone brings about a shift in meaning, evoking the fact that "the translator – even if all he wanted to do was produce equivalence – will inevitably produce differences" (Frank 1989: 5).<sup>4</sup> The text therefore already undergoes an alteration by simply being transposed into a different context. Taking furthermore into consideration that texts are in general inevitably subject to continual change due to the fact that the relationship between signifier and signified is not a fixed one and that therefore we can never apply only one meaning to a text<sup>5</sup>, it has to be accepted finally that even the so-called original cannot be viewed as an entity providing a binding interpretation.

If translation is viewed as a form of interpretive rewriting, the comparison of two translations of the same text, one produced on either side of the Iron Curtain, inevitably has to include an analysis of their respective settings in terms of the discursive context. To facilitate this analysis a short description of the reception of Latin American literature in the former GDR and in the FRG is necessary.

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<sup>2</sup> German references are directly translated.

<sup>3</sup> Nies explicitly names the phenomenon of language change as a reason for the necessity of new translations in regard to French-German literary transfer (Nies 1991: 133). However, attributing the call for new translations solely to language change carries the risk of neglecting the discursive changes and processes of cultural recontextualization.

<sup>4</sup> On a related note, Frank states: "The condition that governs the *translator's* activity is that the perfect translation cannot, in the nature of things, be identical with the original but must necessarily deviate from it in some respect(s)." (Frank 1986: 337f.)

<sup>5</sup> "The transfer of meaning can never be total between systems of meaning, or within them." (Bhabha 1994: 163).

Long after Latin America gained political independence from Europe, both continue to be bound together in a complex, asymmetric relationship (cf. [Ette 1994](#)). From a European point of view Latin America is still considered to be solely peripheral, and the discourse with regard to that continent continues to be heavily influenced by the concept that Europe represents civilization and culture whereas Latin America stands for backwardness and savagery. These kinds of projections reaffirm the European self-image to the effect that the assumed strangeness of the other validates the construction of the self through a contrasted distinction: the postulation of a Latin American mythical identity, for example, constitutes a counter-image for a Europe that perceives itself as having been enlightened.<sup>6</sup>

Before the Frankfurt Book Fair of 1976, with its focus on Latin American literature, Latin American authors did not gain any widespread attention in the FRG. Although now blessed with considerably more recognition, the reception of their works remains strongly influenced by the discourses in regard to Magic Realism which had gained massive attention mostly through the so-called Boom phenomenon (cf. [Wiese 1992](#)). One topic of reception research is the assumption that Magic Realistic novels have been such a success with the European audience because they filled a literary void: people were said to have been weary both of the German novel's crisis and of the experimental French Nouveau Roman, therefore yearning for great novels, for a return to a socio-political reality. Last but not least, the 'magic' part cast a spell on the reading public. This new Latin American type of novel catered to the wishes, needs and images of the European audience, and 'Magic Realism' became a dominant literary pattern, a collection of post-colonial imagery, thereby exoticizing, even stigmatizing all of Latin American literature as a means of expressing its strange magic reality, seeing as this image is based on the ontological assumption of a different, supposedly 'authentic' Latin American reality. According to Cortés, the dominance of this literary pattern leads to a standardization of the reading variants:

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<sup>6</sup> Hölz shows through a variety of contrasting images how established dichotomous images of otherness in respect to the relationship between Latin America and Europe are expressed: "hero – victim, active – passive, strong – weak, good – evil, perfect – imperfect, mind – body, intellect – feelings, order – chaos, civilisation – barbarism, white race – dark race, Europe – Latin America" ([Hölz 2000: 327](#)). A detailed description of European discourses (and German ones in particular) concerning Latin America can be found in [Gerling 2004](#).

The *boom* phenomenon created a concept of 'the' Latin American literature in a singular meaning that became accepted throughout the world, but erased 'the' Latin American types of literature as a plural, and established a fixed canonical tradition of how to read and interpret that which is Latin American. (Cortés 1999: 61, translation J. M.)

While the success of boom literature in Western Europe is at least partially due to economic concerns, because boom sells, the reception of Latin American literature in the GDR was rather influenced by the state's involvement in decisions concerning the literary scene.<sup>7</sup> According to the GDR government, literature had a societal mission that, in order to be published, had to be fulfilled by meeting a certain ideal of socialist realism. Closely linked to the task of meeting this condition is a particularly strong emphasis on the content of a work of literature: it has to deal with the fight against fascism, capitalism and the inhuman exploitation inherent to imperialism, as well as advocate revolution, socialism and communism (cf. Kirsten 2004: 86). The artistic form was merely viewed as a means to amplify the content and serve an educational purpose (cf. Sperschneider 1999: 42ff.).

Based on the fact that Cuba was the first Latin American country to establish a socialist system after the revolution of 1959 and thus became the closest political ally of the GDR in Latin America (Kirsten 2004: 72), Cuban literature was predestined as material for GDR reception strategies. Alejo Carpentier's works in particular were seen as being connected to his political involvement and interpreted as a presentation of Latin America's historic mission (cf. Sperschneider 1999: 168). The aesthetic components of Carpentier's concept of the "marvelous real", actually representing a counter-idea to socialist realism, were either ignored altogether or interpreted as abiding by the rules of argumentation favored by the government and therefore seen as evidence for the connection between the mythical world and reality perceived as being typical for Latin America.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Broyles shows in her analysis that literature had a "cultural value" in both German states, but while it served as more of an "economic commodity" in the literary scene of the FRG, its "political value" was its most important facet in the GDR (Broyles 1981: 243ff.).

<sup>8</sup> As seen for example in an epilogue by Hans-Otto Dill (Dill 1977).

## 2 The Narrative *Viaje a la semilla* (1944)

Alejo Carpentier's narrative *Viaje a la semilla* was published in its original language in 1944 and is considered a landmark in the author's literary development. The importance that the reflection on the concept of time (which is a fundamental aspect in Carpentier's work) has for this narrative is emphasized by the fact that the author included it in his collection of narratives *Guerra del tiempo* (*The War of time*; first edition published in 1958).<sup>9</sup> The narrative itself discusses the concept of time by reversing the chronology.

Concerning its macrostructure, it can be divided into a frame story and an inner story. The frame story, covering Chapters I and XIII, deals with the demolition of a house and a black man watching this process. The inner story covers Chapters II to XII and deals with the story of the house and its inhabitants in reversed chronology – following the black man strangely waving a stick at the house after the construction workers are gone. First, the semi-demolished house builds itself up again, then the story ventures deeper into the character of the Marquis Marcial. He rises from his deathbed and goes on to watch his life go backwards, which includes, among other things, the construction of his house, his wife's death, his honeymoon, his wedding ceremony, his childhood and even his birth. After that the reader is informed about how every piece of material that the house is made of returns to where it came from, the wood goes back to the forest, the marble goes back to Italy and so on. In the final chapter, where the frame story is resumed, the construction workers return the next day and instead of a semi-demolished house only find the bare earth where it once stood. They are confused and complain to their labor union of their work having already been done.

The way time passes in the inner story differs from the way we are used to for three different reasons. First, a period longer than Marcial's lifetime passes within one night; second, time runs backwards; and third, it passes at varying speeds – which is especially notable in the relationship between narrative time and narrated time. The inner story thereby strongly contrasts with the frame story, where time runs 'regularly', meaning

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<sup>9</sup> I am using the edition of Carpentier (1963) which is the source text for the translation by Erb (Carpentier 1971).

'chrono-logically'. Considering the events of the inner story to be "expanding the scales and categories of reality"<sup>10</sup> (Carpentier 1967: 94), this narrative can be easily understood as an expression of the *real maravilloso*, the *marvelous real*<sup>11</sup> (a term designed and defined by the author himself four years after the book was first published), and as being an authentic expression of a different, marvelous reality that attributes the ability to reverse time to the black man's *Voodoo* powers.

The narrative's time is not limited to a simple turning-back of time, as in a movie that progresses backwards.<sup>12</sup> Durán states:

In a movie that goes backwards the most ordinary things turn into a ridiculous enigma: eaters produce the food from their mouths and put it on their plates, for example. There's none of that in Carpentier's little novel however; everyone acts completely natural, and the only thing being destroyed is the predictability of what will happen next.<sup>13</sup> (Durán 1977: 307)

The plot is to be understood as a progressing plot. This is especially visible in the use of verbs that imply a progressive movement and thereby confusingly contrast the causality we are used to – when candles grow instead of shrinking, for example. Events that 'ordinarily' refer to the future cause results in their reversed order: a scene where a doctor desolately shakes his head is followed by the recovery of the patient. The heavily ironic potential of this kind of storytelling becomes remarkably clear when Marcial, having reached infancy, muses why he never before had had the idea of simply sitting down on the floor instead of a chair. Expectations concerning 'logical' results are played with, often when unexpected reactions

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<sup>10</sup> ["una ampliación de las *escalas* y categorías de la realidad" (translated into English by Jenny Merling, henceforth "J. M.".)]

<sup>11</sup> The definition of the *real maravilloso/marvelous real* had been first published by Carpentier in *El Nacional* in 1948, and appeared as a preface for *El reino de este mundo* the next year (cf. Verdevoye 1982: 151). It refers to the authentic magic of the Caribbean world and was therefore criticized as a eurocentric view on an exoticized Latin America (cf. Verdevoye 1982: 164).

<sup>12</sup> Various secondary authors thus use this image, for example Delprat (Delprat 1982: 119).

<sup>13</sup> [Los actos más ordinarios se convierten, en el cine proyectado al revés, en ridículos enigmas: los comensales se quitan la comida de la boca, por ejemplo, para depositarla en el plato. Nada de eso sucede en la novelita de Carpentier: todo el mundo obra con naturalidad, y lo único que queda destruido es la previsibilidad de lo que va a ocurrir poco después. (translation J. M.)]



to certain events are depicted – reading a suggestive book, for example, can be expected to trigger certain desires, but not the wish to play with lead soldiers, as is the case with Marcial.

In addition to that, the retrogression of time is presented as something positive, as the protagonist's liberty increases and he feels better and better: he recovers from his illness, becomes debt-free, regains his freedom upon his wedding in church, and the more knowledge and intellect he loses through the process of turning into a child, the more liberated he feels. By ironizing the traditional ideal of man as a rational, self-determined being striving for knowledge, whose life is to be characterized by a progressive development, a discussion of Western European teleologies takes place in a way that is both playful and critical.

However, the reversed logic of time that is offered to us as an alternative should not be seen as an expression of cyclical time, and thus referring to an African identity – as is often stated<sup>14</sup>. Because at the end of the narrative there is no new beginning, we rather find the origins of Marcial's life story disseminatingly spread throughout the world, and bare earth being all that remains.

According to Derrida, what we see exemplified here is rather a loss of the origin and the negation of an assumed original state and the "trace originaire" (Derrida 1967: 90), of which all that is left behind are traces of memories. Though the house and all evidence of its former inhabitants are gone, the construction workers remember the Marquesa: "Someone remembered the very vague story of a Marquesa de Capellanías who drowned one afternoon in May among the mangroves of the Almendares."<sup>15</sup> (Carpentier 1967: 64)

A notable facet of both the frame story and the inner one is the use of personified verb meanings, giving objects the appearance of being animate: the house puts on clothing,

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<sup>14</sup> As Luis does, for example: "*Viaje a la semilla* contains two texts and therefore offers two ways of reading it: one that fits the European world and one that fits the African one" ["contiene dos textos y, por lo tanto, ofrece dos lecturas: una se ajusta al mundo europeo y la otra al africano [...]"] (translation J. M.) (Luis 1991: 154) On the other hand, he demonstrates that in contrast to the "religious cycle" ["ciclo religioso"] of *El reino de este mundo* there is "un tiempo regresivo" present in this context (cf. Luis 1991: 153).

<sup>15</sup> ["Uno recordó entonces la historia, muy difumida, de una Marquesa de Capellanías, ahogada, en tarde de mayo, entre las malangas del Almendares." (translation J. M.)]

rooms sleep and parts of the building structure have needs. In the second chapter, when the house builds itself up again, various parts of it move purposefully, and statues act like people. Animals act like human beings as well, such as the yawning fish. Plants demonstrate unusual powers and a volition of their own. Even processes, ways of behaving, and abstract concepts are being personified this way, when, for example, a question falls down from a scaffolding. Again we are witness to a disorienting deconstruction of the traditional superiority of the rational human being (who is capable of acting purposefully) over inanimate objects and animals, as we witness the dissociation of the reality we consider to be 'normal'.

A further fundamental aspect of the narrative is the critique of language, illustrated in the depiction of how categories that are created by a language determine how people think in terms of progressing developments, how epistemological assumptions are reinforced and promoted by the language system. Opinions on time and the world that are traditionally accepted as 'true' are undermined.<sup>16</sup> Following the dichotomy between "acá" ("here") and "allá" ("there"), referring to the so-called "Old" and "New World," respectively, in *Los pasos perdidos* – a novel that, according to Carpentier, originates in this narrative (cf. Armbruster 1982: 151) – this concept of time and the criticism directed at language may be understood as an opposition to the occidental worldview.

Then we have the narrator's viewpoint as a noteworthy aspect. The main character is partly internally focalized, which – the more Marcial loses his mind – leads to an increasing discrepancy between what the narrator of the story tells the reader and what the reader actually 'sees':<sup>17</sup> we continue to have an extradiegetic narrator, seeing as even Marcial's experience of his very own birth is related in literarily 'correct' speech. Yet the protagonist's decreasing understanding of his surroundings has a strong influence on the content of what the narrator gives an account of, when, for example, Marcial does not comprehend why his

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<sup>16</sup> This may be compared to the kind of abolishment of order we know from texts by Jorge Luis Borges. Foucault, for example, points out the heterogenic classification of animals in a fictitious Chinese encyclopedia, which Borges presents in "The Analytical Language of *John Wilkins*" ("El idioma analítico de John Wilkins"). Such a "literary heterotopia" supposedly provokes laughter capable of eliminating boundaries and unsettling established ways of thinking (Foucault 1966: 7).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the distinction between "who speaks" and "who sees" in Genette 1980.

father carries the mulatta to his room in his arms – he thinks it is because she used to steal and snack on stewed fruit from the pantry. He still believes this when the mulatta leaves his father's room crying and with disheveled clothes. This demonstrates how heavily the perception of the world depends on the intellectual horizon of a person.

By toying with the readers' expectations the text calls attention to the influence of discursive presumptions on the interpretation of a text, or of the world in general. The arbitrariness of every interpretation of a narrative's topic is pointed out. At the same time basic presumptions on what seems to be natural and normal are questioned too, in particular the principle of the general superiority of the human mind. The discursive role of the belief in progress is reduced to absurdity. Against this background, an approach like the one taken by Noyau seems to be too narrowly considered, when he explains the use of progressive verbs with an assumed insufficiency of the language and its incomplete lexicon that is not capable of providing terms for retrogressive processes.<sup>18</sup> The truth is rather that this discrepancy between 'logical' and 'ordinary' events and their consequences on the one hand and the established concept of reality on the other hand raises an awareness for the kind of reality perception that is based on presumptions and is linked to the rules that are created by the language we speak. The contradistinctive world of the construction workers, which is accepted as 'normal' and follows a 'normal' chronology, demonstrates in particular how the idea of an alternate, retrogressive world dismantles the claim of absoluteness of the other one. When examining this text bearing in mind Alazraki's concept of the Neofantastic<sup>19</sup> it

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<sup>18</sup> Noyau assumes that stylistic considerations had kept Carpentier from using neologisms to compensate for the lack in his language's lexicon, in order to not disturb the nostalgic atmosphere of the past. He also stated that he avoided words that expressed a reversed process by means of negation (for example *desagravar* [alleviate] or *reaparecer* [reappear]), so as not to formalize the style (cf. [Noyau 1992](#): 166).

<sup>19</sup> While according to Alazraki the traditional patterns of fantastic literature such as fairy tales arose during a time when science still had the status of a "maravilla más" ([Alazraki 1990](#): 25) and when the world was still explained by mystic beliefs, an uncanny and gloomy atmosphere still continues to be typical for fantastic literature, even after Edgar Allan Poe's creation of the modern narrative. In this context this atmosphere serves as a "challenge of scientific rationalism and of the values embraced by the civil society" ["desafío del racionalismo científico y de los valores de la sociedad burguesa" (translation J. M.)] ([Alazraki 1990](#): 31).

The step towards neo-speculative fiction on the other hand is said to have been caused by a general change in the worldview as the 20<sup>th</sup> century was influenced by WW I, Freud's theories and trends like surrealism that abolished traditional views and allowed for a "second reality" ["segunda realidad"] that was to have the same

could be seen as a critique of a language approach that discusses the artificial construction of reality itself, an approach that reveals that the coherent world governed by reason and morality is nothing but a human invention (cf. Rodríguez Monegal 1970: 70).<sup>20</sup>

The analysis shows that this text may be interpreted in various ways, while the focus will remain on two key elements: both the perception of reality and the conception of history being subject to critical scrutiny. The events that are depicted in the story are based on the understanding of reality according to the concept of the "marvelous real" as established by Carpentier himself, wherein reality in the Caribbean is different from the traditional reality of European societies. Affairs that would have no place in a rational worldview are accepted as real, such as the *Voodoo* culture, for example. On the other hand the text can also be interpreted as being meant to challenge the established ways of our understanding of history, with time going backwards as a way of counteracting the principle of a progress-oriented conception of history. At the same time one could see in the text an attempt to turn back the clock on the conquest of America, to start over again, and with that have the possibility of a history without a violent conquest, without the adoption of European and imperialist power structures that the Marquis de Marcial stands for.

The two translations that are presented here offer different versions of the source text, each with its own focus. On the one hand we have the translation by Roland Erb, first published in 1971 as part of the anthology *Moderne lateinamerikanische Prosa (Modern Latin American Prose)*, edited by Andreas Klotsch and Gisela Leber of the Berlin publishing house *Verlag Volk und Welt*, in the former GDR. The second translation was produced by Anneliese Botond and first published in 1977 by Suhrkamp Verlag as part of the volume *Krieg der Zeit (The War of*

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right to exist as did the world commonly accepted as "real". Referring to the field of literature, this meant that the fantastic part "could occur right in the middle of normal everyday life" ["puede suceder en plena realidad cotidiana" (translation J. M.)] (Alazraki 1990: 27).

<sup>20</sup> In 1982, Armbruster criticized the usurpation of this text by fantastic literature. According to him, this narrative rather reflects one of Carpentier's main subjects which became notable only later, namely the "co-existence of different time periods in Latin America" (Armbruster 1982: 120). Here Armbruster represents the notion of viewing Carpentier's work as an expression of the search for a Latin American identity and as an authentic reflection of a reality of a different nature.

*Time*).<sup>21</sup> Now that the source text's specific features have been outlined, a detailed analysis will depict how the translators have taken these features into consideration in their respective translation strategies. Both translations will be directly compared to each other, as this juxtaposition will help make possible alternatives comprehensible.

### 3 Roland Erb: *Reise zum Ursprung (Journey to the Origin, 1971)*

In his translation, Roland Erb seems to attach only little importance to the use of progressive verbs for the description of a story going backwards in comparison to 'normal' chronology. In the following example, for instance, he eliminates the present gerund in a succession of actions, to the effect that the causal connection between the extinction of the flame and the act of 'putting out' the candle is not clear anymore. In Botond's version on the other hand this connection is emphasized explicitly.<sup>22</sup>

Los cirios crecieron lentamente, perdiendo sudores. Cuando recobraron su tamaño, los apagó la monja apartando una lumbré. (Carpentier 1963: 48)

Die Kerzen wuchsen langsam und nahmen ihre Schweißperlen wieder auf. Als sie ihre volle Größe wiedererlangt hatten, löschte sie die Nonne aus und trug einen Leuchter fort. (Erb 1971: 151)

*The candles slowly grew and absorbed their beads of perspiration. When they had reached their original size, the nun put them out and carried away a candle holder.*<sup>23</sup>

Die Kerzen wuchsen langsam in die Höhe, verloren ihren ausgeschwitzten Behang. Als sie ihre volle Größe erreicht hatten, löschte eine Nonne sie aus, indem sie einen brennenden Span entfernte. (Botond 1977: 46)

*The candles slowly grew and grew, lost their sweaty coat. When they had reached their full size, a nun put them out by taking away a burning wood chip.*

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<sup>21</sup> Cited page numbers refer to the mentioned editions.

<sup>22</sup> The comparison of these two translations is not intended to be a corrective but a demonstration of the variety of potentially possible versions.

<sup>23</sup> All excerpts from the German translations were translated into English by Jenny Merling (henceforth "J. M.").

Paradoxical times and dates also serve as a means of confusing regular chronology in Carpentier's text, a fact again left out or up to interpretation by Erb in the next example:

Era el amanecer. El reloj del comedor acaba de dar las seis de la tarde. (Carpentier 1963: 49)

Es tagte. Die Uhr des Speisezimmers hatte gerade sechs geschlagen. (Erb 1971: 151)

*It dawned. The clock in the living room had just struck six.*

Es wurde Morgen. Die Uhr im Speisezimmer hat [sic] eben sechs Uhr abends geschlagen. (Botond 1977: 47)

*Morning came. The clock in the living room has just finished striking six o'clock in the evening.*

From time to time we come across unexplainable elements in this German version, which however do not cause any surprise or confusion for the characters – for instance, the fireworks that are really pomegranate trees in Carpentier's text.<sup>24</sup>

Y como se estaba en carnavales, los del Cabildo Arará Tres Ojos levantaban un trueno de tambores tras de la pared medianera, en un patio sembrado de granados. (Carpentier 1963: 53)

Und da Karneval war, machten die Leute von der Gesellschaft Arará Tres Ojos mit Trommeln einen Höllenlärm hinter der Trennwand, auf einem Patio, der mit Feuerwerkskörpern übersät war. (Erb 1971: 154)

*And because it was carnival time, the people of the Arará Tres Ojos company produced quite some noise with their drums behind the partition wall, in a patio garden that was strewn with fireworks.*

Und da Karneval war, vollführten die von der Gruppe Arará Tres Ojos hinter der Trennwand in einem mit Granatbäumen bestandenen Garten einen Heidenspektakel. (Botond 1977: 50f.)

*And because it was carnival time, the people of the group named Arará Tres Ojos produced quite some noise behind the partition wall in a garden full of pomegranate trees.*

These elements could be explained by the carnival going on. However, what Roland Erb's version does not answer is why the dog Canelo's fur is always stained with red paint – this

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, this could also simply be seen as the result of a translation error. But by "[...] analyzing mistakes one will neither do justice to the source text nor to the translator's performance, and much less to the image that the translation of a work of literature presents itself with to the reader of the target language" (Frank 1989: 4).

could be interpreted as a characterization of Marcial who as a child may have painted the dog for his amusement:

Marcial prefería a Canelo porque sacaba zapatos de las habitaciones y desenterraba los rosales del patio. Siempre negro de carbón<sup>25</sup> o cubierto de tierra roja, devoraba la comida de los demás [...]. (Carpentier 1963: 61)

Marcial zog Canelo vor, weil er Schuhe aus den Zimmern holte und die Rosenstöcke im Patio ausgrub. Ständig schwarz von Kohle oder mit roter Farbe beschmiert, schlang er das Fressen der anderen herunter [...]. (Erb 1971: 159)

*Marcial preferred Canelo, because he retrieved shoes from a room and dug up the rose bushes in the patio garden. Always black with coal or smeared with red paint, he wolfed down the food that belonged to the others [...].*

Marcial mochte am liebsten Canelo, weil er Schuhe aus den Zimmern holte und die Rosen im Patio ausgrub. Immer war er schwarz von Kohle oder mit roter Erde überstaubt, fraß den anderen das Futter weg [...]. (Botond 1977: 56)

*Marcial liked Canelo best, because he retrieved shoes from a room and dug up the roses in the patio garden. He was always black with coal or the dust of red earth, eating the others' food [...].*

Overall, Roland Erb's translation is defined by the recurring theme of origin, as the following passages demonstrate:

imágenes que recobraban su color primero (Carpentier 1963: 55)

Bilder, die ihre ursprüngliche Farbe wiedererlangten (Erb 1971: 156)

*pictures that regained their original color*

Bilder, die ihre erste Farbe gewannen (Botond 1977: 52)

*pictures that received their first color*

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<sup>25</sup> The description "negro de carbón" is also a reference to the same term being used pejoratively in Cuba for the skin color of black people. Credit for this suggestion given during a discussion of a paper presented by the author goes to Matthias Perl.

buscando sus antiguas raíces al pie de las selvas (Carpentier 1963: 63)

suchten ihre alten Ursprünge am Grund der Wälder (Erb 1971: 161)

*were searching for their origins on the forest floor*

auf der Suche nach ihren alten Wurzeln am Fuß der Wälder (Botond 1977: 57)

*in search for their old roots at the foot of the woods*

regresando a la condición primera (Carpentier 1963: 63)

kehrte in den Urzustand zurück (Erb 1971: 161)

*returned to its original state*

kehrte in seinen ersten Zustand zurück (Botond 1977: 57f.)

*returned to its first state*

This recurring theme confirms two topics being considered typical for Magic Realism: on the one hand it is an allusion to the idea of cyclical time, which is often interpreted in Carpentier's works as a reference to the aspects of African culture in the Caribbean, a point that has already been discussed in regard to the present narrative.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand the issue of identity with regard to a pluralistic origin of Latin America is raised.

The narrator's viewpoint plays a very important role in Carpentier's text, as has already been mentioned above (comp. p. 9) with regard to the distinction between "who sees" and "who speaks". For instance, Roland Erb translates the following passage into free indirect speech. This evokes the idea of young Marcial reflecting on his situation, which is hardly what a child would do. In the Spanish text a gerund is being used instead.

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<sup>26</sup> Mocega-Gonzalez interprets time as being portrayed as cyclical in this narrative, too. In particular, the synchronization of Marcial's mother's death and his own birth demonstrates in her opinion a "concept of human life as being a process that repeats itself infinitely, a concatenation of the life cycle that ends in the beginning of the one coming afterwards" ["concepto de la vida humana como un proceso que se repite sin fin, en un encadenamiento de un ciclo vital que agoniza en el principio de otro que le sucede" (translation J. M.)] (Mocega-Gonzalez 1975: 51). In addition, referring to this understanding of life, where at the beginning and at the end is nothing, she creates a connection to Quevedo (cf. Mocega-Gonzalez 1975: 49).



Comenzaron a jugar al ajedrez. Melchor era caballo. El, era Rey. Tomando las losas del piso por tablero, podía avanzar de una en una [...]. (Carpentier 1963: 58)

Sie begannen Schach zu spielen. Melchor [*sic*] war der Springer. Er war der König. Wenn er die Fußbodenplatten als Spielbrett ansah, konnte er Platte für Platte vorrücken. (Erb 1971: 157)

*They began to play chess. Melchior was the knight. He was the king. If he imagined the floor tiles to be a playing board, he could advance tile by tile.*

Sie fingen an, Schach zu spielen. Melchior war das Pferd. Er war der König. Sie benützten die Bodenfliesen als Schachbrett, und so konnte er von einem Feld zum anderen vorrücken [...]. (Botond 1977: 54)

*They began to play chess. Melchior was the knight. He was the king. They used the floor tiles as a chess board, and so he could advance from one square to the next [...].*

Botond has an extradiegetic narrator relate this event; there is no identification with the character of Marcial through the stylistic means of free indirect speech.

#### 4 Anneliese Botond: *Links der Uhr (On the Left Side of the Clock, 1977)*

In Anneliese Botond's 1977 translation titled *Links der Uhr (On the Left Side of the Clock)*<sup>27</sup> there are irregularities in the temporal structure concerning deictic references as well. While in Carpentier's text, for example, there is no definition on where the first-person narrator is situated temporally, in Botond's text there are several clues with regard to a connection between the point in time when the story is being narrated and the point in time when the events actually took place.

Sólo quedaron escaleras de mano, preparando el salto del día siguiente. (Carpentier 1963: 45)

Nur Handleitern blieben zur Vorbereitung des morgigen Angriffs zurück. (Botond 1977: 44)

*Short ladders were all that was left for tomorrow's attack.*

Nur Handleitern blieben zurück für den Ansturm des nächsten Tages. (Erb 1971: 149)

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<sup>27</sup> The new edition in 1979 changes the title into *Reise zum Ursprung*, according to Roland Erb's translation. This second version displays 16 minor changes that have been obviously considered to be of stylistic benefit to the text and are not at all oriented toward Erb's version. Oddly enough, in the 1992 anthology *Lateinamerikanische Erzähler des 20. Jahrhunderts (Latin American writers of the 20th century)*, published at Heyne Verlag, the translation is included in its 1977 version again, under its original title *Links der Uhr*.

*Short ladders were all that was left for the rush of the next day.*

Aquella mañana [...]. (Carpentier 1963: 58)

Heute morgen [...]. (Botond 1977: 53)

*This morning [...].*

An jenem Morgen [...]. (Erb 1971: 157)

*That morning [...].*

By using "tomorrow" or "this morning", respectively, Botond defines the narrator's place on the timeline of events. Her narrator does not remain completely anonymous, as is the case with Carpentier's narrator and his frame story vs. inner story; she offers his temporal coordinates in reference to the point of time in the inner story.

Carpentier consistently narrates the chains of actions backwards; but Botond's translation effectively adjusts these actions to a 'logical' chronology again, as is shown in the following passage:

Al arreglarse la corbata frente a la luna de la consola se vio congestionado [...]. (Carpentier 1963: 48)

Während er sich vor dem Konsolenspiegel die Krawatte aufband, spürte er, wie ihm das Blut zu Kopfe stieg [...]. (Botond 1977: 46)

*While loosening his tie in front of the mirror on the console table, he felt the blood rushing to his head [...].*

Als er vor dem Spiegelglas der Konsole die Krawatte richtete, sah er, dass sein Gesicht gerötet war. (Erb 1971: 150)

*While fixing his tie in front of the mirror on the console table, he saw that his face was flushed [...].*

Loosening the tie in front of the mirror fits the 'chrono-logical' way of narrating, but the situation is different here: the 'regular' order of events would be for Marcial to enter his room – with a flushed face after a heated argument – and then loosen his tie. In Carpentier's reversed tale, indeed, he fixes his tie and then goes to the heated argument with a flushed face.

Carpentier makes use of the gerund several times here, which allows for different interpretations of this passage due to its potential ambivalence in meaning, an aspect that cannot be reproduced in the German translation, though. For instance, in reverse the dog would have to eat the egg before tossing away the hen. In Botond's version, in contrast to Erb's version, there is once again a definitely 'chrono-logical' order of events:

De vez en cuando, también, vaciaba un huevo acabado de poner, arrojando la gallina al aire con brusco palancazo del hocico [...]. (Carpentier 1963: 61)

Von Zeit zu Zeit leerte er auch ein frisch gelegtes Ei, nachdem er die Henne mit einer brüsken Hebelbewegung seiner Schnauze in die Luft geschleudert hatte [...]. (Botond 1977: 56)

*From time to time he would empty a freshly laid egg, after having tossed the hen up into the air with a brusque lever-like movement of his muzzle [...].*

Ab und zu schlürfte er auch ein frisch gelegtes Ei aus und schleuderte die Henne mit einer jähen Aufwärtsbewegung der Schnauze in die Luft. (Erb 1971: 159f.)

*From time to time he would savor a freshly laid egg and toss the hen up into the air with a sudden upwards movement of his muzzle [...].*

The personification of objects and even actions, which disrupts the usual habits of perception and is typical of Carpentier's text, hardly plays a role in Botond's translation. The statement that "Varias veces cayó la pregunta de lo alto de los andamios [...]" (Carpentier 1963: 45) is smoothed over by her through the use of a language that is stylistically much too formal: "Zu mehreren Malen tönte die Frage vom Baugerüst herab." ("Multiple times the question chimed down from the scaffolding." Botond 1977: 53.) The active actions of the bricks in Carpentier's text are reduced to their regular passivity: "Ya habían descendido las tejas, cubriendo los canteros muertos con su mosaico de barro cocido [...]" (Carpentier 1963: 45) is turned into "Die Dachziegel, die bereits abgenommen worden waren, breiteten ihr Mosaik aus gebrannter Erde über die abgestorbenen Gartenbeete [...]" ("The bricks that had already been removed spread their mosaic of burned earth over the flower beds that had died off [...].") (Botond 1977: 44))

The following examples demonstrate how Roland Erb attributes much more significance to this aspect than Anneliese Botond:

la casa [...] se vestía de sombras (Carpentier 1963: 46)

Schatten überzogen es (Botond 1977: 44)

*it was covered in shadows*

Es kleidete sich [...] in Schatten [...]. (Erb 1971: 149)

*it wore shadows*

Alargando el torso, los moros de la escalera acercaban sus antorchas a los balaustres del rellano [...].

(Carpentier 1963: 56)

Mit den höher aufragenden Torsen reichten die Mohren an der Treppe mit ihren Fackeln bis an die Geländer des Treppenabsatzes. (Botond 1977: 52)

*With their taller upper bodies the Moors reached the banisters at the foot of the stairs with their torches.*

Die Mohren an der Treppe streckten ihre Oberkörper und näherten ihre Fackeln den Säulen des Geländers am Treppenabsatz. (Erb 1971: 156)

*The Moors stretched their upper bodies and approached the balusters of the banister at the foot of the stairs with their torches.*

In Anneliese Botond's translation, just like in Erb's, there are unexplainable elements that lend the story a marvelous aspect. For instance, the sun shines down on the fish in Carpentier's text because the walls of the house that used to give them shade is not there anymore: "Visitados por el sol en horas de sombra, los peces grises del estanque bostezaban en agua musgosa y tibia [...]." (Carpentier 1963: 45) In Botond's text this passage contains a rather disorienting lack of logic: "In schattiger Stunde von der Sonne beschienen, gähnten die grauen Fische im Teich [...]." ("Bathed in sunlight in a shady hour, the grey fish in the pond yawned [...].", (Botond 1977: 53). Don Marcial, as if by magic, finds himself "in die Mitte des Zimmers versetzt" ("placed in the middle of the room", Botond 1977: 46), whereas Carpentier lets him come to in the middle of the room: "Don Marcial se encontró, de pronto, tirado en medio del aposento" (Carpentier 1963: 48). In the marvelous world of this translation, there is no surprised reaction when a couple spends their honeymoon in a sugar factory or tin soldiers are equipped with flame throwers (instead of linstocks). Even a bathtub can burst here without causing any astonishment: "Am frühen Morgen barst im

Badezimmer der Marquesa eine mit Wasser gefüllte Badewanne." ("Early in the morning a bathtub full of water burst in the bathroom of the Marquesa." Botond 1977: 47), whereas in Carpentier's text we find only a water jar: "Al crepúsculo, una tinaja llena de agua se rompió en el baño de la marquesa." (Carpentier 1963: 50). So there is a clear tendency here of Anneliese Botond carelessly ignoring certain formal aspects of the text while at the same time putting special emphasis on the magical aspect of it.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

This analysis of the two translations in regard to certain details of the text shows that both translators clearly set different priorities in their work. Both translations do offer – in varying degrees of differentiation – an interpretation of Carpentier's text as an expression of a marvelous reality, corresponding to Todorov's approach.<sup>28</sup> But in both cases, this aspect triggers a different kind of interpretation. What stands out in Roland Erb's version is his accuracy concerning, among other things, the formal aspects of the story – the reversed chronology, personifications, the instances of free indirect speech. A detailed analysis showed that the reversed chronology has not been completely adopted, but taking into consideration the fact that Carpentier himself has not followed through with it at all times either, this "error" seems almost adequate. The personification of objects and living creatures, however, has been adopted completely by Erb, and the free indirect speech that allows for identification with the protagonist Marcial is matched in this translation.

In Anneliese Botond's translation there are obvious inaccuracies with regard to formal aspects, in a way that could make it difficult for the reader to recognize the breach with the established ways of perceiving meant to be brought across through stylistic means as a key element of the text. There are more errors concerning the reversed chronology, especially when it comes to the deictic appearance of the narrator. In this way, an importance is attributed to the narrator that cannot be found in Carpentier's text. The personification of objects and living creatures is less consistent in Botond's text as well. On the other hand, she

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Todorov's distinction between the Marvelous and the Uncanny (Todorov 1999).

puts a greater emphasis on its magical facets, as can be seen in the example of the bursting bathtub.

How can these results be brought into relation with the discursive context as a whole? It would be presumptuous and shortsighted to view each and every decision made by the translators as a sign of an interpretation forced onto them by their state or by economic reasons. This would by no means do justice to the individual performance of the translators. Still there are certain tendencies visible that are related to the discursive context and therefore may be interpreted as clues for translation strategies that have been at work consciously or sub-consciously.

Some key decisions concerning Roland Erb's choice of words may very well be traced back to his worldview being heavily influenced by the then present discourse and to a corresponding, if subconscious, interpretation on his part – finding fireworks after a party in some large landowner's garden instead of the pomegranate trees Carpentier placed there does insinuate a rather opulent and decadent lifestyle. The negative image of the imperial colonizer is thus reinforced. Then there is the emphasis on the term "origin", steering the aspect of criticizing the historical content in a certain direction, too. In Erb's version the topic of origin myths becomes the key aspect of his work, due to the fact that the lexical field of "origin" defines the translation, in particular by its influence on the title, and the fact that this topic thereby becomes the narrative's main motif. This corresponds to the popular interpretations as we can see, for example, in the one by Delprat: "C'est un cycle complet de retour aux origines." (Delprat 1982: 120)<sup>29</sup> However, one should bear in mind by all means that Carpentier may speak of return (even the marble returns to Italy), but that there are neither as many references to origin myths nor to a cyclical concept of time. Rather, we find a discussion of the chronology of time that is commonly accepted as 'normal'; at the center of the narrative, we are presented with an alternative that consists of heading back toward

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<sup>29</sup> A comparison with the first German translations of "Los pasos perdidos" reveals how titles of other works by Carpentier have been equipped with deictic aspects that the original lacks. The 1958 translation by Janheinz Jahn and Hans Platschek was published as "Flucht nach Manoa" (Escape to Manoa). In 1979, a new translation by Anneliese Botond was published under the title "Die verlorenen Spuren" (Lost traces).

the past, that is to say a reversed teleology, and also with a critical discussion of the epistemes of the 'Old World'. In Carpentier's text a further break with customary perceptions arises as the title metaphorically refers to the origin ("semilla"), but the text itself ironizes this term with its disseminating procedure, thereby offering an alternative to the Hegelian conception of history that is committed to progress. Erb's version is intellectually less drastic, it offers instead a reading variant that is rather conformant to the then current discourse – the suggestions that there indeed exists a pure and true origin that should be striven for, which can be achieved by reversing history. If all produced goods returned back to their original state, the capitalistic production process would be completely overturned. The critical reflection of the capitalistic faith in progress that is indeed inherent in Carpentier's story is emphasized here especially by erasing the conquest of Latin America from history.

At the same time the translated text manages to offer an interpretation that goes far beyond one limited to praising socialist realism and criticizing capitalism and imperialism – by enabling an identification with the Marquis Marcial, who represents imperialism and exploitation. The translator obviously does not view the formal aspects as embellishing accessories merely supporting the educational value of the literary text; on the contrary, he takes them seriously as fundamental literary characteristics. Therefore the story is not reduced to its content, but rather the text and its specific aesthetic is brought across as a whole. Thus a piece of literature is being made presentable to general discourse although it offers reading variants that by no means comply with the censorship principles of the former GDR at the time. Because even though there is a heavy emphasis put on the aspect of origin, this does not rule out the possible reading variant of interpreting the text as a criticism of any ideology, including the socialist one, based on the idea of constant progress. This corresponds to the reception strategy applied to Carpentier's work in the GDR. While he was easily perceived as being in conformity with the system because of his background and his political involvement, the various different ways that his texts could be interpreted also enabled it to transmit ideas not in conformity with the system. The reaction to the *Voodoo* culture playing a role in the text is an example that shows the possible ways to adapt it

ideologically to the system – though the belief in *Voodoo* might not fit into the atheist worldview of socialism, within the context of the reception of Latin American literature from the Caribbean it can be subsumed as part of its "different reality" and thus be understood as an expression of a specific Latin American counter movement against European imperialism: they "really believe in miracles" (Dill 1975: 95, translation J. M.). This way, even the marvelous can be accepted as part of socialist realism.<sup>30</sup>

Botond's version is closer to the Western interpretation that understands Carpentier's texts as a Magic Realistic variety of surrealism, highlighted by her choice of words in the code-like title *Links der Uhr (On the Left Side of the Clock)*. The meaning of the title becomes clear in the last sentence of the narrative, where Botond's version reads: "because [...] the hours that grow on the right side of the clock have to be prolonged through idleness." (Botond 1977: 58, translation J. M.). The ironization of the 'chrono-logy' does happen here to some extent, but due to the fact that this 'other' concept of time is not adopted systematically and that the events taking place are banished to a Magic Realistic fairytale world, the text would hardly be considered a discussion of the Western concept of time. In particular, Carpentier's critical approach to the idea of one's perception of the world being influenced by one's language system is not noticeable anymore in Botond's version as a result of her multiple eliminations of personifications. In this way, her translation fosters the approach of interpreting the text as an expression of an exotic identity concept: the number of strange events to be found within in the story which do not confuse anyone is in accordance with the established interpretation of Carpentier's work as based on the marvelous real – and therefore as a reaffirmation of the European self-image as a counter-image to the Latin American mythical identity. The black man takes on the role of the sorcerer, leading into this other world, matching the interpretation that was typical for the 1970s and was championed, among others, by Durán: "[...] he's a sorcerer, and his actions introduce us to the world of magic."<sup>31</sup> (Durán 1977: 295) In Anneliese Botond's version there is a much stronger

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Stéphen Alexis was thus quoted in the epilogue of version published in the GDR (quotation in Kirsten 2004: 88).

<sup>31</sup> ["es un brujo, y cuya actividad nos introducirá en el mundo de la magia" (translation J. M.)]



orientation toward surrealistic stylistic elements and the literary stereotype of Magic Realism. As European surrealism is viewed as forming part of the basis for the creation of Latin America's Magic Realism, this can be seen as a case of usurpation of Carpentier for the European cultural context.

Therefore, both translations represent variations of the same topic but have different foci, and they allow for variants that are clearly oriented toward Magic Realistic premises: they pass on established ideas of alterity concerning Latin American literature and serve as a projection surface for the European audience. Thus, the translation process appears to be neither a transparent process nor a random, arbitrary choice of meanings in a discourse-free world, but rather a place where varying discourses of the source culture and the target culture intersect and engage in a relationship with each other. Thus, the act of translation is to be understood as a transdiscursive process opening up new spaces.

*Translated by Jenny Merling*

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