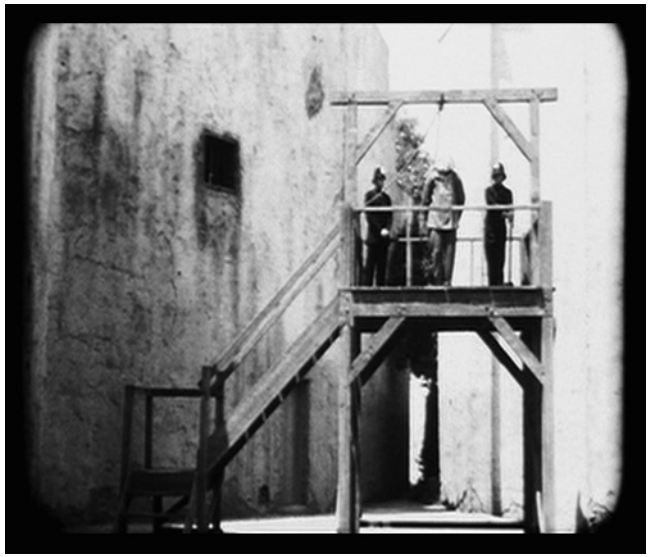
Chapter 1

Magnolia at the Millennium
Historical and Social Contexts

Magnolia opens with three stories interlaced into a six-minute vignette. Over a black screen, a male voice-over (by Ricky Jay) launches into narration. He begins by recounting a tale from 1911 set in Greenberry Hill, London. Three men were hanged for robbing and killing a beloved town pharmacist. In a twist of fate – perhaps "only a matter of chance," according to the voice-over – the three men's names were Joseph Green, Stanley Berry, and Daniel Hill (hence, "Greenberry Hill"). The first shot of this sequence, and therefore the entry point of the entire film, shows the hanging of one of the men. He stands on a wooden platform before plunging to his death, with a sack over his head and the number 82 on his prisoner's uniform. Harkening back to its early twentieth-century setting – and the era of silent cinema – *Magnolia* presents this introduction through a viewfinder. Shot by an authentic Pathé camera from that time, the scene simulates the film stock, camera apparatus, and sepia tone of the period. The device of the viewfinder results in a frame-within-a-frame, creating the illusion of 35mm projection. This is "celluloid" – cinema still in its early stage of inception. Yet, its initial images represent death, a lone figure dangling by a rope.

From birth – or, to be specific, from filmic origin story – to death to rebirth. If we give credence to Thierry Kuntzel's claim that every



The hanging of one of the men from Greenberry Hill

film's first few minutes manifest its overall design, then this opening foregrounds themes of mortality and redemption through its formal properties (1980). Endeavoring to revive the medium, *Magnolia* proffers itself as part of a larger rebirth of cinema. The sheer velocity of this opening sequence implies that it represents a resuscitation, an attempt to breathe life into a (potentially) dying form.

As the vignette continues, the narrator relays another strange encounter, a scuba diver who was accidentally dragged by a small (water-carrying) plane during a forest fire. It is June 1983 in Reno, Nevada and the scuba diver, who is also a casino black-jack dealer, has died from the accident. The pilot of the plane, as it turns out, had provoked an altercation with the diver-dealer just the night before, when he had been dealt an unsatisfactory hand at the blackjack table. After the accident, when he is unable to bear the guilt that he has taken the life of this man – a man he had attacked – he commits suicide. This story poses one of

The pilot who has accidentally killed his blackjack dealer

the film's central questions: can individuals forgive themselves for the irrevocable wrongs they have committed? It also presents the first of the film's references to flowers as a metaphor for community. As the shotgun blasts off-screen, the pilot's blood splatters onto a painting of multiple magnolia blossoms.

The final sequence of this prologue depicts a strange series of events set in Los Angeles in 1951. A young man, Sydney Barringer, commits suicide by jumping off the roof of a tall building. During his fall, he is shot by his mother who has pulled the trigger on his father just a few stories below. The bullet misses the father, flies out the window, and lodges itself in Sydney's back. In case these spatial relations are too complex, a digital pen emerges from the non-diegetic sphere to draw a diagram of the action. This pen, which simulates the telestrator, or television illustrator, was famously used by National Football League commentator John Madden to depict game movements during instant replay. A similar reference would later appear in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) when Uma Thurman, accompanying John Travolta to Jack Rabbit Slims, "draws" a rectangle on the screen ("Don't be a square," she says). As in *Pulp Fiction*, this instance interrupts the narrative flow while also referencing the medium of television. The effect of the telestrator in *Magnolia* is to introduce

A telestrator diagrams the fall of Sydney Barringer

visual reflexivity in a way that foregrounds cinema's plasticity – a condition enhanced by digitality. Just as the three preliminary tales suggest, anything can happen, even within the frame. In fact, the transformative, roaming, questioning quality of this opening serves as preparation for the remaining three hours. Its backward-forward momentum and constant querying take the form of provocation: it asks spectators to open their eyes to a new – or at least renewed – way of seeing. We too should be prepared to replay and review events as they unfold.

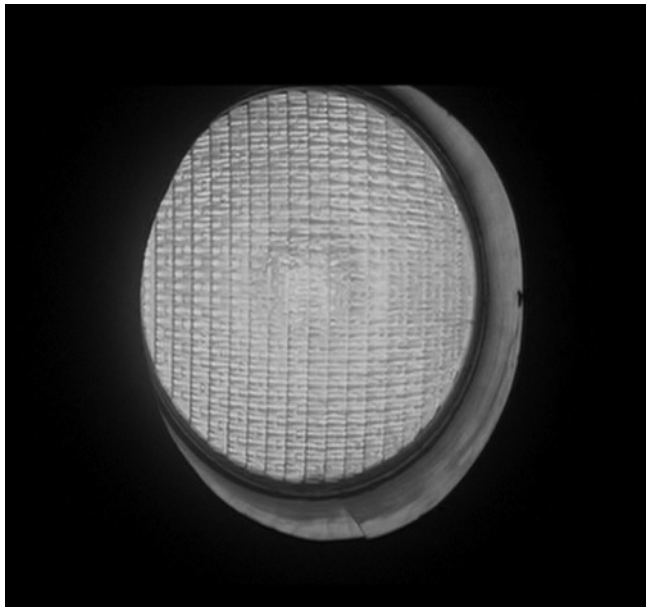
The film's opening also presents children as exemplars of this renewed perspective. In the Barringer suicide-murder story, Sydney (we are told) had revealed his plans to a neighbor – a young boy – just a few days prior to the incident. This boy acts as a witness, a listener, a knowing subject, and a narrator in his own right, given that he fills in the blanks for the police. He serves much the same role that Stanley Spector, the young game show contestant, will play in the larger story. Marginalized and taken for granted, Stanley not only knows more (intellectually and emotionally) than the surrounding adults; but he also anticipates the film's final "catastrophe" and reacts openly without fear or question. Sippl remarks, *Magnolia*'s "children are the truthseers and soothsayers"

(2000, p. 7). When the frogs rain down and most (adult) characters express fear, Stanley merely shows wonderment as though he has known something like this event would come and that he has in fact been hoping for it.

This prologue comes to a close as the camera pushes in on the boy. The voiceover narration unites with his piercing gaze into the camera, reinforcing the boy's role as a knowing narrator in his own right. It is at this point that the film – through the narrator – poses its governing thesis: "and [the Barringer death] is, in the humble opinion of this narrator, not just 'something that happened.' This cannot just be 'one of those things.' This, please, cannot be that. And for what I would like to say, I can't. This is not just a matter of chance. Ohhh. These strange things happen all the time." This commentary is made all the more significant because it is spoken by Jay (who also appears in the film as television producer Burt Ramsey), a film and television actor even better known as a magician. As a master in the art of sleight of hand, he lends credence to the argument against random chance. Within professional magic, an intentional design exists behind every trick. Cause and effect govern each action. Yet Jay's voiceover is somewhat ironic and over-the-top. His performative style results in an excessive quality, opening up the space that questions the very "order" he proposes. He is in fact both mimicking and mocking the authority associated with typical narration.

Following the logic of the voiceover, *Magnolia* sets out to show that life's chain of events have a greater meaning – a grand design – and that, by extension, each individual's moral choices carry weight within a larger community. The film ultimately revolves around a question of faith – a refusal to believe only in chance. Its own style and structure *feel* as though nothing is left to chance, appearing to have an organic and pre-conceived architecture.

The best example of this notion that *Magnolia* expresses an underlying, independently moving *consciousness* is realized two hours and 42 minutes into the film, with its climactic rain of frogs.



A green light signals that a surprise is coming

Within each story line, various characters have reached a breaking point. Jimmy Gator has just confessed to his wife that he may have molested Claudia, at which point his wife walks out on the marriage. Frank has finally made a visit to Earl (now in a coma) and begins to cry at his bedside, begging him not to die. An ambulance rushes Linda to the hospital. Donnie has been overcome by shame at his crime and returned to the store to put the stolen money back. He sits in his car asking, "What the f**k am I doing?" And Claudia has run out on her date with Jim Kurring after allowing her insecurities to get the better of her.

The sequence begins as Claudia (in a taxicab) and her mother (in a car) unknowingly pass each other at an intersection. The street sign reads "Magnolia," providing an initial cue to start paying attention – a wake-up call to this climactic sequence. The camera

A frog falls toward Officer Jim Kurring

cranes from an extreme long shot of Claudia's vehicle to a close up of Rose, cinematically linking the two women and previewing a more significant meeting between the mother and daughter that will unfold shortly. A cut to a medium close up shot of the traffic signal, as it changes from red to green, announces a shift into cinematic overdrive, so to speak: a cataclysmic event is about to begin.

With this, Jimmy walks toward his kitchen (his daughter's portrait hovering on the wall behind him) and loads a gun. Donnie approaches the store's door only to realize that his plans to rectify his theft have been foiled; the key has broken in the lock. Officer Jim (from his vehicle) spots Donnie scaling the wall of the store. He decides to make a u-turn in order to thwart this would-be intruder. As his car curves around, a frog falls splat on the windshield. And, a second frog lands on the hood. Panicking, Jim swerves and slams on the brakes. As he tries to absorb what is happening, he looks out the window and up at the sky. A subjective shot from his point of view renders several frogs hurling down from the blackened sky, picking up speed before crashing onto his car. A hard, relentless rain of countless frogs ensues, as the sequence moves from character to character, linking them through crisis.

This rather unconventional device manifests an epic-scale catharsis and a moral cleansing for almost all the characters simultaneously. (It appears that Jimmy is the only protagonist not spared from his own self-loathing. He is punished by the film in that he does not finally even have the choice to end his own life. A frog causes his death when its fall results in the gun blasting into the television set, setting off a deadly fire.) By the conclusion, most characters have "weathered the storm" in a way that binds them together, again thematically rather than through narrative conflict. The choice of rain as the overriding experience is appropriate given that *Magnolia* is dripping with affect: tears fall, emotions flow, and, not incidentally, the rain pours. The film's debt to the "weepie" is reinforced by the vertical movement of its direction.

The rain of frogs has received major criticism by those who view it as a *deus ex machina* that erupts out of the blue. Some reviewers perceive it as an external plot contrivance made to compensate for an inability to resolve dramatic conflict through character-driven or narrative-based techniques. *Magnolia*'s defenders point to the fact that the film lays an internal foundation for the event. Anticipatory clues about the frogs, and the related scripture Exodus 8:2, arise frequently. Both are foreshadowed through a repetition of the literal appearance of the term "Exodus 8:2" (or simply 8:2, or random references to 8s and 2s).[1] The book of Exodus in the Bible's Old Testament tells the story of Israel's delivery from Egyptian slavery. In Verse 2 of Chapter 8, God conveys through Moses a command to the Pharaoh to release the slaves, threatening to otherwise plague his country with frogs.[2] This passage informs *Magnolia* because of its emphasis on freedom from oppression and because it communicates a message of redemption and renewal. These characters have hit the point at which they cannot save themselves from themselves. Divine intervention brings a new day.

The visual and narrative cues that set up the rain of frogs are not as noticeable during an initial viewing – as scenes unfold – as they

are in retrospect. Therefore, one of *Magnolia*'s distinguishing factors is its manner of inviting audiences to engage in repeat viewings to reconstruct and deconstruct the cinematic ground on which the film is built. Due to the relative subtlety of the signs, the complaint that the final turn of events comes unexpectedly is valid. This is especially true if one expects plot-, story-, or character-driven cause and effect. Yet within the film's emotional and moral terms, the frog flood is motivated. Its dimension of surprise is necessary.

It is important to recognize that the reference to the plague of frogs is not a case of *Magnolia* – or its "creator," Anderson – "finding religion" at the end of the film. This would imply both a last minute emergency ploy to achieve a coherent conclusion for a series of loose ends as well as a problematic attempt to escape the ideological implications and material conditions portrayed by the film. The film is too architecturally sound, on the one hand, and too skeptical about consumerist capitalism and misogyny on the other for this. According to Shane Hipps, "the numerological foreshadowing is largely found in the margins," yet *Magnolia*'s "trick is that the true meaning of the film is [also] found in the margins." He posits that "the frogs falling from the sky are not a random interjection, but rather the only possible conclusion to this story" (2003).

The various appearances of 8:2 are too numerous to document (there are at least 50 of them). The film's opening vignette, previously discussed, offers several examples. In the first story, the hanged convict wears the number 82 on his uniform. In story two, the pilot's plane boasts 82 on its side door. When he plays blackjack, the dealer gives him the cards 8 and 2. In the third story, 82 is spray-painted on the roof's wall just a few feet away from Sydney. His parents' apartment address is also 82, as indicated by their front door. So within the first six minutes, the number surfaces at least five times. In a less obvious instance, the toll-free number listed in Frank Mackey's self-help advertisement is 877-826-3437 (also presented as 877-Tame-Her). The phone number's placement

The numbers 8 and 2 are situated in the middle of the phone number for Frank's Seduce and Destroy program

within a close up of Frank positions the middle "82" within the center of the frame. In a more obvious example, an audience member at the taping of *What Do Kids Know?* holds up a hand-made sign that reads "Exodus 8:2." To conclude with one of the most fleeting instances, just before the frogs start falling, Officer Kurring drives by a banner for a warehouse sale followed by the briefest flash (only a few frames) of a green neon sign with the small letters, "Exodus 8:2."

Further allusions to the pending rain of frogs emerge in the sprinkling of "weather reports" that segment the film. An early interruption occurs 12 minutes in, as a transition occurs between an extended character introduction and the launch of the diegetic action, a scene at the site of a domestic disturbance call for Kurring. Serving a function similar to a DVD chapter stop, the report states, "Partly Cloudy, 82% Chance of Rain." Inserted against a backdrop of blue

A weather report creates both disruption and continuity

skies and intermittent clouds, accompanied by (non-diegetic) musical chimes, this bridging shot lasts 10 seconds. Two more weather announcements appear – the first at 42 minutes and the last at 2 hours 22 minutes. The middle break is more ominous with darker clouds, heavy music, and windy weather on the way. The final one is superimposed over the Magnolia Boulevard intersection, setting the stage for the frog sequence and announcing that the "rain [is] clearing."

The weather reports work to both halt and advance the film. While they help ground the story in time and place, and also directly address the viewer, they create distancing breaks in the narrative. At the very least, they encourage the viewer to question why the interruptions are there, ushering in moments for pause and reflection and allowing the film to breathe. They also point to an autonomous consciousness that lives both inside and outside the film – an omnipotent presence that is not only capable of forecasting atmospheric conditions but also connecting the dots between the climate and the characters' lives. Is it Anderson, as director, behind this presence or is it a deeper consciousness, over which Anderson both can and cannot exert control? The blueprint of this grand design may elude even the director, *Magnolia* suggests,

which speaks to the unknowable and inaccessible aspects of the film. In other words, authorship represents more of a struggle *with* film (or other media) rather than a veritable imprint *on* film (or other media).

"The End of the World as We Know It"

For obvious reasons, the weather forecasts and the rain of frogs contribute to the apocalyptic sensibility of *Magnolia*. These phenomena signal broader themes about "the end of the world" that structure a number of "millennial films" such as *Armageddon* (1998), *End of Days* (1999), *The Perfect Storm* (2000), *The Sum of all Fears* (2002), and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). Such blockbusters conjure up potential doomsday scenarios that gesture toward a "final judgment" of contemporary society.

The millennial cycle also includes more existentialist films such as *Traffic* (2000) and *Crash* (2004), which not coincidentally share *Magnolia*'s geographical setting of Los Angeles. *Magnolia* is more closely aligned with these character dramas than the millennial action films; like the dramas, it features an ensemble cast and multiple storylines. *Traffic*, *Crash*, and *Magnolia* each function as a response to and a reflection of American cultural anxieties about the culmination of the twentieth century and the dawn of an unpredictable day. Los Angeles serves as a microcosmic lens through which negotiations of class, gender, and multiculturalism speak to broader conflicts facing the nation. In the case of the gritty, pseudo-documentary *Traffic*, a commentary on North America's losing battle in the war on drugs translates into a critique of US capitalism. With *Crash*, an intense examination of contemporary race relations suggests that everyday personal interactions have become cold and dehumanized. While blockbusters such as *Armageddon* or *End of Days* are obvious instances of the disaster

genre, *Magnolia*, *Traffic*, and *Crash* explore psychological and interpersonal "disasters" in their efforts to more fully comprehend the very specific social conditions that define the millennium's historical moment.

Magnolia ponders the millennium by channeling free-floating ideas rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition that prophesize a "second coming" of the Messiah. These notions, which typically had been relegated to the fringe or paranoid realm, became common currency in the 1990s mainstream, especially on television and in the popular press. Television programming, Hollywood films, and print media drew on dubious yet increasingly referenced allusions to the New Testament's Book of Revelation. Various forms of mass media showed concern that in the "dawn of the third Christian millennium [there] was the slim chance that even one of the world's countless eschatological theories might come true" (Feit, 2004, p. 134). Jonathan Scott Feit posits, "With the approach of the millennial shift, religion took on a tangible sense of foreboding and leapt noticeably to the foreground of the Western collective consciousness. One did not have to be highly religious or a believer in millennial prophecy to worry" (2004, p. 134).

An obvious example of such apprehension within the media occurred in the Y2K (Year 2000) scare: the press reported (and fed) massive fears of a worldwide computer crash, caused by an underdeveloped time coding system that had occurred in the early years of programming.[3] Some despaired that humankind would experience a major downfall in an environment where science was out of control. As Robert Lamm puts it, "Technology promises a paradise on Earth, but Western culture perhaps cannot forget that the original price of wisdom was expulsion from Eden" (1991, p. 7). Had industrialized countries simply gone too far in the search for knowledge and advancement?

For most, however, the Y2K worries were overblown. They were a product of hype that served television and news ratings.

John McCullough explains, "the theme of epochal catastrophe rang through the media and checkout scanners from the White House podium to the West Samoa Hilton (where the 24-hour coverage of New Year's Eve finally wound down)" (2000, p. 54). The absurdist quality of the live news coverage is captured by McCullough as he recounts a CNN anchor's New Year's reportage "that nothing unusual was happening in Times Square but that one should always be aware that L.A. was only three hours away, and crisis could be just around the next ad break" (2000, p. 54). Hour by hour, and city by city, commentators expressed surprise that ordinary life continued as usual, an obvious ploy to keep viewers on the edge of their seat and tuned in until the threat had apparently passed.

Though it is true that many Americans were not overly concerned about Y2K and saw the apparent crisis as media frenzy, a good number of them found reasons to be anxious about more realistic or pressing concerns. This was especially so for those who considered themselves informed or socially conscious. Around the world, numerous hotspots and political conflicts suggested that civil war, aggressive nationalism, and genocide were on the rise. The break-up of Yugoslavia (and the large-scale ethnic cleansing against non-Serbians), genocide wars in Rwanda, and the Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia caused dismay and uneasiness. Intolerance and violence were apparently growing worse rather than better, even as developing countries were purportedly becoming more civilized. In addition, issues of global warming and environmental sustainability began to take center stage, as the planet's ecosystems appeared increasingly over-burdened.

Moreover, the 1990s had been a decade in which the US economy, under President Bill Clinton, underwent the largest sustained expansion in its history. Accelerated capitalism, globalization, and rapid technological innovation placed the country at a distinct advantage worldwide and benefited many wealthy and upper-middle

class Americans. Yet such global expansion and the rise of the hi-tech economy caused numerous "unintended consequences" (a phrase first coined earlier in the century by sociologist Robert K. Merton). Domestically, the American class system was being shaped by an increasingly influential professional-managerial class at the same time that the service sector was becoming technologized. The United States saw a serious decline in its manufacturing base and a sudden rise in certain inflated economies related to information technologies, real estate, and finance. Even as excess came to define the decade, many people experienced a loss of real income, a rise in inflation, and other uncertainties due to a series of recessions that dated back to the early 1970s. The successful "bubble markets" that dominated late in the 1990s meant that many members of the working- and middle-classes faced a disparity between the expansionist rhetoric of the American economy and their everyday experience. People's economic lives were becoming increasingly mystified.

In a related trend, the image of the slacker took hold in the 1990s. Downwardly mobile young adults were re-cast as disinterested workers; they were represented as apathetic toward work and adulthood in general. The idea that the emerging generation was simply "slacking" obscured the fact that they faced a declining job market and rising costs of living. Some Generation X-ers chose slackerdom as a form of resistance against financial and economic conditions; others were struggling in their earnest attempts to gain economic footing. However, regardless, the decade became defined as one in which young people were alienated from labor and detached from the proverbial "American Dream."

Internationally, poorer or more underdeveloped nations suffered as richer and more dominant countries succeeded. The surrounding circumstances of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) provides a solid example of how globalization intensified disenfranchisement in Mexico – through the development of

Maquiladoras – and decreased manufacturing jobs in the United States at the same time. While globalization may have contributed to America's wealth, it escalated outsourcing and off-shoring of US jobs and created disadvantages for many in the working classes around the world.

Considering all of these factors, it is easy to see why many Americans felt that, by the late nineties, both the nation and the world were at a crisis point. Amid an overall mood of escapism and abundance, underlying tensions percolated. *Magnolia* captures this tension between a superficial sense of material success and deeper questions about existing social conditions. The film translates implicit ideological and political concerns into emotional and ethical ones capitalizing on the fact that melodrama often speaks to the former by mobilizing affect. It posits that social change is possible though it does so through themes of individual transformation. In other words, the outward attention to *characters* – as sites of change – indicates an inner preoccupation with *contexts*. As an example of millennial cinema, *Magnolia* imagines its way through the crisis, looking toward a new way of envisioning existing problems. It searches out a newly invented post-apocalyptic space.

Resisting a closed, predetermined universe, the film constructs an open narrative field almost exclusively "concerned with the possibility of breaking out of confinement" (Sippl, 2000, p. 7). Here again, its complex structure and aesthetic approach support an underlying proposition that everyday choices represent social and often political acts. The rain of frogs, then, symbolizes an "initiation into community" (Sippl, 2000, p. 7). As the characters connect without necessarily even knowing it, we as spectators are encouraged to see ourselves as part of that community. As Sippl puts it, we are "invited to enter its world freely, as critics and aficionados, to take up a position within that world and see it expand. We can grow by helping to create a place that includes us" (2000, p. 7). *Magnolia* levels power relations and emotionally

involves viewers, thereby charting a passage out of its underlying narrative – and cultural – conflicts.

This is a path with multiple positions and potentialities that heralds the possibilities of a radical ideological shift. The move is meant to occur both outside (in the characters, in context) and inside (within us). The interplay between the film's outer surfaces and inner emotional layers, shows the heavy influence of the 1950's melodrama. In this genre, high affect often stands in for broader social and political concerns that are not, or cannot be, explicitly articulated. However, *Magnolia* is equally related to Cold-War era science fiction, thriller, and noir films, which mediated apocalyptic themes by staging doomsday scenarios and deeply distorted settings.

The American climate of the 1950s was dominated by the reality of the atomic bomb in the nuclear age as well as increased anxieties related to the Red Scare. *Magnolia*'s existential questioning is quite reminiscent of Cold War, apocalyptic films such as *Panic in the Streets* (1950), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Them!* (1954), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) which stressed the notion that the country (and the world) had crossed a new threshold from which there was no turning back. A formulation by Sippl not only illustrates the thematic connection between the 1950s and the 1990s but it also provides a working hypothesis for millennial cinema overall. She claims, "We might think of an apocalypse as an ominous prophetic revelation of an intimate, ultimate, cosmic cataclysm that descends in a grandiose and climactic manner […] I would like to define apocalypse simply as this: the end of the world as we know it" (2000, p. 2).

"When man entered the door to the atomic age, he opened the door to a new world. What we'll eventually find in that world, nobody can predict," remarks the doctor-character in *Them!*. It is this precariousness of a new and unpredictable place – "the end of the world as we know it" – that defines the apocalyptic strain of the

Cold War and millennial cycles. In a revised global context – where the countries that had won World War II now had the collective ability to cause massive destruction and even obliteration – a profound shift in consciousness was taking shape. At the same time that many Americans were anxious about nuclear build-up, others were more concerned about the negative effects of Cold War ideologies on ordinary, everyday life. Through policies such as the Monroe Doctrine, the United States was reinforcing an "us versus them" outlook that resulted in internal divisions between "true Americans" and "anti-Americans" (Rogin, 1987, pp. xiii–xvii). Just as 1950s melodrama highlighted the disjunction between the external appearance of material success and an inner emotional anxiety, the apocalyptic films negotiated an ongoing tension between a surface environment and a deeper sense of ideological and spiritual discontentment. As Matthew Frye Jacobson and Gaspar González put it, "the good life and unthinkable death were strangely one and the same" (2005, p. 39).

Both the post-World War II era and the millennium required new ways of thinking and knowing. *Kiss Me Deadly* provides a profitable illustration of this epistemological dimension. The film shows that its protagonist, investigator Mike Hammer, is in way over his head. His usual methods of detecting are failing him, as he cannot see the big picture (the "great whatsit"). By the time he realizes that the world is on the verge of destruction, it is too late. Jacobson and González explain that in *Kiss Me Deadly*, "the unthinkable has already happened" (2005, p. 74).

Though Hammer's story ends rather hopelessly, its overarching theme is that of awakening. The idealistic impulse of apocalyptic cinema often registers as "waking up." In millennial films such as *Magnolia*, characters are surfacing, or re-surfacing, to a new reality that puts into question the ideological values of the 1990s. North America may have been benefiting from increased consumer goods, enhanced research development, and elevated military

positioning but many Americans were asking themselves, what was the point of it all? *Magnolia* is motivated by a drive to find "the point" (or at least a point). Its inquiry into the possible existence of a grand design, therefore, insinuates more than a search for meaning. *Magnolia* asserts a desire for a more ethical and open-minded approach to the social issues of its day.

Ideological Awakening in Contemporary Millennial Cinema

The millennial cycle includes apocalyptic cinema as well as related films that convey cosmic, prophetic, or existentialist themes. It encompasses a range of genre offerings, from such dramas or science fiction thrillers as *American Beauty* (1999), *Contact* (1997), *Traffic*, and *Signs* (2002) to the action-spectacles *Armageddon*, *End of Days* and *The Matrix* series (1999, 2002, 2003), to more provocative fare such as *Dogma* (1999) and *Fight Club* (1999). Many of these titles, particularly the dramas and thrillers, are similar to *Magnolia* in their re-negotiations of conventions of gender and class under the "time pressure" felt at the turn into the twenty-first century. With many, there is also a sense of an inaccessible past, a stable setting of knowledge and identity that is no longer available, if it ever was, even if a promising future may lie ahead. In millennial cinema, according to Sippl, it is the "irretrievability that makes it apocalyptic – the personal and social incapacity to regain what has been lost, even if afforded the ground to begin again" (Sippl, 2000, p. 2).

In most instances, the characters undergo an identity crisis, which represents an examination of current social conditions. They have crossed a point of no return; they believe there is no place for them in society. By way of example, the protagonists in *Signs* and *American Beauty* grapple with a series of questions about the world they inhabit. The answer in *Signs* is the restoration of

ideological order. It is the opposite in *American Beauty*, given that the world, as known by the protagonist, must be obliterated. *Magnolia* differs in this respect, refusing to resolve its cultural contradictions and proposing that its characters will continue to negotiate these tensions.

Signs shares *Magnolia*'s existentialist themes yet it provides a contrast in its reassessment of contemporary American social values (Feit, 2004, pp. 134, 139). The protagonist Reverend Graham Hess (Mel Gibson), a disillusioned former Episcopal priest, begins to question his faith after the freakish death of his wife. He leaves his post at the church to work on his farm full time. As mysterious crop circles materialize on his land and the farm animals act increasingly strangely, he and his family begin to believe that extra-terrestrial beings are visiting them and launching an invasion of the planet. In his search for what all of this means, Hess finally realizes that his wife's dying words have given him the tools to battle the aliens. One scene particularly resonates with *Magnolia*'s treatment of coincidence. The priest reasons that some people take unexplainable events as an indication that "there will be someone there for them, and that fills them with hope." For others, these events "could be good, could be bad, but they feel that whatever happens, they're on their own and that fills them with fear."

In this instance, Gibson's character is looking for meaning in an evidently absurd world. He asks, "Do you see signs, see miracles? Is it possible that there are no coincidences?" Like *Magnolia*, *Signs* explores the possibility of a world without chance that is ultimately governed by design. Both examples tap into a broader search for significance and a hunger for faith circulating within millennial popular culture (Feit, 2004, p. 135). However, *Signs* notably reinforces a stable male order. It focuses on a (white, heterosexual) male protagonist who represents authority (albeit an authority in crisis) in his roles as family father and church Father. Given that the wife is deceased, she is relegated to the narrative margins, which centralizes Hess.

In comparison to *Signs*, *American Beauty* offers a more reflexive examination of masculinity while also going further in critiquing structures of capitalism. Feeling alienated and disenfranchised, Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) decides to quit his job, rebel against his marriage, and "re-masculinize" his image. He explains, "It's the weirdest thing. I feel like I've been in a coma for about twenty years, and I am just now waking up" (quoted in Tripp, 2005, p. 181). *American Beauty* conveys Lester's journey out of conformity and commodification. He realizes he has become an object within a system dictated by late-industrial capitalism and mass-mediated images. According to Daniel Tripp, this film and many like it, such as *Fight Club* and *The Matrix* are "male epiphany films;" they are "all linked by a common acknowledgement of, and consequential response to, masculinities perceived to be in jeopardy" (2005, p. 181). In *Fight Club*, for instance, the protagonist tries to combat the feminization he perceives – a shift caused by an accelerated capitalist engine – by inspiring other men to participate in a new cult of physically aggressive manhood. In *The Matrix*, the lead realizes that he is not living a real life but rather a simulated one, controlled by computers who are using human body-energy to power their domination of the earth.[4]

In Tripp's view, each protagonist undergoes "an experience of 'awakening' through which he comes to the realization that his life has been automated and/or manipulated by external forces, and that his desire has not been his own" (2005, p. 181). The theme of ideological awakening structures *Magnolia* as well. Yet, this film is less about masculinities in jeopardy than gender identity in flux. As we will see in Chapter 3, femininity and masculinity are represented on a continuum rather than as binary oppositions. These gender constructs are viewed as unstable and fluid, characteristics supported by the principle of "multiplicity" that governs both plot and form.

Nonetheless, even if the film treats gender in more complex ways than in the "male epiphany" narratives, it is beneficial to

place *Magnolia* alongside these examples in order to more fully comprehend the roles that class structures and corporatism play. Almost all of *Magnolia*'s male characters are living half-lives, a direct function of the media industry that surrounds them and their own very limited understandings of masculine identity. Given that most of these males work (or have worked) in the television industry (e.g., Earl, Jimmy, Frank, Donnie, Stanley) – and that the technology of television continues to permeate their everyday lives – they are trapped within a world of mechanization and objectification motored by consumer culture. To their own detriment and that of those around them, the male characters are playing out patriarchal models of identity. As Mario DeGiglio-Bellamare puts it, "Their lives represent the pathologies of fame and success in [the television industry]: the career pressures, the competitiveness, the stress, the lying, alcoholism, drug addiction, and, ultimately, the broken confidences of fallen glories and the defeated spirit of shame" (2000). These men are awakened toward a more humanized, humbled position. This occurs with the climactic rain of frogs but also more importantly within the small-scale, deeply felt interactions that build throughout the story.

The adult male conflicts carry devastating consequences for the women and children in the film. Young Stanley, for example, feels the stress caused by his father's expectations. He needs to become a "winner," which will, in some sense, prove his manhood. This desire informs the humiliation he experiences when he pees in his pants while on the television show. Meanwhile, many of the female figures are spinning out of control. *Magnolia* suggests that their chaos is a result of their subordination to men, their lack of self-empowerment, or the (direct or indirect) influence that the media industry has on their personal lives. For some characters, such as Claudia, all three factors shape her struggle. A look at *Magnolia* in the context of other examples in the "male

epiphany" category shows evidence of an egalitarian approach to the conflicts of gender, even if the majority of its characters are male. The structure – and logic – of the film pay attention to the way that masculine and feminine norms affect, and are affected by, each other.

Magnolia's depiction of a crisis of faith becomes in part a critique of the consumerist-oriented, media-saturated climate that defines the close of the millennium. To "wake up" is to, in the words of Aimee Mann's accompanying song, "wise up" to the ideological constraints perpetuated by Los Angeles's communications industry. Anderson uses the media backdrop to subtly but implicitly criticize his own business from within. Even more broadly, he concludes that, at the turn into the twenty-first century, various modes of the "self" have been technologized. Like *American Beauty*, *Fight Club*, and *The Matrix*, this musical-melodrama speaks to anxieties about "the extent to which identity is not only always already mediated, but also itself a medium" (Tripp, 2005, p. 182). In *Magnolia*, identity has become a technological "medium," as seen in the inescapable flow of television through public and domestic spaces. Even those who work outside the media cannot escape its effects. Jim Kurring behaves as if he is on camera for an imaginary *COPS*-style program as he sets out on his morning patrol. He may sit alone in his car but he envisions an ever-present, live media stream that requires him to act the role of the rugged individualist. In certain instances, such a state can be both liberating and confining (see Chapter 3).

Magnolia's focus on technology, commerce, identity, and gender signals a relationship that reaches back, beyond its own contemporary millennial moment. Its "fin de siècle" sensibility points to an indebtedness to the late-nineteenth century, a time when modernism and industrialization were gaining momentum. The technological mediation of identity was a central cultural concern then, just as it was a century later. The opening sequence's reference to early cinema (and the Pathé camera) reiterates this interest in the

late-1800s and early-1900s. As the film looks toward the future, it calls on the past.

The negotiation of birth, death, and re-birth plays out differently in *Magnolia* than in many "male epiphany" films. Tripp demonstrates that "in both *American Beauty* and *Fight Club*, we are presented with tragic visions where only death, symbolic or otherwise, can allow the male hero to surmount [the problem of] mediation" (2005, p. 184). In *American Beauty*, Lester dies, and has in fact been dead since the start of the story, but his consciousness survives (via his voiceover narration). *Fight Club* ends on a more cynical note, with the implosion of buildings across the Manhattan skyline, an allegorical sign that the capitalist machinery has been (and must be) destroyed altogether if a re-envisioning of masculinity is to be achieved. The unnamed protagonist (Edward Norton) who has struggled against his alter ego for the film's entirety comes to terms with the disintegration of his identity, which has been under attack by corporate values and constant threats against a range of masculine models. According to Tripp, *Fight Club*'s solution is "schizophrenia" while *American Beauty*'s "answer lies in a stable, uncompromised male position" (2005, pp. 185–6). In *The Matrix* series, Tripp says, machine-to-human interface presents the only route out of mechanization, which means that de-humanization is inevitable.

Magnolia, however, sustains a sense of instability and fractured subjectivity while moving its characters into more vulnerable, empathetic, and yet still contradictory positions. In other words, the solution for embattled gender identity does not lie in an eradication of the battle nor does it require a shift toward more coherence or unity. The answer is also not to succumb to a rigid set of social norms. These characters come to terms, simultaneously, with an insecurity intrinsic to any form of identity and their newfound desire to re-invent the ground on which their subjectivity is structured.

To conclude, *Magnolia* understands the cultural anxieties of the millennium as deeply rooted in capitalism and gender relations. It translates broader historical trends of global economic expansion, technological proliferation, and a rise in nationalist violence into concrete, emotional experiences of mass media and male power. The year 1999 presents an opportunity to "wake up;" the film's interstitial weather reports signal "the end of the world as we know it." Yet this may be the best of all potential outcomes. To return to Hipps' proposal that the rain of frogs is perhaps "the only possible conclusion to this story," the surprise flood is not *Magnolia*'s fundamental weakness but rather its greatest strength. Just as the frog rain's inevitability is continually forecast between the visual cracks of the mise-en-scène, the film's call to community emerges from the margins. By the same token, the desire to re-write gender identity is addressed between the lines, in ways that avoid re-inscribing power relations based on stability, unity, and control.