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## “But it did happen”: Sound as Deep Narrative in P.T. Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999)

### **Abstract**

This paper explores how sound is used in P. T. Anderson’s *Magnolia* to convey the deep narrative of the film. Through analysing how sound is employed to suggest meaning, form associations and create narrative coherence for the viewer, I argue that sound conveys an underlying narrative of redemption which climaxes apocalyptically in the rain of frogs. I then read this aspect of the film theologically through Barth, by drawing comparisons between *Magnolia*’s claim to be ‘strange but true’ and the church’s creedal stake in strange stories which claim universal meaning and redemptive significance. By looking at *Magnolia*’s use of sound to convey narrative, lessons are drawn out for the church in terms of how it might humbly perceive but resolutely proclaim narratives of universal significance in the climate of postmodernity.

“One random day in the San Fernando Valley, a dying father, a young wife, a male caretaker, a famous lost son, a police officer in love, a boy genius, an ex-boy genius, a game show host and an estranged daughter will each become part of one story. Through coincidence, chance, human action, past history and divine intervention they will weave through each other’s lives on a day that builds to an unforgettable climax.”

The quotation above is how the blurb on the back of the DVD of P.T. Anderson’s 1999 film *Magnolia* explains the links that emerge between the lives of its nine main characters in one twenty-four hour period. Such a comprehensive causal inventory might suggest to the interested browser that *Magnolia* is a straightforward, albeit beautifully made, ensemble drama. However, the prologue to the film, recounting the unrelated stories of the murder of a pharmacist, the death of a scuba diver in a forest fire and the suicide/murder of Sydney Barringer begs the viewer to see the film as something other than people’s lives playing out before us on a screen: “please”, it says, “this cannot just be one-of-those-things”.<sup>1</sup> From its opening moments, the film is laid out before us both as ‘not just one-of-those-things’, and yet also ‘but it did happen’. The film’s narrative consciously places itself on the edge of meaningfulness, poised between necessity and random contingency.

This chance/fate dynamic, which is laid on quite thickly during the prologue, pulls *Magnolia*’s narrative in two directions. From the inside out, so to speak, the film is a straightforward narration of 24 hours of ‘things that happen’. From the outside looking in, the fact of their selection from countless possible stories, and the way they are set up as significant by the prologue forces the viewer into believing they are ‘not just one of those

things', almost by the very event of their being viewed. This doctrine of Hollywood election is part of what makes the film redemptive, as I will argue later on, but it also resonates with *Magnolia's* religious overtones. The film pays little attention to 'religion' as such (despite the mention of 'divine intervention' in the blurb) but viewers are drawn from the start into a narrative of biblical significance. The narrative seems innocent of the intensely scriptural vocabulary of the film: children, angels, plagues of frogs, prodigal sons, fallen women, judgement and death. Throughout this guileless-but-knowing narrative, the viewer is asked to believe not just that it is not 'one-of-those-things', but that 'it did happen'.

What kind of a film is *Magnolia*, then? A philosophically astute ensemble drama? A pseudo-biblical epic? A foray into postmodern dramatic irony? Before moving to the main argument of my paper, it will be helpful to situate the film theologically by outlining a few of what could be considered the interpretative front runners.<sup>2</sup> First, Mario de Giglio Bellamare sees *Magnolia's* narrative as one of liberation.<sup>3</sup> For Bellamare, the film speaks of the God who liberated Israel from Egypt, and who gives signs of his liberation to an oppressed people. The frogs are a sign of judgement and a Passover in the lives of the characters from structures of sin and death to life.<sup>4</sup> Second, Joanne Clarke Dillman argues that the film can be read as soap opera.<sup>5</sup> She argues that the unusual structure of the film and the lack of closure in the narrative bespeak a female viewing position. Though it has a preamble and coda, the main body of the film breaks with mainstream stylistic convention, displaying little narrative direction, not narrating the goals of its characters and leaving much unresolved.<sup>6</sup> While Aimee Mann's songs narrate the film, its male protagonists

undergo successive crises by which they are, in Dillman's words, feminized by circumstance or choice: dying or caring, losing guns or losing tempers.<sup>7</sup> Read as melodramatic, hysterical soap opera, the film becomes a stinging critique both of the rapacious, fickle and destructive television industry and of popular attitudes to masculinity. Lastly, Erin Runions argues the film is apocalyptic, and therefore essentially revelatory.<sup>8</sup> The rain of frogs is an apocalypse – an imagined ending which allows the past and present to cohere. As the film comes to its amphibious climax, characters undergo personal transformations which allow them to see their pasts differently.<sup>9</sup>

All of these interpretative possibilities draw out something of *Magnolia*'s richness as a theological, literary and filmic text. However, despite agreeing with many features of each, I think *Magnolia*'s narrative, in terms of both its structure and content, can perhaps best be read as liturgy. My contention in this paper is that we can read *Magnolia* as playing with the chance-fate dynamic set up in the prologue in a liturgical space. Further, I want to reinforce the importance of *Magnolia*'s use of sound, which I will argue is what allows the film to be described as liturgy. The idea of 'liturgy' is sometimes used rhetorically in a fairly enigmatic way: all I mean (and I hope it is not too controversial) is that through the film a significant narrative of redemption is re-presented to a community. Re-presentation here refers to the film's ability to make a narrative of redemption present again to an audience, to transcend its boundaries as a self-contained narrative and to make demands on the viewer. Through analysing how sound is employed to suggest meaning, form associations and create narrative coherence for the viewer, I will argue that sound conveys a deep narrative of redemption which climaxes apocalyptically in the rain of frogs. This

underlying narrative forms a liturgy that assumes the stories of those who watch, rendering them significant and redeemed through drawing them into the redemption worked out through *Magnolia*'s characters. The lack of a definitive ending to the film, which Dillmann argues is a characteristic of soap opera, I will suggest is rather a sign of the way in which liturgy is always repeated and never final.

I outlined at the start the way in which *Magnolia*'s prologue sets the film up as an already significant narrative. This directorial underscoring of the import of what is to follow in the narrative is reflected and in part established by the use of sound. During the prologue, the voice of the narrator clearly cuts through from his reality to that depicted in the film. Over a muffled and confused soundtrack of discordant music and talking belonging to the original clips of Green, Berry, Hill, Delmar Darien and Sydney Barringer, the narrator sets up the main playing space of *Magnolia* – chance and fate. “This was not just something that happened”, he says, “This cannot be ‘one-of-those-things’; this –please- cannot be that. And for what I would like to say – I can – this was not just a matter of chance. Very strange things happen all the time.” The narrator is very obviously ‘outside’ the events of the film – we hear the noise of moving between shots, and chalk as diagrams are drawn of Sydney Barringer’s death. The voice from outside in the prologue, which is itself outside the body of the film, impresses the importance of the forthcoming narrative on the audience. Sound is used to labour the visual point. The documentary, outside-eye feel continues through the credit sequence as we enter the narrative proper. Aimee Mann’s ‘One is the Loneliest Number’ plays over the top of all the characters, emphasising their discrete lives.<sup>10</sup> We are narrated through the lives of Jimmy Gator as we see him and his

daughter, Claudia. Television is used to link the lives of the characters, as we cut from screen to life and back again. Sound reflects this edited confusion between screen and life, by confusing monogetic and diegetic sound, as we hear layers of theme music, noise and sound effects. Sound is also used in the prologue to subtly establish narrative trajectories and, in some cases, privilege the viewer with a narrative coherence hidden from the protagonists. Thus, Earl Partridge seems to narrate a medical documentary of his own cancerous lungs, and Jim Kurring's personal ad becomes his own documentary voiceover, which becomes him talking to camera. Through the prologue and the long credit sequence, it becomes evident to the viewer that the narrative of *Magnolia* is already significant. We are set up to look for meaning and coherence. Already, sound is allowing the stories of the individual characters to bleed into one another, as they narrate each others' lives - and the outside perspective of the narrator cuts in to prompt the viewer that this is "not just one of those things".

The significant narrative initially intoned by the prologue is again made present to the audience throughout the film by the careful and clever use of sound. Sound is used to link characters, create associations and provide commentary, and thereby make the associations between chance and fate that *Magnolia* sets up as a dichotomy at the start. I would argue that sound is a very significant element of the ways in which the lives of *Magnolia*'s characters are drawn together. While the association of characters and narratives through the use of sound comes to an obvious high point when all the characters sing along with Aimee Mann's 'Wise Up', sound is used more subtly throughout the film to the same end, with the result that the froggy deus-ex-machina, when it comes, is really

integral to the film in a way you cannot often say of plagues of frogs in family dramas. A few examples. Throughout the film, music competes with dialogue to form associations (eg. Donnie Smith and Gabrielle) or a sense of chaos (eg. the set of *What Do Kids Know?*). It also links people to create narrative associations: Stanley Spector's rendition of the Carmen aria '*Love is a Rebellious Bird*' fades into a recorded version of the same aria, which becomes the theme music for the sweetly awkward tryst between the clumsy Jim Kurring and the coke-high Claudia Wilson: the innocence of children is associated with the angelic appearance of Claudia to Jim. Or, the ticking noise of the timer from '*What Do Kids Know?*' is heard before we cut to the scene – it ticks in the background of the previous scene, where Gwenovier is interviewing the increasingly uncomfortable Frank Mackey. The sound of Donnie Smith sweeping the keys off the counter before his ill-conceived attempt to rob Solomon Solomon is associated with the following sound of Earl Partridge's clinking pill bottles, creating an association of desperation between Donnie, the suicidal Linda Partridge, and Phil's attachment to the dying Earl. The applause for Frank Mackey as he starts his workshop is bled back into the previous scene, where Earl Partridge lies on his deathbed in his house, and Phil Parma looks around, seemingly bewildered by where the applause is coming from. The noise of the rain as Rose Gator confronts Jimmy about the abuse of their daughter cuts to the sound of the shower, as Claudia prepares for her date with Kurring. All the way through the film, sound links chance and fate by showing us how characters are linked in this redemptive narrative before the climax point where their stories coincide.<sup>11</sup> Sound shows us that chance and fate are linked through what 'did happen'.



So sound establishes narrative connections and renders this ostensibly straightforward soap opera of daily lives significant. How is this narrative of redemption represented to the audience? Throughout *Magnolia*, sound is used to rupture the boundaries between reality and story, allowing the story of redemption to transcend the boundaries of the film. Because only the audience is privy to the narrative coherence and significance established by the ways in which sound and image are edited, the audience is drawn into the liturgical performance. I agree with Dillman that one effect of this is to parody television – nowhere more obvious than where Phil Parma pleads with the telephone operative that “this is like that scene in the movie...they have these scenes in movies because they’re true...and this is the bit where you help me out.”<sup>12</sup> But more subtly, all the way through, sound is used to rupture narrative believability, to make *Magnolia*’s faltering story of redemption self-conscious as such, and to make demands on the audience. So as the unseen audience applauds Earl Partridge’s deathbed scene, the real audience questions the nature of the scene they have just viewed. Was it acted, or was it real? And if we are already watching it on a screen, can it be real at all? Why are we looking for reality or redemption on television?<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the constant confusion between monogetic and diegetic sound opens the narrative out to the audience, and allows the story of redemption to transcend the boundaries of the screen. Thus, through liturgically presenting the lives of this filmically chosen people, the lives of those in the audience become part of the litany of ‘things that happen’ – things happen all the time, and the film becomes a narrative hallowing of all these stories. The use of sound to open the narrative out to the audience is another way in which the film behaves liturgically. Stanley Spector’s pronunciation that “This is something that happens...” as the frogs start to fall from the skies becomes a

comforting refrain – these are things that happen, and in *Magnolia* they are assumed into a deeper narrative, a seemingly Godless but consciously religious narrative of fate, chance and a kind of benevolent redemption that works itself out in the lives of the characters.

I have suggested throughout this paper that I think the narrative invoked by the liturgy *Magnolia* enacts is redemptive. The redemptive streak in *Magnolia* is difficult to quantify or pin down. How is it so, if at all? Certainly not obviously: there is no happy ending, minimal dramatic resolution, and no clearly identifiable saviour figure (though having said that, I think Jim Kurring an interesting study in this regard).<sup>14</sup> *Magnolia*'s deep ambiguities sit uncomfortably with Bellamare's identification of the film as liberation. Runions suggested, more fruitfully I think, that the film can be seen as apocalyptic, and that its redemptive nature is to be seen more in terms of revelation and subjective realisations of narrative significance provoked by catastrophic events. Given the extent to which, as I have argued, the film involves the audience in a kind of liturgical rehearsal or catharsis, however, I think redemption in *Magnolia* goes further than revelation. Dillman, recall, argues that *Magnolia* privileges a female viewing position. The film leaves the characters' goals unnarrated, and catalogues male failure, or male participation in systems of abuse and corruption. She also argues that, by advancing the story through dialogue rather than action, the film encourages female participation and identification in what she calls a 'double-voiced discourse'. Perhaps in *Magnolia*, then, we are dealing with a narrative of redemption that is unfamiliar to Hollywood storyboards because it speaks of redemption from what might be very broadly characterised as a female 'viewing position': redemption that could be described very sketchily as embodied, immanent, subjective, not

narrated as a 'goal', but lived, as it were, from the middle of things, and inseparable from the stories in which it occurs.

How do we see this in *Magnolia*? Though the preamble and coda set up the stock themes of the film in terms of chance and fate, we never have a clear sense of what the film envisions redemption to be. All we are given is the unfolding story. But a sense of peace has fallen across the film by the end, a kind of peace which I think is distinct from the sense of resignation earlier on in the story, where the protagonists sing 'Wise Up', and Stanley Spector sings the final line "So just give up." Earl Partridge and Jimmy Gator have died, and while there is certainly no unequivocal sense of justice with their demise, their own stories and those of their victims - Frank Mackey and Rose and Claudia Wilson are assumed into a wider narrative, one in which those who have love to give are eventually paired with those who desperately need love: Rose and Claudia, Frank and Linda, Jim and Claudia, and perhaps even Donnie and Jim. The overall sense at the end of *Magnolia* is hope – or faith in redemption insofar as such faith represents a basic acknowledgement that these 'things that happen' are somehow held, and ordered towards good. It is the sense of peace that Rainer Maria Rilke hinted at when he wrote, "And yet there's one who's holding all this falling/endlessly tender in his upturned hand."<sup>15</sup> *Magnolia*'s liturgical performance through sound of this narrative of redemption affirms the fact of being held, while remaining reticent – perhaps apophatic - about the identity or presence of the one holding. So, as Kurring talks Donnie through giving back the money to Solomon Solomon, we hear him ask, "What can we forgive? That's the tough part of the job, the tough part of walking down the street." And as he speaks to Claudia, we hear Aimee Mann singing "But can you

save me? Come on and save me, if you would save me...”. Kurring says “You see?” – and Claudia looks directly at the camera, and we cut to the coda. If it was in a movie, we wouldn’t believe it.

The other point to make about redemption in *Magnolia* is this: despite the presence of a narrator and the narrative coherence created by an unseen editing hand, the narrative of redemption that I think emerges and brings all the characters together does not draw attention to an all-powerful director figure. Rather, through bleeding together sound, lives and stories, *Magnolia* draws attention to the ways we participate in stories over which we have no control – perhaps another element of *Magnolia* which speaks to a female viewing position. For all the significance set up by the prologue, all the ‘things that happen’ are viewed from within the confused and confusing dramatic space in which they occur. The meaning of these events is significant, but not fixed; their meaning is not foreclosed by any definite idea from ‘outside’ the drama of what redemption might actually be. Redemption is experienced less as event or resolution and more as a work in progress, or a fuzzy horizon within the dramatic space. *Magnolia*’s use of sound is what, I suggest, tips us over from interpreting it as soap opera to being able to see it as a liturgical and redemptive. Together with the unusual structure of the film, sound is also what makes the narrative of redemption so unintrusive in the film and yet so profoundly resonant with salvation as I think it is often experienced as a horizon in the church: fuzzy, embodied, and sometimes hard to see.

Part of the reason why *Magnolia* is so good, and part of the reason why this paper was so difficult to write, is that it is nigh on impossible to speak of narratives of redemption without simply retelling the stories of people’s lives. This is what *Magnolia* does: it retells

the stories of people's lives, but with that kind of tension I mentioned at the start between chance and fate, chosen and spurned, significant and irrelevant. I have argued that sound in *Magnolia* acts as a deep narrative, pulling these discrete stories together in their retelling, and quietly reuniting them in an underlying narrative of redemption. As with all good narratives of redemption, it is hard to reduce to any kind of lowest common denominator or any principle outside the stories in which it occurs. *Magnolia*'s keen sense of the irreducible nature of human suffering, the complexity of relationships, motives and emotions has something of Donald MacKinnon's approach to atonement as tragedy: its liturgical approach to narration assumes the stories of those who act and those who view, touching what MacKinnon calls those "deepest contradictions of human life...without the distorting consolation of belief in a happy ending."<sup>16</sup> *Magnolia* presents us with a narrative which, while refusing to trivialise suffering and the particular, nevertheless involves the audience in affirming the possibility of redemption.

To conclude, I have argued that sound in *Magnolia* acts as a deep narrative, playing on the narrative's protology and eschatology to create a kind of purposefulness and direction in the film. The tension between chance and fate introduced in the prologue is explored throughout the film in a space which I have described as liturgical. Sound is used to establish the narrative of redemption enacted in the liturgy, through linking characters, establishing narrative coherence and working in motifs of transcendence and purpose. Sound is also a major factor in representing that narrative to the audience. Through confusing the boundaries between reality and story, sound extends the narrative of redemption to the audience, assuming their stories into the narrative of 'things that happen'.

As the first frogs begin to fall, it becomes apparent that sound is linked to redemption, because it signifies a different story, one that goes ‘all the way down’ and eventually, unavoidably, erupts into our own story.<sup>17</sup>

Is this just another one of those things? What questions might this interpretation of the film raise for theological reflection? Particularly, what might *Magnolia*’s narrative of redemption say to the church in the postmodern context, deeply invested as it is in an unfolding story over which it claims to have no control? I think theological reflection on *Magnolia* in a Western cultural context where, as Gerard Loughlin puts it, we are little storytellers living among the ruins of our former grand narratives, can shed light on how the church might proclaim narratives of universal significance. The church, too, is proffering a narrative of redemption where the historical and accidental events of one man’s life are held up as the supreme instance of ‘not-just-one-of-those-things’. By quietly telling its story of redemption from within the theo-dramatic horizon in this way, the church may find resources better to negotiate not only its own perennial and inherent sinfulness and stupidity, but also to address a culture of ever changing narrative bricolage. For where the church becomes a living story about those who need love finding those with love to give, where the church refuses to trivialise suffering but nevertheless hopes in the essential ‘heldness’ of creation, where the church confusedly but steadfastly tries to orient its life to the deeper narrative of redemption, then it may learn to bear profound but self-effacing witness to the story that the world may be through with the Word, but Word ain’t through with us.

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<sup>1</sup> *Magnolia*'s script is available online at <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Magnolia.html>

<sup>2</sup> While *Magnolia* has generated a lot of theological interest, particularly in theological blogging circles, there remain few papers on the film.

<sup>3</sup> Mario DeGiglio Bellamare, 'Magnolia and the Signs of the Times: A Theological Reflection', *Journal of Religion and Film*, 4:2 (2000), §13–14.

<sup>4</sup> Bellamare, 'Magnolia and the Signs of the Times', §13–15.

<sup>5</sup> Joanne Clarke Dillman, 'Twelve Characters in Search of a Televisual Text: *Magnolia* Masquerading as Soap Opera', *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 33:3 (2005), 142–150.

<sup>6</sup> Joanne Clarke Dillman, 'Twelve Characters in Search of a Televisual Text', 143–4.

<sup>7</sup> Joanne Clarke Dillman, 'Twelve Characters in Search of a Televisual Text', 144–.

<sup>8</sup> Erin Runions, 'Falling Frogs and Family Traumas: Mediating Apocalypse in *Magnolia*', *How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 133–63. Runions' paper is fascinating, and her analysis of the role of television in *Magnolia* alongside the philosophy of Walter Benjamin is particularly suggestive.

<sup>9</sup> Runions, 'Falling Frogs and Family Traumas', 141–2.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson has said that he sees Mann's voice as an extra character in the narrative: for an interesting commentary on this statement and analysis of Mann's voice as encouraging female viewing perspective, see Joanne Clarke Dillman, 'Twelve Characters in Search of a Televisual Text', 144.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Michael Goss comments on some of Anderson's 'startling sound bridges' in "'Things Like This Don't Just Happen': Ideology and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Hard Eight*, *Boogie Nights*, and *Magnolia*", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 26:2 (2002), 171–91, (177).

<sup>12</sup> Joanne Clarke Dillman, 'Twelve Characters in Search of a Televisual Text', 150.

<sup>13</sup> Clarke Dillman makes a similar point about the prevalence of screens calling into question the reality of what the viewer has just seen.

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the subheading for such a study could be 'Christ as good cop'. Kurring is the only character who decides to 'save' others, and whose actions are governed by a coherent sense of his own purpose and mission. Though we are made aware of his failures to be a 'good cop' in any ordinary sense (asking someone out on a date during a call out, dropping his nightstick, losing his gun), Kurring nevertheless represents something of a salvific figure in those whose lives he touches – particularly Claudia and Donnie.

<sup>15</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Herbst', online at [http://www.onlinekunst.de/rilke/rilke\\_herbst.html](http://www.onlinekunst.de/rilke/rilke_herbst.html)  
Translation is my own.

<sup>16</sup> Donald MacKinnon, 'Subjective and Objective Conceptions of Atonement', F.G Healey (ed.), *Prospect for Theology: Essays in Honour of H.H. Farmer*, (Welwyn: James Nisbet and Company, 1966), 172.

<sup>17</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.