

## “Intersections and Strange Things Told”: San Fernando Valley as Depicted in Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia*

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### Introduction

During promotions for his third film, *Magnolia* (1999), writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson said that it was “for better or worse, the best movie I’ll ever make” (Kermode). Made two years after his father died of cancer, the film is a three-hour long opus about illness, grief, romance, and divine intervention that tracks the intersecting lives of twelve main characters over the course of a single day. Thirteen main characters, if you also include the character of San Fernando Valley itself, where the film takes place. Nearly two-thirds of the San Fernando Valley’s land area is part of the City of Los Angeles; it is located in the northern section of the city, north of the Hollywood Hills, and while Hollywood District is not located within the Valley, “Hollywood” is indeed the specter that hangs overhead. Most major film and television studios – including Warner Bros., CBS, Disney, NBC, ABC, and Universal – are located here. Anderson, who was born and raised in the Valley, is thus afforded a unique perspective on Hollywood not as a metonymic behemoth of beauty and glamour, but as the stark realities of his own backyard. His film *Magnolia* tackles themes about the artifice of performativity, the emptiness of late capitalism, and the yearning to connect with others in a sprawling and labyrinthine city.

Magnolia Blvd. centralizes the sprawl of the San Fernando Valley

Unlike New York City, which is dense and compact in its vertical expression of urbanization, Los Angeles is notable for being wide and flat. In *Magnolia*, Anderson makes the feeling of urban sprawl palpable not through the use of wide establishing shots or long, sweeping takes of cars driving down streets, but by keeping the camera closed in tightly on his characters, mostly as they navigate interior spaces. Whenever characters enter new locations, the camera still keeps the building they are about to enter in-frame and mid-distance, so the audience cannot orient itself in relation to where the characters have been and where they are about to go, the crosscutting jumping quickly from one character to another as they make their way through the day.

This sense of physical displacement is made particularly apparent due to the sheer number of characters in the film who wander around various parts of the city near Magnolia Boulevard, from the hotel where sex guru Frank “T.J.” Mackie gives men a seminar on how to “Seduce & Destroy” women; to the deathbed of his estranged father, the wealthy television producer Big Earl Partridge who eventually seeks to reconcile with him; from the pharmacy where Partridge’s hysterical trophy wife Linda buys her husband’s liquid morphine and her own depression medication; to the sound stage where Jimmy Gator, who is dying of cancer, hosts a television quiz show called “What Do Kids Know?” produced by Partridge that features the boy-genius Stanley Spector; from the bar where former boy-genius and now-loser “Quiz Kid” Donnie Smith attempts to seduce the barman; to the apartment of Claudia, the estranged and coke-addled daughter of Gator who falls in love with an incompetent police officer. There is no sense of the city’s boundaries, which ironically makes the scale of the San Fernando Valley

seem oppressive. Frenetic camerawork pushes the characters onward as they hurtle through the labyrinth of the city while in fits of existential confusion, heightening the tension and anxiety that runs ragged through the film.

The parallel plot threads that loosely tie all of the characters together emphasize the phenomenon of coincidence and the universality of the plight of the city's inhabitants. The city's size works as both an advantage and a disadvantage for the characters in the film. Emotional estrangement from their families, whether voluntary or involuntary, mirrors the vast distances they must cross in order to talk together, if they choose to meet at all. The moment of the film's climax when frogs rain down from the sky is one of the few instances of the film that feature the characters interacting in the same urban space. Magnolia Boulevard becomes the focal point for the world of the film in an otherwise decentralized, featureless city. At the intersection of Magnolia and Ventura, the paramedics drive through the red light and take Linda to the emergency room after she attempts suicide by overdosing on her prescription medication, then the camera pans to "Quiz Kid" Donnie Smith in a Buick in the next lane, who has just robbed his ex-employer and is wracked with guilt (02:42). Jimmy Gator's wife Rose is also driving along Ventura, in an attempt to visit their daughter Claudia after Jimmy more or less confesses to having molested her when she was a child. Meanwhile, Officer Jim Kurring drives down the street after his failed date with Claudia. As everyone moves past each other unknowingly, the viewer is overcome with an awareness of the tragedy of missed connections.

As the camera continues to look forward along Ventura Boulevard, the street is dark and devoid of people. The streetlamps reflect off the wet asphalt and concrete buildings because of the unexpected rain from earlier in the day, making the street glisten with a stark, cold light.

The color palette that dominates the film is in full effect here, with greys and browns and reds giving the city a sense of shabbiness. The neon signs and traffic lights that frame the shot are a feeble attempt to warm up the space, exposing the tackiness of the city instead of lifting and modernizing it. In the absence of extras in the film, the streets look old and ugly, abandoned in an almost post-apocalyptic neglect. This furthers the notion that the lives of the characters can be subsumed into the space itself. The sudden barrage of frogs from the sky, streaking their cars with slime, affixes each character to that space and to that moment as reality and expectations are overturned in an almost perfunctory way.

#### Motifs of Late Capitalism Essentialize the Reality of Suburban Ennui

The material products of consumerist culture are featured prominently in *Magnolia*. The cliché of the petroleum-addicted Los Angeles is actualized in the film, but the cars serve as more than a means of transport. While they can help characters to connect between spaces in the city, they can also be a means of self-induced alienation. For instance, Frank sits in his car in front of his childhood home before he musters the ability to reconcile with his dying father. Cars can also serve as morbid, modern coffins as well as impromptu confessional booths to commune with God. For example, Linda attempts suicide in her car because of the privacy it offers, as she feels remorse for marrying Earl for his money and only finally loving him when he is about to die. Meanwhile, Donnie, having just robbed Solomon & Solomon, sits in his car at the intersection of Ventura and Magnolia and shouts at the ceiling, "What the fuck am I doing?!" before making a U-turn and driving back to the store (02:42). After Officer Kurring helps Donnie return the cash and decides not to arrest him, Kurring gets behind the wheel of his car and says aloud, "A lot of people think this is just a job that you go to: take a lunch hour,

the job's over, something like that. But it's a 24-hour deal, no two ways about it. And what most people don't see: just how hard it is to do the right thing... But you can forgive someone. Well, that's the tough part. What do we forgive?" (02:58). Unlike his earlier posturing and monologues, this is the first instance of vulnerability the audience witnesses in Kurring. We see that the loneliness and the responsibility of his job takes a personal toll on him.

Televisions in *Magnolia* are portrayed as devices that can numb, seduce, and torture its viewers in equal measure. As the city that houses the entertainment industry, Los Angeles is the place where reality and fiction often intersect, and is often a place that encourages delusion. In each of the character's homes, there is a television that they gaze at placidly while Jimmy Gator, Stanley, and Frank "T.J." Mackie perform and advertise their products and personas onscreen. Televisions are a means for distraction, but are also a way of imprisoning people and preventing them from escaping the images that haunt them. For example, Claudia is often seen snorting cocaine in her living room while watching her sexually abusive father interact with children on his game show. Furthermore, Frank's advertisements for his seminars brainwash people with the myth of self-improvement through the acquisition of material products, and Anderson suggests that the drugs with which Linda, Earl, and Claudia self-medicate are to numb and heal their pain (both physical and emotional). The self-hatred they experience is through hyperawareness of their situations reflected back to them onscreen.

Claudia, Donnie, Stanley, and Frank must constantly overcome their personal traumas effected by the sins of their fathers, and respond with self-destructive drug use, self-improvement through unnecessary orthodontic work to mimic crush Brad the Barman's braces, passivity, and flagrant misogyny for commercial gain, respectively. Malaise, selfishness, regret,

emotional disconnect, and the ultimate meaninglessness of the items acquired via the seductive grip of late capitalism – instead of seeking genuine emotional contentment – are all nestled within a miasma of rundown corporate imagery that decorates the San Fernando Valley's streets and television screens. In *Magnolia*, Anderson exposes the irony of building an image-conscious industry within a decrepit and morally barren landscape. It is an industry that depends on selling products that enforce a particular culture of willful delusion that all the characters initially buy into yet become increasingly disillusioned by at the end of the film. By setting *Magnolia* in the San Fernando Valley and having his characters so intimately linked to the television industry, Anderson reveals 'the other side' of the television screen to the audience and helps break down the mysticism and the showiness of modern entertainment. Anderson takes the audience's voluntary 'suspension of disbelief' as they watch film and television, gradually destroys it, and demands that they view the artifice directly in the face.

#### Reality and Hyper-reality, Narration and Meta-Narration

For the characters in *Magnolia*, the entertainment industry is so integral to the fabric of their existence that they not only have an awareness of the contrivances of film and television, but also rely on the medium to construct their perceptions of reality. This places them in an odd state of hyperconsciousness that becomes emotionally unbearable until the moment when the melodrama is destabilized by a shocking twist of raining frogs that none of them could have predicted, but is a scene that adds a Biblical scope to the film that aligns closely with its themes of coincidence and fate. Every character recognizes that the space they occupy – whether they are knowingly in front of the camera or not – is a stage for them to perform, from the sound stage of "What Do Kids Know?" to Earl's deathbed to Linda's emotional meltdown at the

pharmacy to Frank's dual performances in front of the seminar audience and the female journalist Gwenovier. The characters have an awareness of an outside viewer, an audience that they are compelled to perform for in the film and beyond the scope of the film, and what Anderson accomplishes by making these characters so melodramatic is turning the audience's gaze inward and examining our own artificiality in social situations.

For example, when Earl's nurse Phil Parma first greets him, Earl goes, "I don't wanna do this. This is so boring. Dying wish, man on a bed..." (00:20). Later, when Phil calls Frank's "Seduce & Destroy" help line in an attempt to reunite father and son, Phil tells the man on the phone, "I know this sounds silly, and I know I might sound ridiculous, like this is the scene in the movie where the guy is trying to get ahold of the long lost son, but *this is that scene*. This is that scene. And I think they have those scenes in movies because they're *true*. Because they really happen. And you gotta believe me, this is really happening" (01:09). Although Phil acknowledges how trite the situation appears, pointing out the improbable contrivance of the estrangement between father and son earns a level of trust with the other person on the phone. In this moment, the common language of cinema is able to connect two distinct individuals and construct a conduit of empathy for Earl and his dying wish. This level of meta-reality suggests the possibility of a universe working cooperatively with the people who exist within it, and that their awareness of their fragile grasp of the world strengthens their ability to bear the punishing yet mysterious laws that govern it.

As opposed to moments of absolute clarity and hyperconsciousness, there are instances in the film when the characters appear to be so overcome by the strength of their emotions that they cannot properly articulate their fears and anxieties, speaking in garbled, grandiose,

and heightened axioms that edge towards the emotions but are imparted more as physical sensations than as abstractions. When Donnie confesses to Officer Kurring, he cries, "I don't know where to put things! I have a lot of love to give! I just don't know where to put it!" (02:55), he describes his emotion as a physical object, a physical illness, incurable. For the characters in *Magnolia*, the emotions *are* their reality; the experiences they live are tied inexorably to how they feel when they are able to connect with other human beings. Anderson demonstrates that the connective human experience can transcend language, and that language can often serve to bolster the *illusion* of the presented reality but fails to touch upon the truth. For example, when Linda prepares to leave for the day, making phone calls and arranging details with Phil, she speaks rapidly, ignoring Phil's responses before continuing with her monologue. Even in the presence of others, she is still oriented in her own narrative and isn't listening or responding naturally to the flow of conversation. When she pauses to kiss Earl's forehead to whisper, "I love you, Earl," even that appears like an insincere line that she knows she must utter before leaving for the day (00:10). Later, at the pharmacy, when the pharmacist casually comments about the odd mix of Dextroamphetamine, Prozac, and liquid morphine she is buying, she breaks down, screaming, "I come in here, you don't know me, you don't know who I am, or what my life is and you have the fucking balls, the indecency to ask me a question about my life..." and despite her tirade, the level of performance in her indignation puts the audience at arm's length and she becomes difficult to sympathize with (01:13). The audience feels her shame, rather than any righteous anger, as a woman who superficially appears to have been afforded life's luxuries yet lives in a society that stigmatizes and trivializes

mental illness. Her rant is her distraction technique as she attempts to flee the unwanted audience who is witness to her vulnerability.

Similarly, Stanley rejects the performance he is pressured to give by his father and the production staff at "What Do Kids Know?" After he is not allowed to use the bathroom and wets himself on the soundstage, Stanley, embarrassed and realizing his function as a pawn in to be objectified and othered by the show's live audience, tells Jimmy Gator on-air, "This isn't funny. This isn't cute. See, if we were looked at... I'm not a toy. I'm not a doll. The way we're looked at because you think we're cute? Because you think I'm a freak if I answer questions? Or I'm smart? Or I have to go to the bathroom? What is that, Jimmy? What is that? I'm asking you that" (01:54). Frank's performativity, unlike Stanley's, is wrested from him unwillingly. At the beginning of the film, the audience watches as an enthusiastic (male) crowd cheers while Frank spits out derogatory proclamations about overpowering women for sexual pleasure. He flexes onstage and moves his hips to demonstrate his prowess. Later, when he is interviewed by Gwenovier, the predicted gender dynamics play out. Frank strips off his shirt and pants, swaggering about and doing acrobatics, and Gwenovier sits passively with a coquettish smile on her face, but over the course of the interview she completely dismantles his persona, asking him about his father Earl who abandoned him and his sick mother whom he cared for until her death when he was fourteen years old (00:52). Initially, Frank believes his posturing is working for him; he spins an elaborate, impressive narrative about his dead father and his doting, supportive mother. He tells Gwenovier, "See, what you're looking at is a true rags-to-riches story" (01:16). Frank looks directly into the camera and says, "That's why people respond so strongly to 'Seduce.' It's about finding out what you want to be in this world. It's about defining

it and controlling it. And saying, 'I will take what is mine.'" In changing his name and constructing this over-the-top identity, Frank not only persuades his audience, but he vocalizes it to convince *himself* of his self-constructed myth of personality. When he realizes Gwenovier's ulterior motive to expose his past, he chooses to remain combatively silent and still for the rest of the interview, abandoning all attempts to perform a convincing self-constructed lie, as owning up to the truth would prove self-destructive for his carefully crafted image.

Officer Kurring spends intervals throughout the film driving around in his cop car, speaking in a rehearsed, thoughtful way as though he was being interviewed on-site on the television show "Cops." The monologues are self-indulgent, and Kurring always keeps his head still with his eyes on the road, as though he is really aware that a cameraman is seated in the passenger seat and pointing the camera at the profile of his face. These monologues, about the responsibilities of his job, the struggles, and the loneliness of trying to do the right thing, encapsulate the only aspect about himself on which he prides himself. In a city so focused on the value of one's image, he needs assurance for himself that he can be presentable and accepted by a larger viewing audience. By mimicking the format of "Cops," Anderson suggests that Kurring's consumption of heightened reality television to inform his own professional work ethic skews his behaviors and makes him out of touch with the community he tries to serve, though his attempts are earnest and endear him to the audience.

Anderson suggests that the artifice of their performativity to cope with the struggles of living have in turn hollowed them out into veneers, reducing them into easily identifiable archetypes that work as pawns in a larger story; at the same time, their larger-than-life

personas are not sustainable in actual public social spaces. The persistently inauthentic culture of the San Fernando Valley limits the characters' ability to connect on a human level, and in their delusions of celebrity they fail to realize how devoid of honesty and empathy they really are until they acknowledge and overcome their insincerity.

### Conclusion

In *Magnolia*, Anderson balances the notion of the San Fernando Valley as a place that both perpetuates and is removed from the glamour of Hollywood, as his characters reconcile with the consequences of their own delusions and the consequences of the delusions of those around them. Anderson does not provide a tourist's eye of the city. He does not use the predictable cinematic techniques of films about urbanization, and does not set up his film with an establishing shot of a crowd in a city that dollies in on an individual, following him or her around for the duration of the film. Instead, he uses interlocking narratives with multiple characters of equal importance to make everything feel intimate yet epic with its complex narrative structure and heady emotional beats, experimenting with the audience's ability to both willingly sustain disbelief yet also admire the architecture of the film he has created. He allows the audience to be enclosed tightly within the spaces occupied by the characters, helping us see that while they are not perfect, they can be forgiven. Anderson asserts that the San Fernando Valley is its people, making the urban space feel both inexorable and unstable, and worthy of love.

References

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