



12-16-2016

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Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare
University of Toronto, mario.bellemare@utoronto.ca

Recommended Citation

DeGiglio-Bellemare, Mario (2016) "Magnolia and the Signs of the Times: A Theological Reflection," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol4/iss2/4>

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Magnolia and the Signs of the Times: A Theological Reflection

Abstract

This piece attempts to articulate a theological reading of the film *Magnolia*, directed by P.T. Anderson. The author endeavours to locate God within the matrix of human relationality in the film. The God depicted in *Magnolia*, argues the author, is the God of liberation, the God who took the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. This God of Exodus gives signs of imminent freedom to people living within systems of captivity which crush dreams and deny the flourishing of hope. *Magnolia* depicts the lives of people tossed aside by the television industry in Los Angeles. God's signs, however, remind us that it is precisely those who are tossed aside, or marginalized, who will find a new voice and help heal the brokenness of the world.

The crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. (Matthew 15:31)

What are the "signs of the times" in our historical moment that awaken us to the reality of injustice? And how is the present reality ultimately linked to the history of social relationships in our past? These are some of the questions raised by writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson, in his new film, *Magnolia*. There has been a lot of talk about *Magnolia* in recent months, but much of it has erased the film's theological content. And this is ironic for a film that appropriates the biblical traditions of Judaism and Christianity to wrestle with issues such as liberation, forgiveness, sin, and grace. Anderson impressed the film world in 1997 with *Boogie Nights*, a compassionate depiction of the porn industry set in the 1970s and 80s. *Boogie Nights* is not sensationalistic, nor does it exalt the porn industry as a self-important counter-cultural movement, as does Milos Forman's *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. In fact, *Boogie Nights* is rather modest in its intentions which consist in depicting the successes and failures of life on the margins of the glamorous and "respectable" Hollywood film industry. If *Boogie Nights* was Anderson's *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese) of the porn industry, *Magnolia* is his *Nashville* (Robert Altman) of the entertainment industry. Like *Boogie Nights*, *Magnolia* addresses the plight of people who live within social structures that appropriate patriarchal versions of masculinity as paradigms for personal success. Unlike *Boogie Nights*, however, *Magnolia* is focused on the destructive inter-generational effects of the television industry on people who are seeking liberation from oppressive structures and relationships which are in a state of crisis.

Similar to Altman's *Nashville* (1975), *Magnolia* weaves together different stories that reach a climax with the death of one of the characters at the end of the film. While *Nashville* is centred around the country music scene, *Magnolia* is concerned with the ethos of fame in the Los Angeles television industry. Unlike Altman's more recent *Short Cuts* (1993), to which *Magnolia* is often compared, *Nashville* ends with a sense of hope for life lived with dignity within structures that crush dreams and human agency. Hope also resonates powerfully in *Magnolia*, which depicts a day in the life of a dozen characters who are somehow loosely associated with the dying television producer, Earl Partridge (Jason Robards). The film is operatic in its magnitude and scope, and it moves between stories without urgency, allowing the deeper emotions of the characters to slowly surface. At 179 minutes, *Magnolia* unfolds at a deliberate pace, conscious of the need for attention and watchfulness as the characters slowly allow themselves to become vulnerable and awaken to life's sufferings and joys. Much of the film is shot in exquisite close-ups revealing in some of the characters their past sorrows and defeats, while in others, their struggle for authenticity in the present.

Magnolia is about the links between the past and present, but ultimately, I believe, it is also about finding hope in those small moments of grace that fall through the cracks of our lives; it is about a certain kind of hope that allows us to befriend the past and risk an uncertain future. I will not endeavour to map out the

complex connections that slowly unfold in the film. It is fascinating to make the connections as the characters slowly revealed their inner worlds. The connections that exist between the characters are not always obvious. Connections, however, is what *Magnolia* brilliantly succeeds in highlighting - based in part on some very inspired editing. The opening sequences about the so-called coincidences of history reinforces the importance of the past on our lives, of the baggage we carry into the present. We are told that when the surface of coincidence is more deeply probed, we are more likely to find broken relationships, such as the parents of the suicidal boy who threatened each other with a shot gun. The film asks us to ponder how labeling something a coincidence can mask more telling undercurrents.

In *Magnolia*, much pain runs below the surface in the lives of the characters. This pain is what constitutes the important connections in the film. Anderson insists on a pyramidal structure in the setup of his characters. Earl Partridge's death bed represents the pinnacle of power in the film. One must not forget that Anderson is depicting the lives of people in the television industry. Their lives represent the pathologies of fame and success in such an industry: the career pressures, the competitiveness, the stress, the lying, alcoholism, drug addiction, and ultimately, the broken confidence of fallen glories and the defeated spirit of shame. As I watched the film, I was reminded of *The Brothers Karamazov*, by F. Dostoyevsky, where the lives of the brothers in the novel reflect and resist the structures of sin

ascribed to the life of the father. I write structures of sin here because I want to emphasize that in *Magnolia*, the revelation of past sins is not only the stuff of personal lives; it is first and foremost presented intergenerationally and arising out of the ethos of commercial success in the television business.

Partridge's son, Frank Mackey (Tom Cruise), is a cocky macho infomercial host and workshop facilitator for men who want to reclaim their "real" masculinity. In an interview, Frank loses face on account of a reporter's probing questions in relation to contradicting stories about the death of his parents. This occurs not only as a result of past tensions with his father - we find out about his absence at Frank's mother's deathbed - but because the lie about his father's alleged death reveals a bigger lie that his television career represents. For Frank, success, and independence from his father take the form of aggressive women-hating on the surface. Yet we slowly discover the pain his aggressive behaviour seeks to mask.

Television is about putting on masks. And these masks are real because they hinder human relationality. Los Angeles is a city of masks. Even the police force must wear masks to project an aura of power. Officer Kurring (John C. Reilly), is a cop whose awkward expression of masculinity, even in its paternalism, does not live up the slick and aggressive image of the LAPD - the most televised police force in North America - and finds himself marginalized by his fellow officers. In Kurring's gentle religious presence we find a man who endeavours to do right. In

the system of violence and brutality that the LAPD represents, Kurring's attempts at righteousness ring hollow until he meets a young woman, named Claudia (Melora Walters), whose internal strife is masked by a cocaine addiction. When Claudia and Kurring meet for a date, he shares his vulnerability with her in a moment that signals the beginning of a healing process between them. Yet Kurring cannot allow himself to be vulnerable when he is in uniform, especially when he loses his gun tracking a suspected criminal. Kurring is ridiculed by his peers because of this. For a police officer to lose his gun is tantamount to betrayal in a world where masculinity is measured by the brutality with which one wields a weapon.

Magnolia is as much about Los Angeles, a city of stardom and wealth, as it is about the people who inhabit the city. The film's biggest flaw is to underplay the other side of Los Angeles: the racial discrimination and the poverty in the inner cities.¹ Unfortunately, Anderson does not approach the racist segregation of Los Angeles with much complexity. In a film that so powerfully resonates with the idea of liberation, race issues should have been prioritized. Although the film is focused on the more success-oriented side of Los Angeles, it does, however, venture into more marginal areas of the city through the point-of-view of officer Kurring. And it is here that we meet the film's prophet who raps "gangster-style" on the street for

the police officer. Kurring's only response to the young boy's rap, which is supposed to help him solve a murder case, is to reprimand the young boy for swearing.

The boy seems unintelligible to the officer because Kurring is reading his discourse through lenses that fear black masculinity and street gangs as they are constructed on MTV and in the media. Does the young boy rap gibberish or does he rap a truth that is undiscernible to those who do not have the ears to hear? Is the young boy's rap a sign, among other more discernable (and literal) signs, that cannot be understood in a city fixated on stardom? "You know how to interpret the appearances of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times" (Mt 16:3). What are these "signs of the times" that Jesus is talking about in Matthew? In theological terms, they are the signs which point to the coming of G*d's² Reign, where the sick are healed, where the marginalized find community, and where the voiceless find a voice. This young black boy has found a voice, but is he heard? As we shall see near the end of the film, some signs are more obvious than others.

What on the surface seems like a strange occurrence, or a bizarre coincidence, might very well be G*d speaking in ways that seem undiscernible. Anderson's subtle depiction of Jim Kurring's Christian faith links liberation to religious ethics in the film. Kurring's faith is not only depicted as a private experience divorced from social concerns. Kurring takes his faith out into the streets; it functions as the moral foundation for his police work. But for Kurring,

salvation is ultimately linked to personal striving, to moral uprightness, and to individual wrestling with sin. However, as the plague of frogs suggests, liberation requires more than the eradication of personal sins; it requires an exodus from structures of sin that enslave and destroy lives. These structures are complex and inter-connected. In the film, they include the television industry, but also, the system of police protection set up to safeguard the lives of those who profit from the industry. In this sense, Kurring's faith cannot actively respond to the structures he himself protects. Yet Kurring's vulnerability within the force suggests a man struggling with what it means to do right in the context of social injustice. Kurring believes that sometimes people need to be forgiven and sometimes they need to go to jail but he never questions those structures which tend to privilege the sentencing of black men and the poor. The plague of frogs is as much a judgement on Kurring's kind of faith - an individualistic faith which subtly upholds the status quo - as it is on the structures which keep the poor and marginalized captive.

Following Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, I understand theology to be "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word of G*d".³ As a Christian theologian deeply concerned about the plight of human suffering and injustice, *Magnolia* speaks volumes to me about where G*d is found in the world and how G*d operates in history. In my opinion, the film locates G*d in the broken and vulnerable people who endeavour to reconstruct their lives within the belly of

the beast. Moreover, the film also portrays some characters as actively working to support G*d's justice in the world. As with Jesus, who lived in a small country under Roman occupation and who preached the coming of G*d's Reign in opposition to Caesar's reign (the pax romana), healing the sick and casting out evil spirits were signs of G*d's presence among the overburdened. Some of these illnesses were social ills, the effect of conquest and dehumanization on the people of Palestine. In our time, the empire produces new social ills, some of which are brilliantly portrayed in the film: addictions of all sorts, sexism, racism, shame, and despair.

Jesus performed miracles and they were signs of G*d's coming Reign. Also, G*d showed the Pharaoh signs that Moses would lead his people out of bondage into the wilderness of freedom. In *Magnolia*, G*d sends a plague of frogs down on Los Angeles in order to let the people know that the coming of liberation is imminent. The G*d of "signs" depicted in *Magnolia* is the G*d of the outcry; it is this G*d who is revealed to the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible, the G*d who hears the outcry of the vulnerable and participates with them in their journey to freedom (Exodus 2: 23-25). G*d's promise of liberation is also a judgement on the structures that keep people in captivity. The plague of frogs in the film is not explained in any scientific way.⁴ Like the Exodus story from which it derives, the plague of frogs is a theological truth, a truth that points to G*d's intervention in history. Some biblical

scholars have attempted 'natural' or 'scientific' explanations for the Exodus plagues, such as red algae to explain the turning of the Nile into blood - the first plague in the Exodus story. This is not an appropriate hermeneutic for the biblical story. The Exodus plagues are narratives that reveal where G*d is found in the world. In Exodus, religious faith is linked to the active participation in G*d's liberating work among the slaves and oppressed of the world. G*d is found among the slaves of Egypt who cry out for freedom. The Jewish Passover is a ritual remembrance of G*d's liberating work among the "Moses group" and their acceptance of G*d's covenant with them at Mount Sinai. The G*d of Magnolia is the G*d of Exodus, a G*d who is at work in history, not above history, who cares for the slave, not the Pharaoh, who seeks change, not the status quo.

As I mentioned earlier, the liberation process depicted in *Magnolia* is not simply about personal sins, although on the surface there is an attempt by some of the characters to seek repentance for past sins. However, there is another level of sin depicted in the film which is deeply embedded within the pyramidal system of star production in Los Angeles. This is symbolised by the dying man, the television producer, the Pharaoh, who, like Fyodor Karamazov in Dostoyevsky's novel represents the grain of wheat in John 12: 24: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit." For Dostoyevsky, the death of the father occasions a profound transformation in the life

of his sons.⁵ Dostoyevsky's idea is not that the father, the Pharaoh figure, must die in order for the children to be released. His main conviction is that death is not the last word in history. For Christians, the resurrection of Jesus represents a rupture in history; it is a moment that reveals G*d's solidarity with the vanquished of history. The idea that new life stems out of death, or that letting go of our false selves can bring about a new relationship with life, is an insight taught in many of the religious traditions of the world. From the symbol of death which Partridge's deathbed represents, liberation surges forth and hope struggles to find a voice in the suffering and vulnerable characters of the film. As the quiz show host, Jimmy Gator (Philip Baker Hall), reminds us when he is comparing the scores between the adults and the children: "the kids are not out of it yet."

Magnolia is a film that is anchored in the hope that children will be released from the captivity imposed on them by adults who fetishistically cling to fame and wealth. However, no-one can predict the coming of G*d's Reign in the world, nor is it possible to predict the movements of the Spirit in history. Even G*d's signs can be difficult to discern. Yet it will be the children, the "least of these" (Mt 25: 45), who will be the first to understand the implications of G*d's signs of grace in the world. After the plague of frogs has descended on Los Angeles, the quiz show wonder, Stanley (Jeremy Blackman), finds a new voice and the courage to tell his father that he should be nicer to him. Like Stanley's active support of G*d's Reign,

Jesus also did not draw a lesson of inactivity with respect to the gratuitousness of G*d's Reign. In fact, he actively worked to support the Reign of G*d through his healings and table-sharing ministry. Moreover, one will be alert to the "signs of the times" if one remain close to those for who the Reign has been proclaimed: the children, the victims of abuse, the slaves, the drug addicts, the depressed, the poor, and powerless. In other words, one will know something about G*d if one works in solidarity with the victims and survivors of this world's systems of power and prestige.

In the last shot of the film, Anderson takes us beyond the masks of false security and internalized oppression as we witness the liberating process of G*d's promise. Here, we are met by the smile of Claudia, who is moving out of the depths of despair, pain, and addiction, with the compassionate support of Kurring. Over the soundtrack Aimee Mann sings "Save Me," a song about overcoming self-hatred through the power of self-giving and mutuality. Are structures of oppression being toppled in *Magnolia*? This is the wrong starting point for understanding the transformative processes at work in the film. In this last scene, we are seeing a "sign" that points to what our world could be like. We see that a new sense of hope has pitched its tent in Los Angeles. Kurring's caring attitude toward Claudia, Stanley's new stance towards his father, are but initial steps in that process. "Signs" are unfinished moments that point to a transformed future. Jesus' curing of the man

with leprosy (an illness and a social stigma) did not abolish all illness, but it did allow for the man's re-entry into the fabric of community. Those movements from the margins of community to its center can be "signs" of G*d's grace.

P. T. Anderson has articulated a vision that points beyond the 'post-modern' ethos of hip cynicism, so predominant in the films of the 1990s. *Magnolia* takes us into the realm of hope, where healing begins to blossom. *Magnolia* offers hope and empowerment in a world where injustice is embedded in the many layers of society. *Magnolia's* power lies in its ethical vision and in its ability to touch the raw core of human brokenness.

¹ In several interviews, Anderson has indicated that the first cut of the film ran an extra 20 minutes. He decided to trim the film down to three hours and most of the footage that ended up on the cutting room floor were the scenes associated with Marcia, "the worm," and the young black rapper. Would the extra footage reveal a more complex picture of race relations in Los Angeles? It is unfortunate that this storyline has been trimmed down so much. We are left with a murky storyline of African American life on the margins - one that unfortunately recapitulates racial stereotypes about "suspicious" black men involved in criminal activity in the shadows of a big city.

² I write G*d in this way to point toward G*d's ineffability and unnamability (Ex 3:14). It is not meant to denote the absolute transcendence of G*d, but to veer away from burdensome and gendered presuppositions of the word.

³ *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. xxix.

⁴ However, it is interesting to note here, that the health of frogs is considered by scientists to be a kind of litmus test for the health of the environment. Where frogs are endangered, other more deeply rooted environmental problems are usually uncovered as well.

⁵ A similar symbolic construction underscores the action of Karl, the main character played by Billy Bob Thornton in *Sling Blade* (1996).