

Film Review

Magnolia

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Recent years have seen several examples of a new aesthetic freedom in American cinema. Films such as Terence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1999), Spike Jonz's *Being John Malkovich* (1999) or the groundbreaking American-Vietnamese cooperation *Three Seasons* (1998) directed by Tony Bui have successfully enlarged the canon of traditional Hollywood aesthetics. While the concept of the blockbuster still dominates the scene, there is also a new sense of experiment. Sponsors seem to be more willing to invest in less spectacular productions that allow a greater amount of artistic freedom. It seems that Hollywood outsiders such as the Coen brothers or Robert Altman have paved the way for a whole new generation of Hollywood directors.

Paul Thomas Anderson is a good example. Having enjoyed considerable commercial success with *Boogie Nights* (1997), Anderson's most recent film *Magnolia* (1999) is a radical departure from the traditional concept of narrative film. Anderson's script links the story of about twelve characters by engaging them in a kind of patchwork aesthetics in the manner of Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*. The result is a fairly eclectic concept of film that points back to the director's personal vision and thus to the European concept of the *auteur*.

The film opens in black and white with three short episodes that are based around the themes of murder and suicide. The narrative relationship with the subsequent plot is purely associational; the three stories introduce the film's central motifs of death and coincidence which constantly reappear. A policeman (John C. Reilly), a fairly solitary person who prays before his daily routine, finds the corpse of a slain man who used to beat both his wife and his son. It remains open until the end of the film whether the wife or the son committed the murder. During the same day the policeman falls in love with the fairly enigmatic Claudia (Melora Walters) who takes cocaine. Two quiz show whiz-kids carry the burden of a destructive fatherly influence. One of them (Jeremy Blackman), apparently the most successful quiz kid of his time, tells his father towards the end of the film: "You have to be nicer to me, daddy!" For the other one called Donnie (William H. Macy) the moment of triumph is already decades away. Donnie is a real loser; his own father once cheated him out of the winning prize by keeping the money to himself. Clumsy and desperately trying to survive in a series of marginal jobs, Donnie finally has a brace made for

himself in order to gain the attention of the barkeeper he feels attached to. Donnie's attempts in this matter fail as miserably as his plan to break into his employer's office; Donnie falls from a window. His teeth get smashed so that the brace actually starts to fulfill a concrete function. It is this element of strange coincidence that is also responsible for the film's dramatic climax: frogs fall from the sky and unite all the characters in a moment of metaphorical catharsis. An element of surrealism totally subverts the conventions of narrative cinema and introduces a new type of artistic freedom.

The destructive influence of the father is also obvious in the scenes between Tom Cruise and his film father Jason Robards. Being a rather arrogant sex guru on the surface (motto: "Seduce and destroy!") it becomes gradually clear that Cruise's film ego, behind his façade, is suffering from a childhood trauma. As a consequence, the scenes between Cruise and his dying father (a former TV producer) turn into a rather agonizing experience somewhere between serious drama and cheap melodrama. Julianna Moore (as the producer's wife) walks the same line; she is constantly on the edge of a nervous breakdown. Only the male nurse (Philip Seymour Hoffman) remains calm and full of understanding. The plot comes full circle when the child quizmaster (Philip Baker Hall) collapses in front of the TV cameras. Facing death he gets confronted with his pedophile inclinations; fortunately enough, his traumatized daughter Claudia manages to attract the attention of the aforementioned policeman (who introduces a new element of hope to her life).

The entire action takes place during one day and a subsequent night so that the unity of time is preserved. The same holds true for the unity of place: All the stories are centred around the same area in Los Angeles, the Magnolia Boulevard in the San Fernando Valley. It is the area where Anderson grew up and where he still lives; the home of America's porn industry (and thus a natural production site for *Boogie Nights*) and of various TV studios. By filming all the scenes around the same area, Anderson managed to introduce a new sense of economical direction to Hollywood. A reasonable budget, after all, was his only chance to find sponsors for a fairly unusual cinematic experiment.