Reconsidering Apocalyptic Cinema: Pauline Apocalyptic and Paul Thomas Anderson

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Abstract: *Apocalypticism has been a consistent theme in modern culture. In recent religious studies, the definition of "apocalyptic" has undergone extensive revision and expansion, resulting in the articulation of a distinctively "Pauline" apocalyptic theology. This new conception of apocalypticism offers a new way to interpret works of popular culture, especially film. This paper argues that Paul Thomas Anderson's 1999 movie,* Magnolia, *is properly viewed as an apocalyptic film in this revised Pauline sense. Viewing it from this perspective helps to make better sense of its key themes and plot developments. The goal of the paper is to initiate a broader conversation regarding the field of apocalyptic cinema in light of the latest theological research.*

Keywords: *apocalyptic, Pauline theology, Paul Thomas Anderson,* Magnolia, *J. Louis Martyn, event, transcendence, paradox, parable, existential*

The category of "apocalyptic" has a long history in film studies. In numerous books and articles, the adjective refers to films related to the "end of history," whether in a religious sense (as in *The Rapture* or *Left Behind*) or in a secular sense (as in *Armageddon* or *War of the Worlds*). Conrad Ostwalt (2009) defines apocalyptic in terms of the literary genre associated with certain Jewish and Christian texts, such as Daniel, the Book of Enoch, Ezekiel, and the Apocalypse of John. Jerome Shapiro (2002) cites the work of John Joseph Collins (1998) as the basis for his understanding of the word apocalyptic. Mervyn Bendle (2005) associates apocalyptic with millennialism, tracing its history to modern dispensationalism. These and many other studies all take for granted a notion of apocalyptic forged within Second Temple Judaism and Christianized in the Book of Revelation. The apocalypse is thus a cataclysmic and world-historical event; it usually involves a dualistic conflict between good and evil, often portrayed in a highly symbolic or fantastical way. At the very least, it refers to something imminent, cosmic, and historical. The apocalypse is "the end of the world as we know it," as the R.E.M. song puts it.

The problem with this use of the term "apocalyptic" is that it does not take into account the wealth of scholarship regarding "Pauline apocalyptic." The conversation regarding apocalyptic themes in popular culture has remained stuck within a limited definition of the concept, one that doesn't address the diversity of New Testament apocalyptic texts. This paper proposes to bring the insights of J. Louis Martyn, among others, to bear upon the analysis of film. In light of Pauline scholarship, it becomes clear that the popular notion of "apocalyptic cinema" is far too narrow. Many other films need to be included in the dialogue. First among these, I argue, is Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999). I begin the paper with a brief overview of the distinguishing marks of Pauline apocalypticism, followed by an analysis of *Magnolia* as a contemporary cinematic take on the genre of "Pauline apocalyptic."[1] I conclude with a proposal for future discussion regarding the intersection of apocalyptic theology and film.

Pauline Apocalyptic and the Invasion of Grace

Modern research on New Testament apocalyptic originated with the pioneering work of scholars such as William Wrede, Johannes Weiss, and Albert Schweitzer. Their work demonstrated decisively that the old liberal notion (indebted to Kant) of the kingdom of God as the inner, spiritual, and moral life of the individual is simply not a biblical idea. The messianic kingdom expected by Jesus and the early church is an objective, cosmic reality that breaks into the world from beyond. As important as this scholarship was, the current conversation owes its genesis primarily to the writings of Ernst Käsemann. This is in large part due to the fact that Käsemann sees apocalyptic—in particular, the apocalyptic perspective of Paul—as an indispensable aspect of the early Christian gospel, whereas the scholars who preceded him viewed it with merely cultural-historical interest, as one more bit of dispensable husk. For someone like Weiss, apocalyptic is an ancient notion that has no relevance for modern life; it might have been the view of Jesus, but it cannot and need not be our view today. Käsemann's teacher, Rudolf Bultmann, refined and radicalized the views of Weiss by arguing for a program of demythologizing, which in a certain sense was (or at least appeared to be) a de-apocalypticizing (Bultmann 1967). With Käsemann (1969), however, that position begins to change. In his famous words, "Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology" (102).

While Käsemann paved the way for the recovery of apocalyptic thinking, contemporary work in apocalyptic theology is indebted primarily to the work of his pupil J. Louis Martyn. This is largely due to a change in the definition of the word. Käsemann "speak[s] of primitive Christian apocalyptic to denote the expectation of an imminent Parousia" (1969, 109, n. 1). He quite readily admits that this is a foreign notion, but as a historian he understands his task to be "the cultivation of the listening faculty, which is prepared to take seriously what is historically alien" (110, n. 2). Those who follow Käsemann, like Martyn, are not content with simply reconstructing and listening to the original views of the biblical writers. The task is to *interpret* Pauline apocalyptic so that it can fund Christian theological discourse today. It's not enough that apocalyptic *was* the mother of all Christian theology; now it must be shown that it *is* the mother of theology in a way that does not require inhabiting the historical context of the disciples.

Martyn accomplishes this task by effectively dropping the notion of an imminent Parousia from the definition of Pauline apocalyptic. He does this by making Galatians the definitive text, as opposed to 1 Thessalonians or even Romans—much less the Second Temple texts that historically have dominated the conversation. Without rehearsing the details of his exegesis, we can summarize the essential axiom of Martyn's position: apocalyptic refers to a cosmic divine invasion of the "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4) which inaugurates a radically new age, a "new creation" (Gal. 6:15).

> The genesis of Paul's apocalyptic—as we see it in Galatians—lies in the apostle's certainty that God has *invaded* the present evil age by sending Christ and his Spirit into it. There was a "before," the time when we were confined, imprisoned; and there is an "after," the time of our deliverance. And the difference between the two is caused not by an unveiling, but rather by the coming of Christ and his Spirit (Martyn 1997, 99).

While he does not put it like this, one could say that Martyn *existentializes* Paul's apocalyptic theology. The event of Jesus Christ is still cosmic and historic in both scope and significance, but it is neither cosmological (in the sense of some catastrophic occurrence like the death of the sun) nor historical (in the sense of fitting within a predetermined scheme of history). God's action in the advent of Christ is apocalyptic in the sense that "it is not visible,

demonstrable, or provable in the categories and with the means of perception native to 'everyday' existence . . . The inbreak of the new creation is itself revelation, apocalypse" (104). The invasion of divine grace causes an "epistemological crisis" for those whom it encounters, since the world they inhabit now appears in an entirely new light. The one confronted by the apocalypse "sees bifocally"; that person sees "both the evil age and the new creation *simultaneously*" (104; emphasis added).

It is this bifocal vision that distinguishes Martyn's existentialized apocalyptic from the grandiose visions and cataclysmic events usually associated with the word. The "end of history" is not a future Armageddon in which there is an actual physical battle between the forces of good and evil—whether this is Christ and Satan, Frodo and Sauron, or Earthlings and Martians. The final battle, in a very real sense, has already occurred in Christ and continually occurs anew in the Spirit. "The motif of cosmic warfare is focused first of all on the cross" and it continues "under the banner of cocrucifixion" (cf. Gal. 2:19), whereby the Spirit of Christ turns believers "into soldiers active on the Spirit's field of battle" (Martyn 1997, 101–102). Crucifixion is itself the apocalyptic incursion into the world, and to be "crucified with Christ" is to participate by divine grace in the new age. Martyn is aware that there is a stark contrast between his Pauline account of apocalypse and the older, more fantastical, notion. He acknowledges that his interpretation lacks "the grotesque characteristics of apocalyptic," but he insists that this should not call his thesis into question. "The motif of an earthquake lies at the heart of this letter without being literally mentioned" (104). The truly cataclysmic event occurs in the death of the old "I" and the resurrection of the new person who now sees himself or herself and the world differently.

Martyn's apocalypticism has been taken up in the work of contemporary theologians, such as Christopher Morse, Douglas Harink, Philip Ziegler, and Nathan Kerr. What has not been attempted is any application of this scholarship to the interpretation of film and popular culture. The result is that "apocalyptic theology" and "apocalyptic cinema" are using the adjective in two very different ways. It is time for film studies to catch up to the latest research in apocalypticism. This will mean rethinking what counts as an apocalyptic film.

Before turning to an analysis of *Magnolia* as exemplary of this Pauline understanding of the apocalypse, it will help to identify the key traits of this perspective. I will first list the marks of Pauline apocalyptic *theology*, followed by the marks of what I will call Pauline apocalyptic *cinema*. Regarding theology, the following are the essential aspects:

(1) the qualitative otherness (or transcendence) and invasiveness of the event of divine action;
(2) the location of this event in the person of Jesus Christ as the ground of the world's rectification;
(3) the existential disruption (i.e., judgment) of and disclosure (i.e., revelation) to the human recipients of this event;
(4) the event's cosmic and historical scope; and
(5) the establishment of a new community through the event.[2]

To use the shorthand expression of Christopher Morse (2010), apocalyptic refers to an "incalculable cosmic inbreaking" (54). It speaks of a reality that "comes to us in this world, but not as part of this world, [that] does not conform to prior conditions . . . What is imminent is not immanent" (54). The apocalyptic invasion of grace does not derive from the given structure of the world; it does not belong to the coordinates of reality as they are generally understood and experienced. There is a decisive inbreaking of something new that changes the order of things, reorients relations within the world, and sets things right (i.e., rectifies the situation).

The translation of these marks of apocalyptic to the world of cinema requires careful qualifications. Film by its very nature cannot capture the divine, understood as something qualitatively different than the material world. Like all forms of art, film concerns the concrete and phenomenal. Similarly, film cannot capture existential realities. For example, a movie can attempt to portray a loving relationship, but it can no more capture what it means to experience love than it can capture what it means to encounter God. The relation of love between two people is as hidden as the relation between a person and God. Film can only capture the external marks of these relations, such as the sharing of a kiss or the acts of prayer and worship. But neither of these actions constitutes the respective relationship. At best, each is a sign, parable, or witness to a relation that exceeds the representative capacity of any artistic medium. And yet Morse has drawn attention to the way apocalyptic thinking in the Synoptic Gospels coincides with parabolic language. It is precisely because the apocalypse is only ever "*at* hand, but not *in* hand"—because, as Jesus says in Luke, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed" (Lk. 17:20)—that it is "conveyed through *parable*" (Morse 2010, 53). The very transcendence of the event frees one for mundane descriptions (or depictions) of it. Parables do not provide "some obvious moral of a story," nor do they have an allegorical one-to-one correspondence. Instead, as Morse puts it, they "signify to their listeners what is other than their current suppositions and not immediately apparent" (54–55). While these statements are made with reference to the parables narrated in the Gospel texts, they have an analogical significance for apocalyptic works of art that signify to *their* audiences something new and other that is breaking into the world. "Secular parables of the kingdom,"[3] like the parables of Jesus himself, may attest to an apocalyptic invasion of grace. Whether a work of art actually serves this parabolic function depends on the one who encounters it—whether that person has the eyes and ears of faith. In any case, film may be just such a vehicle for the disclosure of the radically new. Apocalyptic cinema is therefore parabolic cinema.

What, then, are the marks of apocalyptic cinema, understood in the context of Pauline apocalyptic theology? Any attempt to specify an exact list is bound to be problematic, since there is no way to determine entirely in the abstract what may count as a parable of the apocalypse. This caveat notwithstanding, the following aspects (corresponding to the five noted above) will serve as our guide:

(1) the irruption into the situation of something new and unprecedented;
(2) the location of this event in a concrete reality as the realization, or at least symbolic manifestation, of the event's reconciling (or rectifying) consequences;
(3) the existential disruption of and revelatory disclosure to specific individuals, which is a necessary aspect of this reconciliation;
(4) the cosmic-historical (i.e., the "global" or trans-subjective) significance of the event; and
(5) the establishment of a new community or new communal bonds.

With these identifying marks in hand, I turn now to an analysis of *Magnolia* as an apocalyptic film in a Pauline mode.

Paul Thomas Anderson, *Magnolia*, and the Invasion of Grace

Paul Thomas Anderson announced himself as a director-to-watch with his films *Hard Eight* (1996) and *Boogie Nights* (1997). These established him as a prodigiously talented auteur in the order of Jean Renoir, Stanley Kubrick, Robert Altman, and Martin Scorsese. With *Magnolia* (1999), Anderson exploited his new freedom as a filmmaker by turning the camera's gaze

not only upon the media industry itself—specifically television—but also, and more importantly, upon the universal human condition. It has been widely acknowledged that *Magnolia* is, in the words of Joanne Clarke Dillman (2005), a "subversive cultural product" (143).[4] The film enacts a "crisis in masculinity and male paradigms of power" (145), most obviously portrayed in Frank Mackey's character but suffused throughout the interlocking narratives. What has not received adequate attention is the way this movie sets forth a crisis in humanity as such. There is a cosmic scope to *Magnolia*'s subversive critique that can only properly be identified as apocalyptic in character.

Magnolia has an intricate narrative web united by the mediation of television, as portrayed in the opening credits sequence. The film follows the stories of ten main characters,[5] whose lives are captured in the process of spiralling out of control. A greedy and overbearing father (Rick Spector) exploits his son's genius in order to get rich from the game show *What Do Kids Know?* The son he pressures (Stanley) cannot maintain his composure and still bear the weight of his father, teammates, and countless audience members who expect great things from him. A former game show star (Donnie Smith), who is broke and incapable of holding a job—much less realizing his longing to love another person—feels compelled to steal from his current place of employment. The host of this game show (Jimmy Gator) is dying and tries to reach out to the daughter (Claudia) he abused to assuage the guilt that has plagued his life and threatens to kill him before his disease does. His daughter's life is in tatters, and so she passes the time by taking drugs as an escape from the world. This woman is met by a good cop (officer Jim Kurring) who does not know how to understand his feelings for her and becomes self-deprecating when he cannot fulfil his job at the level of perfection that he expects of himself. The producer of the game show (Earl Partridge) is dying of cancer, while the much younger and neurotic woman who married him for riches (Linda Partridge) is now distraught at his death, lashing out at everyone else due to her self-loathing. Earl is cared for by a compassionate male nurse (Phil Parma) whose humility and lack of narcissism enables him to be an agent of reconciliation. The abandoned son of this dying man (Frank T. J. Mackey) has made his fortune manipulating women and telling others how to do the same, and the discovery of his long-lost father, thanks to Phil's initiative and persistence, forces him to grapple with the past in painful ways. Additional characters include Jimmy's wife (Rose), the object of Donnie's affection (Brad), a female journalist who forcefully interviews Frank (Gwenovier), a young rap artist (Dixon) who confronts officer Jim with a riddle, and a woman (Marcie) caught with a dead body in her closet by the officer. The movie is narrated by Ricky Jay (who also plays the character Burt Ramsey, the director of the game show), whose real-life book on bizarre and eccentric performers, *Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women* (1986), is featured among the volumes on a table where Stanley is studying.

The use of an anonymous, third-person, quasi-omniscient narrator is a significant move on the part of Anderson. The narrator opens the film with the presentation of three stories of seemingly impossible scenarios. After each story, the narrator calls into question the apparently aleatory nature of these occurrences. Finally, after the third story, he states with more conviction: "And it is in the humble opinion of this narrator that this is not just 'Something That Happened.' This cannot be 'One of those things . . .' This, please, cannot be that. And for what I would like to say, I can't. This Was Not Just A Matter Of Chance." Not only does this then set up the story to follow as "not just a matter of chance," but it also serves to create a kind of ironic distance between the audience and the strange story of *Magnolia*. The irony is due to the fact that we know from the outset that each of these characters is connected with the others, despite their own existential loneliness.[6] This distance between the godlike perspective of the camera and the limited perspective of each character is a classical storytelling

technique, and it is unremarkable on its own. However, if *Magnolia* is an apocalyptic cinematic work, as I will argue, then this distance serves a more important *theological* purpose in the unfolding of the story. Specifically, it underscores, first, the fact that the situation of the characters (both their interconnectedness with others and their state of existential brokenness) is representative of the common human condition, a point reinforced by the narrator's declaration after the three opening stories: "These strange things happen all the time." Second, it underscores the cosmic significance of the event—that is, the way the event is indeed a disruption from the outside that truly changes the situation. The godlike perspective—reinforced by both camera and narrator—is thus the cinematographic representation of the apocalyptic perspective of "God," though this only becomes fully clear in retrospect.[7]

The apocalyptic perspective and the corresponding interconnectedness of the characters are both highlighted at the climactic turning point of the film. Each character, caught in a moment of existential crisis, suddenly begins to sing "Wise Up" by Aimee Mann (whose music inspired the film). They each sing, "You got / What you want / Now you can hardly stand it though," which poignantly portrays the state of each character. The chorus sums up the narrative of the film thus far:

It's not going to stop
It's not going to stop
It's not going to stop
'Til you wise up.

If the song were to stop there, it could be the transition to a story of moral self-improvement ("wise up"), the kind of platitudinous parable so common in Hollywood. The last line of the song, however, reveals a twist: "No, it's not going to stop / So just . . . give up." The change of the imperative from "wise up" to "give up," though subtle, marks the crucial turning point in the film's narrative. Based on where the characters are at this point of the story, the words "give up" might naturally lead one to think of suicide. The way to make it all "stop" is to give up on life altogether. Certainly that is the conclusion that two of the characters reach, and others seem headed in that direction.

It becomes clear, however, in light of what comes later, that the line from the song does not advocate resignation or hopelessness. Though we as an audience do not yet know it, the closing line is rather a criticism—a *self*-criticism—of the failed attempt by the various characters to master their existence and control their destiny. The striving for such mastery is captured most vividly in Frank Mackey's imperatival program for the manipulation of women, entitled "Seduce and Destroy." But the same drive is present in the figures of Rick Spector and Donnie Smith. Donnie, for instance, says at one point in the bar, "I'll make my dreams come true," and he repeatedly plays Gabrielle's 1993 single, "Dreams," in his car. This yearning for mastery is even seen in Jim Kurring, who represents the ostensibly benign pursuit of control characteristic of the do-gooder. It also applies to Jimmy Gator and Linda Partridge, who both attempt to take their own lives; suicide is, in some sense, the ultimate act of self-possession. The song's closing phrase refers to the need to give up these illusions of individual autonomy and absolute self-determination. As Dixon's rap declares, "Check that ego—come off it." As painful as it may be, the characters have to "check their ego" and give up on the notion that they can realize their dreams. Only Earl Partridge seems to have come to this recognition. In the script's version of his long confessional monologue, which occurs immediately before the song, Anderson has Earl say at one point that "this story has fallen apart," referring to the story of his life and, in a parabolic sense, to the stories of everyone else as well (Anderson 2000, 150, §247). The attempt to control their destinies through sheer self-determination has resulted in despair and self-destruction.

In a way, the audience has already been conditioned to realize this point by virtue of seeing how each character's life is intertwined with the lives of others, a point that Anderson makes visually explicit by having everyone sing the same song together. From the godlike perspective of the viewer, no person is purely independent from any other person. The notion that, by sheer will, one can slough off the past and forge a new life—a kind of self-created tabula rasa—is revealed to be an illusion, and an especially (though certainly not exclusively) masculine one at that. Anderson emphasizes this point throughout the film by having different characters repeat the same basic statement: "We may be through with the past, but the past ain't through with us." This is, in a way, the movie's "thesis," and it constitutes the cosmic scope of the film's apocalyptic vision of the human situation. To be "through with the past" is to think erroneously that we are absolutely free—in the sense of being free *from* all limitations and thus self-determining—to create our own future through our individual resources. We only "wise up" when we "give up" this fantasy and come to terms with the past. However, such coming to terms requires a violent interruption from outside ourselves, since a self-realized coming to terms would only further confirm us in our delusions of autonomy. The possibility of "wising up"—and so reconciling with the past—is something that can only come as a disruption of our existence. When seen in this light, the song serves to make the same point in a more arresting and compelling manner. It portrays the fact that (a) these lives are all united together in a way that can only be seen "from above," and (b) only something "from above" or "from the outside" will rescue these people from their situation of self-enclosed crisis.

The rescuing event comes in the form of a rain shower. The now-infamous "rain of frogs" is one of the most memorable, if bizarre, occurrences in film history. It comes complete with a reference in the background to Exodus 8:2,[8] in which God tells Moses to say to Pharaoh, "If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country with frogs."[9] Not surprisingly, the scene has attracted most of the critical attention. Gonsalves (2006) sums up the views of many: "It's as if Anderson, desperate for a spectacular finish and an easy way out of his dozen plot threads, had opted for the most arrogantly nonsensical climax possible. Cue the frogs! Is Anderson insane? Or did his ambition just get the better of him?" Besides the declarations of arrogance and insanity, there are also accusations of storytelling failure. Critics claim that Anderson relies upon a deus ex machina ("god from the machine," as in ancient Greek tragedy) to solve the problems in his complex narrative. In her new book on the movie, Christina Lane (2011) reassesses the matter:

> This rather unconventional device manifests an epic-scale catharsis and a moral cleansing for almost all the characters simultaneously . . . 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 . . . 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 (18).

Lane's analysis is helpful, but more needs to be said. She is quite right to point out the way the characters cannot save themselves; they are forced to "give up" such pretensions, as the song indicates. But to interpret the scene correctly, I argue, requires viewing the whole story within a Pauline apocalyptic perspective. It is this perspective that alone surmounts the false opposition between a "transcendent" divine intervention and an "immanent" or "internal" narrative logic.

Pauline apocalypticism posits an "incalculable cosmic inbreaking," in the words of Morse. It speaks of an event that "does not conform to prior conditions" and decisively changes the situation from without (Morse 2010, 54). From this perspective, the bizarreness of the frogs—which is certainly incalculable and breaks with all prior weather conditions—is not a sign of failure on the part of Anderson the storyteller, but rather a mark of the inbreaking of grace.[10] Morse's description of the apocalyptic occurrence as something "imminent" but not "immanent" is especially apt. At three points in *Magnolia*, title cards break up the story with weather forecasts. The first occurs between the long opening credit sequence and the start of the opening scene with officer Jim and Marcie ("Partly Cloudy, 82% Chance of Rain"); the second occurs a half-hour later as Rick drives Stanley to the quiz show and rain begins to fall ("Light Showers. 99% Humidity. Winds SE 12 MPH"); and the final appears at the climactic moment of the film, directly following the "Wise Up" montage ("Rain Clearing, Breezy Overnight"). The forecasts proleptically indicate that something is going to occur; a phenomenon of some kind is indeed imminent. And yet the forecasts are incapable of predicting the *real* event. The anticipated rain arrives early in the story, but it is just like any other rain. It is only when the "immanent" rain suddenly dissipates—as forecasted ("Rain Clearing")—that the "transcendent" rain of frogs arrives. This event is unknown to the scientific perspective of the weatherperson. Even though its arrival is anticipated as imminent, it cannot be predicted as immanent.

At the same time, it's important not to make the frogs a supernatural miracle—that is, the act of a true deus ex machina. Anderson uses the event because it was described by Charles Fort as an odd, but still plausible, occurrence. This is reinforced by the film's prologue, which recounts other strange and unlikely—but entirely natural—situations. The rain of frogs is thus simultaneously a natural phenomenon *and* an apocalyptic judgment on these characters. Both critics who fault Anderson for appealing to a divine or "magical" intervention and critics who defend the movie on the basis of its narrative cohesiveness misinterpret the nature of this event. The one side sees it as supernatural *simpliciter*; the other, as natural *simpliciter*. In reality, it is neither. Again, Pauline apocalypticism provides a helpful interpretive framework. Though contemporary apocalyptic theology speaks of the new creation as an incalculable inbreaking, this does not mean the event is a supernatural intervention. Martyn's concept of "bifocal, simultaneous vision" (1997, 104) understands the invasion of grace to be paradoxically identical with a natural, worldly occurrence. Jesus is divine *as a human being*; the new age is present *in the old age*. The transcendent significance of the event is visible only to the one who has the bifocal vision of faith, the one who can see the true state of things.

This apocalyptic and paradoxical approach is the perspective one ought to have in order to interpret *Magnolia*—not in the sense that the rain of frogs is itself a hidden occurrence, because the film makes it very clear that it is a factual reality that is visible to all and affects everyone. The bifocal or paradoxical aspect is something only *we as viewers* are capable of seeing. In a sense, the film prepares us for this with the use of a narrator who speaks directly to the audience, almost as if to ask the viewer to have the proper vision or perspective. The film further prepares the viewer within the narrative itself: the repetition by different characters of the line about the past not being through with us, the use of camera devices to indicate a special relationship between the characters,[11] and of course the "Wise Up" song sequence directly preceding the rainfall. But preparing the viewer for what? Not the event itself but rather for the proper "bifocal" vision that sees in the rain of frogs *more* than just a bizarre occurrence having both beneficial and deleterious effects. We are meant to see that the strange rain is not only a frightening moment of bad weather, but it is also a judgment on the characters in their various pursuits of mastery of self and others. The "apocalyptic" nature of the event is not self-evident; it is in fact hidden to the characters themselves within their limited perspectives. The

meaning of the event is something only the viewer of *Magnolia* is capable of recognizing, in his or her godlike position of seeing how all the characters are connected. The frogs are thus a test of the viewer's ability to see the film *parabolically* or *bifocally*. As a piece of apocalyptic cinema, *Magnolia* is a cinematic parable that paradoxically unites an "immanent" natural phenomenon (movie qua film) and a "transcendent" invasion of judgment and grace (movie qua parable).

The invasive aspect of the rain of frogs warrants further analysis. In the marks of Pauline apocalyptic that I listed above, I noted that an apocalyptic event has to be simultaneously disruptive and rectifying. Put another way, the event comes as both judgment and grace at the same time.[12] *Magnolia* captures this simultaneity in a remarkable way. On the one hand, the frogs are indeed terrifying. They destroy private property, cause accidents on the streets, hurt unprotected people, and almost certainly cause deaths. The damage is real, yet it is not a graceless judgment. When the ambulance carrying Linda (following her suicide attempt) falls to one side due to the frogs, it comes to a halt at the front door of the hospital. When Jimmy Gator, the game show host who sexually abused his daughter, is about to shoot himself in the head, a frog crashes through a skylight and knocks the gun from his hand.[13] When Donnie tries to steal from his former workplace in desperation, a frog hits him in the face, knocking him off the ladder to the asphalt below—a tooth-shattering fall, to be sure, but one that leads to his personal redemption, thanks to the help of the officer. For those characters who are not directly affected by the frogs, such as Frank Mackey, the rain outside serves instead as a visible witness—almost sacramental in nature—to the invisible, radical transformations occurring in their hearts. The rain of frogs is an apocalyptic event in a Pauline sense in that its judgment is an act of grace, or, conversely, the grace comes in the form of judgment. The frogs actualize (or, at the very least, symbolize) the message of the song to "give up," forcing the characters to let go—in Donnie's case, quite literally!—so that they might "wise up" as a result. One might say that the frogs are the apocalyptic fulfilment of the song's prophecy—not to mention the prophetic rap of Dixon earlier in the movie[14]—though the prophetic logic of the film is, to repeat the earlier point, not self-evidently immanent to the story itself but requires the requisite parabolic vision. By necessity, the event comes as a transcendent interruption of all native and narrative expectations.

The rectifying consequences of the event manifest themselves in the form of new communities and communal bonds. Stanley tells his father, Rick, that he needs to be nicer to him. Frank not only reconciles, however painfully, with his father, but also goes to the hospital to care for Linda after her suicide attempt. One also assumes that he develops a friendship with Phil, the nurse. The film shows Claudia and her mother, Rose, reunited in tears, ostensibly in the wake of Jimmy's death. Even though he never realizes his dream of being loved by Brad, Donnie gains a new friend in officer Jim, a relationship that is far more honest and open than any he was previously pursuing. And, most importantly, Jim and Claudia finally "give up" their own insecurities and, as Anderson puts it, "surrender to falling in love." Her smile indicates that "it's all going to work out" (2000, 207–208).

We can conclude this analysis of *Magnolia* as a work of apocalyptic cinema by reviewing the marks of Pauline apocalypticism in relation to the film. First, there is the appearance of something decisively new that interrupts the situation, something that is imminent but not immanent. The event cannot be derived from the internal logic of the narrative world; it transcendently breaks in from the outside, disrupting the self-enclosed chaos of the lives within. Second, the arrival of the new manifests itself in the form of an unanticipatable weather occurrence, specifically as frogs that rain from the sky. This bizarre, yet natural, occurrence arrives with an almost providential power, rectifying some situations (e.g., Donnie), while symbolizing the rectification in others (e.g., Frank). Third, as in Pauline apocalyptic, the rectification of a

situation coincides with an act of judgment. The song, which serves as an interpretive key to the whole film, makes it clear that to "wise up" requires one to "give up." The apocalyptic event in *Magnolia* is an invasion of grace that confronts the characters as an invasion of judgment and wrath, and it is only in and through judgment that each character discovers grace. Frank Mackey has to be broken of his delusions about being independent from others and from his past. Similarly, Claudia has to be freed from the walls she has put up against others and her own past. Other characters are in similar situations. Furthermore, the event reveals to the characters a new understanding of themselves and their world. This is most poignantly displayed in Donnie's confession to Jim at the end of the film, where he acknowledges that he has "love to give," but he simply doesn't know "where to put it."

Fourth, the event has a "cosmic-historical scope" in a couple different senses. On one level, the rain of frogs is an actual occurrence in the world of the movie. Its full meaning may have an important symbolic dimension, but the phenomenon itself is portrayed as fully real, bodily, and operative. But the event is cosmic also in its parabolic significance. The frogs fulfil the prophetic message of the song regarding the universal human need to give up the individual pursuit of mastery, and they realize the movie's axiom that "we may be through with the past, but the past ain't through with us." *Magnolia* has a cosmic scope in its diagnosis of the human condition and its positing of an invasive grace that redresses this condition. Finally, as noted above, the ramification of the frog event is the development of new communities and communal relationships where only isolation, fear, and egocentrism existed before.

In light of these five points, we can identify Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* as an instance of apocalyptic cinema in a Pauline mode. The comparison is not perfect, of course, since the movement from a theological and historical tradition to the realm of art can only be analogous at best. Yet, as I hope this paper has demonstrated, approaching *Magnolia* from an apocalyptic perspective provides a useful framework for interpreting some of the more confusing and obscure aspects of the film.

Reconsidering Apocalyptic Cinema

This paper proposes a reassessment of the category of apocalypse in relation to art and popular culture. The current popular definition of the apocalypse associates it with the cataclysmic end of the world or the end of history, but this is only one strand of apocalyptic thinking. The epistles of Paul in the New Testament offer another perspective, one that is far more paradoxical, parabolic, and existential. There is still a radical disruption of history, but the event and its consequences are of a very different order than the traditional conception. Where the old notion of apocalypse trades in sharp binary oppositions between sacred and secular, church and world, supernatural and natural, new and old—often ordering these categories chronologically, as well as ontologically—a Pauline apocalypticism collapses the opposition and establishes a "paradoxical identity" of sacred and secular. The new age appears in the old age, and one needs the "bifocal vision" of faith to recognize it. Pauline apocalypticism is therefore *not* "an anti-secular theological position," to use Ostwalt's description of what he considers to be a "real apocalyptic consciousness" (Ostwalt 2003, 158).

When approached from this angle, the field of popular culture appears in a new light. Most so-called apocalyptic movies follow a fairly standard template, which Ostwalt (1995) summarizes as follows: "The overt apocalyptic images and implications come from the Book of Revelation, the dualistic battle represents the western version of Armageddon, evil is judged and defeated, and the community of the righteous is allowed to establish its own utopia" (57). Similarly, Ostwalt states that these movies:

> have recaptured and reinterpreted the Jewish and Christian concepts of the apocalypse where the context of a cosmic battle between good and evil destroys the earth, results in a sovereign God (good) defeating the forces of evil, and pictures a new kingdom, a transcendent, heavenly empire (a sacred realm) that replaces the destroyed world (the contemporary secular realm) (2003, 157–158).

Ostwalt looks at both religious examples (e.g., *The Omega Code*) and secular ones (e.g., *The Matrix*, *Waterworld*, and *12 Monkeys*).[15] But if we take the Pauline approach that I have advocated here, then we must discard the traditional template and look at movies not typically viewed as apocalyptic. Moreover, there will be no separation between religious and secular. Such films will locate the transcendent *in* the immanent social relations between characters.

Magnolia constitutes a mediating position. On the one hand, it does not qualify as an end-of-the-world movie, in the form described by Ostwalt, and for that reason it belongs in some other category, such as "Pauline apocalyptic." On the other hand, its use of frogs, its explicit reference to the plagues in Exodus, and the fact that its climactic moment is often referred to by critics as apocalyptic are all reasons why it has at least one foot in the realm of traditional apocalypticism. It thus exemplifies the need for a different, or at least more nuanced, conception of apocalyptic cinema. Martyn's statement about Paul's letter to the Galatians is a partially apt description of *Magnolia*: "The motif of an earthquake lies at the heart of this letter [or film] without being literally mentioned" (1997, 104). There is a real "earthquake" in *Magnolia* in that the frogs are an actual occurrence in the world of the movie, but the apocalyptic *significance* of the frogs—their nature as a divine judgment, as indicated by the scriptural reference to the plagues in Exodus—is not "literal" or self-evident within the narrative. The point is that a Pauline apocalyptic movie need not even have as obviously "transcendent" an occurrence as frogs raining from the sky. It can be as natural and immanent as the crucified Jesus is for the apostle Paul. A film in the Pauline apocalyptic mode might not depict the end of the world as such, but it will assuredly depict the end of a certain kind of world—even if it is an interior world or one that is hidden apart from the necessary bifocal vision.

This study of *Magnolia* is only the beginning. Numerous other movies warrant analysis from this new perspective. Movies such as *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Amores Perros*, *Tree of Life*, *Fanny and Alexander*, and *Breaking the Waves* are all examples of films that, to one degree or another, bear the marks of Pauline apocalyptic cinema. Hopefully this paper is the start of a much broader conversation regarding the intersection between Christian religious studies and popular culture.

Notes

1. Though it generally goes without saying in our poststructuralist age, this paper has no interest in the question of "authorial intention." The claim is not that Anderson wrote *Magnolia* with apocalyptic themes in mind, but rather that Pauline apocalyptic provides a helpful—perhaps even ideal—framework within which to interpret *Magnolia*'s story and themes.
2. This list is adapted primarily from Kerr 2009, 12–15; Harink 2003, 68–69.
3. See Barth 1961, 117:

   We can and must be prepared to encounter 'parables of the kingdom' in the full biblical sense, not merely in the witness of the Bible and the various arrangements, works and words of the Christian Church, but also in the secular sphere, i.e., in the strange interruption of the secularism of life in the world. In the narrow corner in which we have our place and task we cannot but eavesdrop in the world at large. We have ears to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd even there too, distinguishing it from other clamant voices, and therefore, as we hear it, not moving out of the circle and

ministry of His Word, but placing ourselves the more definitely and deeply within it, that we may be the better and more attentive and more convincing servants of this Word.

4. Many critics disparaged *Magnolia* for its similarities to the American soap opera. For example, Garth Franklin (2012) said that the film is "just 'Days of our Lives' with better production values," while Rob Gonsalves (2006) compared it to "a season's worth of soap-opera vignettes, acted vigorously by a sincere cast." Ironically, it is precisely this aspect of the film that Dillman finds so provocative and subversive.
5. Some, like Dillman (2005), count twelve main characters, but this includes Brad the bartender and Rose Gator. Both characters have no independent storylines (as well as hardly any dialogue) and only serve as counterparts to Donnie and Jimmy, respectively. Gwenovier is a more significant character in the film than Brad, and possibly more than Rose as well.
6. The credit sequence that introduces the characters plays to the song "One" ("is the loneliest number"), by Aimee Mann. Another song of hers will play a crucial role later in the film.
7. This point is further reinforced by Dillman's observation that "time seems to happen simultaneously rather than sequentially." "In *Magnolia*," she writes, "from cut to cut and from segment to segment, time in the interlocking narratives seems to stand still" (2005, 146). Dillman sees this as evidence that Anderson is working within the logic of the televisual rather than the filmic. As true as this is, the same observation about the omnipresence of the camera and the temporal simultaneity of the stories underscores the way *Magnolia* views the world from a distinctively godlike perspective, in a way that subtly prepares us for the apocalyptic event to come later. I use scare quotes around "God" to indicate that the apocalyptic appeal to transcendence made in *Magnolia* need not be construed as an actual deity, much less the specific object of religious belief. The fact that *Magnolia* is an apocalyptic work does not mean that it involves an actual metaphysical being.
8. There are dozens of references to the numbers eight and two scattered throughout the film. For a list, see http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0175880/trivia.
9. Anderson has admitted that he was ignorant of this biblical story when he first wrote the script: "I didn't even know it was in the Bible until Henry Gibson gave me a copy of the Bible, bookmarked to the appropriate frog passage" (2000, 207). As he also states in this interview, he took the idea for the rain of frogs from the writer Charles Fort (1874–1932), who researched strange phenomena. Fort's book, *Wild Talents*, is visible on the table where Stanley is studying, and he is thanked by name at the end of the film.
10. Jean Lowerison's (2012) negative comment on the film is thus, in fact, confirmation of the film's properly apocalyptic nature:

    I suppose it will be claimed that this film is an epic about The Human Condition, and that's why the Biblical plague at the end. Maybe. But this is so chaotic, so dark, so . . . messy that it doesn't make good cinema. It may reflect life, or somebody's life, but it doesn't, in the final analysis, make a coherent story.

    The category of apocalyptic calls into question the usual standards of narrative coherence.
11. I am thinking, especially, of the opening credit sequence (in which each character is connected via the medium of television) and the driving scene that immediately precedes the rain of frogs, when the camera jumps from one vehicle to the next to show how all the characters' lives are colliding at the climactic moment.
12. This constitutes part of Paul's radicalizing of divine action as portrayed in the Old Testament narratives, specifically that of Exodus. The famous plagues, for instance, are acts of divine judgment on the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. These judgments have their counterpart in the mercy and grace displayed to the Israelites whom God liberates from slavery. Judgment and grace have two very distinct objects: Egyptians and Israelites, respectively. Paul locates both judgment and grace in the Christ event, such that the same reality—Christ crucified—is both God's judgment on sin and God's gracious rectification of the creation.
13. The film nevertheless implies that Jimmy dies anyway, due to a fire caused by the bullet from the gun after it was knocked away by the falling frogs. The shooting script, which has a much longer

sequence with the frogs, makes it clear that Jimmy dies; there is even a scene from the next morning with a stretcher carrying his body away. As with everything, this narrative development is open to different interpretations. At the very least, it is darkly ironic that the frog that prevents his suicide by gunshot ends up killing him by fire. One way to interpret this scene is to note the film's emphasis on chance and strange occurrences. Jimmy's death is ironic in a way that is reminiscent of the stories told in the film's prologue, especially that of Sydney Barringer. Viewed in this way, his death has no more meaning than any other death. It is just "something that happens," as the film's refrain puts it. While this view has much to commend it, Anderson seems to invest these occurrences with purpose and intention. The film seems to present the frogs as agents of divine providence or perhaps, in a more secular sense, cosmic karma. They bring Linda's ambulance to the hospital and they keep Donnie from committing theft; both characters are sympathetic ones. When officer Jim Kurring's gun falls from the sky at the end, this also seems to be connected in some mysterious way to the equally mysterious rainfall, and it appears to be confirmation of his good nature—perhaps even a divine reward or blessing. In this sense, the death of Jimmy Gator is equally an act of providence, but in the opposite way. Where officer Jim is shown mercy for showing mercy to Donnie and others, Jimmy receives judgment for his unrepentant life of abuse of others. Jim and Jimmy (the names are obviously not coincidental) are the film's two stark antitheses; each is the foil to the other. This is made all the more apparent by the fact that Jim comes to love the very daughter that Jimmy abused.

Though the Jim-Jimmy contrast provides narrative symmetry, it does so at the expense of the film's more profound themes of forgiveness and reconciliation. In his closing monologue, Jim Kurring says, "Sometimes people need a little help. Sometimes people need to be forgiven and sometimes they need to go to jail." By having Jimmy die in the fire, Anderson satisfies the typical viewer's desire for violent retribution, but this also precludes the possibility of restoration and forgiveness. Some, in agreement with Jimmy's wife, might view him as beyond forgiveness, but in large part the film wants to question such notions. The reconciliation between Frank and his father is a perfect example of this. *Magnolia* emphasizes the "sins of the father," but not without implicating everyone within the mess of the human situation. Jimmy's fate ought to have been that of Donnie's: forced to come to terms with his guilt, and thereby to discover his proper reconciled identity. The other characters experience both disruption and rectification, both judgment and grace; Jimmy only experiences the former. This leaves something to be desired, in terms of the film's overall story. And yet, Jimmy's storyline is not without a certain kind of "grace," even in his tragic end. Despite his death, the frogs nevertheless force him to relinquish his pursuit of control. His life was marked by mastery of others (e.g., Claudia) and himself (in the decision to take his own life). The frogs liberate him from that false pursuit. While his death does serve a certain narrative purpose, it was not the only (or even the best) option open to Anderson.

14. The connection between apocalypticism and prophecy is well-attested in the literature. For example, Jacob Taubes (2009) notes that "the spirit of apocalypticism" is "announced in the prophecy of Israel" (22). Taubes is referring to Jewish apocalypticism, which is distinct from the kind found in Paul's writings, but the connection is worth pointing out because of the way both apocalyptic and prophetic themes manifest themselves in the story of *Magnolia*. This occurs most explicitly in the rap by Dixon early in the movie, which is deserving of more attention than I can give here in this paper. According to the shooting script, the key section of the rap reads: "Check that ego—come off it / I'm the profit [*sic*, prophet]—the proffesor [*sic*] / Ima teach you 'bout The Worm / who eventually turned to catch wreck / with the neck of a long time oppressor / And he's runnin [*sic*] from the devil, but the / debt is always gaining / And if he's worth being hurt, he's worth / bringin' pain in / When the sunshine don't work, the Good Lord / bring the rain in." The prophetic dimension extends beyond Dixon's self-identification as a prophet and his reference to the coming rain as God's judgment. The first phrase, "Check that ego," could serve as a summary of the film's message. It is precisely the egocentrism of the various characters that "Wise Up" criticizes and the rain of frogs judges.

Film critic Charles Taylor (1999) is one of many who misunderstood this prophetic dimension. After accusing the film of falling back on "pop-psych banalities about abandonment and the inner

child," he provides two examples: the film "climaxes with an act of God which acts as a kind of gateway to healing and forgiveness," and it "appears to suggest that a child has the gift of prophecy." Taylor's inability to see anything besides "pop-psych banalities" is a perfect example of why the movie has to be approached from an apocalyptic perspective to make proper sense of details like Dixon's rap.

15. For many more examples, see Christie 1999, 320–340.

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