ALESSANDRO CLERICUZIO

The Destruction of Happiness in American Cinema in the 1990s: Altman, Anderson, Solondz

Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) sort of bookend the decade of the 1990s in terms of American *auteur* film.[1] I am not going to show how "altrnanesque" Anderson's movie is, for this has been widely recognized (Denby 102; Ebert 680; Hillier 179; Jones 37; Meslin 15). Leonard Maltin goes so far as to say that Altman's 2000 film *Doctor T. and the Women* owes its ending to *Magnolia* (387). Taking the intertextual connections for granted, I will try to point out how these two movies — together with the 1998 most disturbing *Happiness* by Todd Solondz — have taken up the catastrophic trend of commercial blockbusters," transforming it into a subtler, subterranean impulse informing and threatening the average American's daily life.

As Solondz's title ironically shows, one of the tenets of the American Dream, the pursuit of happiness, is the main target of this destructive undercurrent. *Happiness* opens with the alternate close-up of two characters: one is Joy, the other is Andy. They are at a restaurant and the tension between the two is justified when he produces a valuable gift for her. We are witnessing the signs of a love bonding. We think. And so does Joy, but right after that, he takes the gift from her hands, telling her he only wanted to show her what she's missing in dumping him. He insults her in the crudest manner and then, off-screen, he commits suicide. The woman falls into a shivering, whimpering depression, which will not leave her until the end of the movie and which will be the counterpart to her dramatically wrong name. Whereas *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* concentrate on the destruction theme in a catastrophic event at the end of both movies, *Happiness* disparages the spectator in a very early scene. Bill Maplewood, a psychiatrist, walks out in a city park and at the sight of

a happy couple strolling hand in hand, produces a gun and shoots as many people as he can.

"I don't kill myself at the end,"[3] Bill tells his own psychiatrist. The carnage is only a dream and the tension of the viewer lowers, only to be raised again in the director's cruel but effective games with audience expectations, stereotypes and macabre irony. The story, again in an Altman-mosaic manner, follows the lives of three sisters: Joy, whose every attempt at happiness is destroyed by the wrong men she chooses or by her own sisters; Trish, the oldest of the three, whose husband is not too secretly a pedophile who is fast heading down a path of self-destruction; and Helen, a much-admired, extremely beautiful writer who despises her own writing. Two of her poems, "Rape at 11" and "Rape at 12," lead her to ultimately wish she had been raped at that age, only so her work could be authentic. Bill's just-turned-adolescent kid, obsessed by the idea of orgasm, is the other side of the story. He is the "pure" element threatened by a disturbed father who molests his school friend, and his are the last words spoken in the film, "I came." Sex is potentially an agent of destruction, in this and the other two films, and love seems to be no real cure for it.

Happiness closes on a family assembled for lunch: the parents are about to separate, Joy is laughed at, Trish has left her husband; Helen, the man-eating beauty, tries to find companions for the others, acting as detached as ever. She wants to introduce her sister Joy to her clumsy, telephone-maniac overweight neighbor Allen. Earlier in the film, receiving obscene phone-calls from this anonymous guy, Helen got extremely excited, showing more and more her sado-masochistic nature. Insulted by this young man, she feeds her fantasies of rape and abuse, which are destroyed when she finally meets him. Most of these characters act as links in a chain of strangers that the director slowly calls upstage to bring out their own visions of life. Thus Allen is in turn suited by even clumsier and obese Kristina, who smashes him while trying to help him out of his drunken stupor. This elephant woman lives alone in a small flat and sleeps in a doll-like bedroom where the flowers of the lampshades match the design of the bed cover and sheets. She behaves like a teen-ager, rolling her

eyes while telling her stories, but harbors a terrible secret: she has killed the doorman who, according to her, had tried to kiss her and make love to her.

In one of the final scenes, Allen is refused by Helen, who prefers fantasies to his reality, and looks for shelter in Kristina's bedroom, where she silently and humbly lets him in. The two go to sleep in the same bed without touching and turning their backs to one another. The image is highly visual and significant: in this apocalyptic setting, where all human relations collapse under the surge of mismatched feelings and emotions, the only pure space left is shared by a sex maniac and a serial killer. In the background, the stories of the pedophile, of Joy robbed by her latest beau, of her mother wishing to be able to kill what she thinks is her rival, unravel in a comic tableau which aims directly at the heart of American darkness. Far from having religious tones, the apocalyptic strain informing this movie is what has been called "the most American of all: a comic Apocalypse" (La Polla 93).[4]

"The police came and looked in her freezer," Helen tells her family around the table, to summarize the story, "and found baggies filled with the doorman's genitals." "I use baggies," says the mother. "Me too," goes Joy. "Everyone uses baggies," explains ice-cold Helen: "That's why we can all relate to this crime, don't you see?"

Frozen in this sarcasm is the director's warning that we all should relate to the "pluses and minuses" of these people, as Allen undramatically says to Kristina after she has admitted to her killing. As a director's warning comes also Altman's final earthquake scene in *Short Cuts*. It happens immediately after another overweight young man who likes to make obscene phone calls[5] has hit a stranger with a rock in Griffith Park, Los Angeles, causing her death.

Altman's world too, in this film, is constantly threatened by a subterranean sense of impending doom. At the beginning of the frame the director creates to turn Raymond Carver's short stories into a film, the menace is external; at the end, pushing through the man's suppressed sexual life and taking the shape of the earthquake which involves all the protagonists, it turns out to be internal, and strongly related to inner human emotions and connections.

As is widely known, Altman connects six of Carver's short stories, plus one poem ("Lemonade"),[6] by setting them in a common quarantined area threatened by the invasion of the medfly. Huge, noisy helicopters like big, mechanical flies, spreading disinfectant, swarm towards the camera in the opening of the film: the defense takes the shape of the agent of destruction and the threat seems to be everywhere.[7]

Death and the sense of catastrophe are more explicit in Altman's and Anderson's movies, in respect to *Happiness.* Whereas the psychiatrist's son in Solondz's film — notwithstanding the director's irony— [8] is safe from the destructive forces of adulthood, a boy of the same age, in *Short Cuts* becomes the epitome of the disruption awaiting the community. Thirteen-year old Chasey, hit by a car while walking to school, is the son of the television editorialist whose voice over the noise of the helicopters opens the film.

"Time has come to go to war again," he declares, "not with Iraq, international terrorists or what was once Yugoslavia, but with the medfly, a potentially devastating insect." This man, alerted to fight off an insinuating enemy, will directly witness and experience the annihilating force of fate at work in the streets of Southern California. The setting is the same as Anderson's *Magnolia,* and offers one of the most apocalyptically connoted *loci* of American geography.[9]

The most widely known threat, that of the "big one," the earthquake that is expected to devastate California, is only the most evident and scientific symbol for a sense of catastrophe that enshrouds both real and imaginary L.A. From Nathaniel West to David Lynch, L.A.'s most glittering icon, Hollywood, breeds a nightmare made of mass destruction or personal loss. Down Sunset Boulevard or Mulholland Drive'? life can turn into its opposite without seemingly changing the *status quo.* It is a city of angels simply because it is a city of the dead. [11]

Driving through the San Fernando valley, an area comprising parts of Orange, L.A. and San Bernardino Counties, Joan Didion writes of an unnatural landscape:

> The lemon groves are sunken, down a three- or four-foot retaining wall, so that one looks directly into their dense foliage, too lush, unsettingly glossy, the greenery of nightmare; the fallen eucalyptus bark is too dusty, a place for snakes to breed. The stones look not like natural stones but like the rubble of some unmentioned catastrophe. [12]

Used to the complaint of not having seasons in the tropical Southern California climate, inhabitants of the area, especially after the infamous 1992 Rodney King trial, have forged a saying, according to which the state does have four seasons: the earthquake, the fires, the landslides and the riots. It is a huge landslide that closes T. Coraghessan Boyle's 1995 *The Tortilla Curtain.* A novel of rich gated communities trying to fence off the invasion of Mexicans, it ends with this natural catastrophe that reunites its severed humanity.

The unsettling gloss Didion sees in the Southern Californian landscape brings to mind the alluring facade of Hollywood representations of reality, which Altman had attacked in his former movie of 1992, *The Players.* In *Short Cuts,* the virtual reality of the movie industry appears only tangentially: a make-up student for monster and catastrophe films is turned on when he feigns wounds and sores on his girlfriend's skin with professional make-up. Some such pictures, confused with those of a real dead woman some fishermen have found in the wilderness, will be a destabilizing force at the end of the film.

The tv set (and the recording studio) is a recurring presence in this film, from the journalist's home through to the home of Stormy Weather's (one of the copter pilots) wife and child. It is very revealing that mother and child come back home to find a turned-on television in an empty apartment that has been completely destroyed, piece by piece, with an electric saw, by Stormy Weather, out of revenge.

But it is in *Magnolia* that television really has a determining role in the destruction of people's lives and hopes for happiness. After the prologue made of dazzling stories apparently disconnected with the film plot, in fact, Anderson uses a blaring television to announce the beginning of the story proper: no wonder the room it is in is empty and stays so. Through the cathode-ray tube comes an annihilating, invisible poison.

All of *Magnolia's* dying or suicidal characters[13] are at least peripherally connected with the television trade. Game show producer Earl Partridge is afflicted with terminal cancer, as is Jimmy Gator, the emcee of his most popular show, "What Do Kids Know?". A host of the show is the adolescent champion Stanley, on the verge of a breakdown because of his father's pressure. Some of the talk among the kids during rehearsals of the program is about an extremely violent film, *Destruction High*, a sort of *Bowling for Columbine* ante litteram, with a massacre in a high school. This is the way in which Anderson hides his real catastrophic undercurrent until he feels the timing is fit to let it all out.

His technique, too, is at work to subtly convey a sense of disintegration. Zamora (97-119) has pointed out, referring to John Barth's prose, that his style is more apocalyptic than his contents. She quotes Barth himself as saying that his style "deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its possibilities and borders upon its own caricature" (5). Anderson's film language actually borders upon caricature, being the weird mixture of some masters' style, namely Altman's and Mamet's, as he himself suggests (Kornbluth 22), but also Martin Scorsese's, with the repeated choice of dissolving within a camera move, and Oliver Stone's, who pointed out coincidences in rapid-fire succession to suggest the doubt that they mayor may not be coincidences.[14] These two techniques, in particular, tend to disavow the authoritativeness of film language. *"Magnolia* self-destruct[s] spectacularly," writes Maslin (15), whose lack of insight lets her consider this a negative feature. But because the self-destruction, the splintering of the language, comes after the coming together of all the main characters in a group sing-along, it is simply the entropic clash of all the elements, both stylistic and thematic.

> The great uh-oh moment in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* occurs about two-thirds of the way through this artfully orchestrated symphony of L.A stories. A song bursts out: it is heard first from one character, then from another, until all the film's assorted lost souls are brought together by a single anxiety-ridden refrain. "It's not going to stop," each one sings resignedly, signaling the approach of an impending group meltdown.[15]

The typology of apocalypse drawn by May (229) distinguishes a traditional, an Antichristian and a secular apocalypse. The latter has two possibilities: the apocalypse of despair and the humorous apocalypse, both having in common the warning sign of the con-man. With these three authors we are clearly in the secular field, though Anderson's movie has the most outward signs of religion. Con-men occur in *Happiness* (the taxi-driver who robs Joy's flat) and in *Magnolia* (Frank Mackey's fake public image.) The column marked "New Life" suggests this new life is cyclic in the primitive form and linear in the Judaeo-Christian form of "Traditional" apocalypse. It is illusory in Antichristian, and "linear potential" in the humorous, secular apocalypse. The space is crossed out in the Apocalypse of Despair. I believe all three films fall into the area of humorous apocalypse, for the new life promised by the events is not illusory, simply humorous, more so in Altman's and Solondz's films. In the first, after the quake, the doctor played by Matthew Modine, his face painted white like a clown's, comes out of the waters (a jacuzzi tub) as if rising from the dead. In *Happiness*, having survived the ordeal of a potentially incestuous father, the kid reaches a seemingly happier puberty. At the end of *Magnolia*, the last scene is between Claudia and the cop, who is determined not to lose her. Will they manage?[16] The ending is open and, for all its religious symbols, the movie seems to me to fall into the Antichristian category, whose promise of new life is simply illusory. "I was ready for some sort of weird religion experience," says Anderson about the symbols in his film (207).

Wunderkids winning a golden future, a sex guru promising all sexual happiness, a journalist revealing the truth about an icon, an emcee bestowing money: all promises, in this film, go through television. But the only power the media have, here, is to destroy families and individuals: there is no trace of happiness in Earl's marriage to Linda, his present wife who has married him for money and now, at his deathbed, refuses that money because she finds out she loves him. No joy in Earl's former life, his first wife having died of cancer alone, assisted by their child Frank. Frank, a popular, misogynist sex guru, holding seminars for frustrated males, has disavowed his past and his father. If apocalypse has to do with the role of history in contemporary times, its

apt reminder is a quotation often repeated by Donnie Smith, Jimmy Gator and Frank J. Mackey: "We may be through with the past, but the past ain't through with us."

Jimmy Gator has to face the truth of having molested his daughter Claudia when she was little, while now she is a drug addict whose sexual and sentimental life is completely destroyed. These characters are all incapable of dealing with life, namely with love. The image of Bill's shooting in *Happiness* can apply to all three movies as the image of love splintered and misdirected, severed from sex, turned into bullets causing the real, imaginary or metaphorical destruction of other people.

Another armed man, this time a cop, is attracted to Claudia, but loses his chance to sexual happiness just as he loses his gun and is too ashamed of it not to see in it an explicit metaphor. Claudia can't cope with sex and feelings, and in a highly strung scene, on their first date, she asks Jim, "Now that I've met you, would you object to never seeing me again?" (Anderson 175).

As Hepola has pointed out, these words are out of Aimee Mann's song "Deathly." Nine of her songs compose the soundtrack. Another song, though, gives us the exact sensation of how it feels to experience life in this film as delusion, disillusionment, loss of innocence and destruction. It is the Supertramp's "The Logical Song," its words accompanying Donnie Smith's (himself a former quiz-show champion) pining for a bartender turned gigolo. While the guy is flirting with "an old-freaky looking Thurston Howell-Truman Capote-Dorothy Parker type guy (60s)" (Anderson 69), the only way Donnie thinks fit to connect with him, is to have his teeth braced the way the guy has. In the background, the Supertramp sing their 1980s hit: "When I was young, it seemed that life was so wonderful, a miracle, oh it was beautiful, magical, with all the birds in the trees, well they'd be singing so happily, joyfully, but then they sent me away...." Donnie's preadolescent world had been golden and happy, but then all his tv-earned money was stolen by his family, thus Donnie miserably ends up working in an electricity shop, surrounded by tv-screens.

Everybody here is estranged from a life of innocence and happiness. The impending catastrophe, in *Magnolia,* is signalled by a little kid's enigmatic prophecy:

> Check that ego — come off it —
> I'm the profit — the professor
> Ima teach you 'bout the Worm,
> Who eventually turned to catch wreck
> With the neck of a long time oppressor
> And he's runnin 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. (Anderson 56)

Talking in riddles, this biblical (black) angel tries to give Jim, the crucifix-adoring Christian cop, the solution to a case of murder.

In *Happiness,* Trish and Bill's younger child only loves his Tamagochi, the famous Japanese toy with human feelings, symptom of a dehumanized world. In *Magnolia* and *Short Cuts* life and love are deadly. In Altman's film the hospital where Chasey eventually dies — and where his father is visited by his own twenty-years estranged father — is the place we're constantly taken back to, to experience loss, sorrow and death. In *Magnolia* sickness is everywhere, ("I have sickness all around me," screams Linda in the pharmacy, "HAVE YOU SEEN DEATH IN YOUR BED IN YOUR HOUSE?" [Anderson 92]) if not in the souls, in the bodies of the characters. Anderson's camera goes as far into the depths of destruction, as to graphically show us in detail the cancerous cells in Earl's throat.

But it is with the unsettling, frightening and apparently unexpected rain of frogs that Anderson's technique reaches the highest point of audience disorientation. First on the Christian cop's car, then in the garden of Claudia's condo, thousands, millions of slimy, bloody frogs fall from the sky. The image is clearly out of the Bible, more specifically from *Exodus* 8.2: "I will smite all

thy borders with frogs"; 8.3: "And the river shall bring forth frogs abundantly" and, finally, 8.6: "And Aron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up, and covered the land of Egypt."

During this "apocalyptic interlude" (Stephens 32), Claudia's mother arrives at the home of her lonely child. Mother and daughter reunite in a single, extremely brief shot highly reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. As those animals had typified Hitchcock's sexual morbidity and signified the female forces kept at bay in the Californian community,[17] so the frogs sort of explode from within this senseless humanity and become the epitome of their slimy, bloody, guilty sexuality. "In *Happiness* orgasm is a crime scene, to be fled at once," writes critic Stuart Klawans (34), but Anderson's camera does exactly the same, with hysterically fast movements, with two couples having sex at the very beginning of the movie. Love is a menace, in Anderson's movie, and sex, no matter which way it is related to it, adds to the tragedy. "[W]hen Claudia kisses Jim Kurring it becomes a curse," he says, and "being in love is the hardest fucking thing in the world, and you don't want to put yourself through the tragedy of trying to be in love [...]" (203-4). After all, the blaring television that opens the film and which is in the background of these sex scenes, is tuned to the most revealing of *Magnolia's* authorial comments, voiced by Tom Cruise, alias Frank J. Mackey. The title of his sex-seminar programme is "Seduce and Destroy." This is the phrase that is most often repeated by Frank all through the movie, and it is what these directors do with their work: seduce the audience and then slowly destroy the myth of happiness.

NOTES

1. Quentin Tarantino begins his artistic production in 1992 with *Reservoir Dogs*, which falls in the "heist movie" sub-genre, that will reach the highest level in 1995 with Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects*. The peculiar violence of these two heist films falls out of the scope of this brief essay.

2. I am referring to such movies as John Carpenter's *Escape from L.A.* (1996) with its apocalyptic ending; Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* of the same year; not to mention Emmerich's *Godzilla* (1998) and similar destructive monster-movies.

3. Todd Solodz, *Happiness*, 1998. There is no script in print: all quotations are directly from the movie.

4. "La sua Apocalisse, sia chiaro, non ha molto di quella tradizionale, e non tanto perchè essa non presenta alcuna esemplificazione escatologica tradizionale, quanto perchè sceglie di essere tale nel modo piu americano di tutti: un'Apocalisse comica," writes La Polla in his essay on Altman's filmmaking.

5. In the age of AIDS, phone sex seems to be the only antidote. Nicholson Baker's best-selling *Vox* (New York, Vintage, 1992) is a perfect example of virtual encounters through the phone.

6. See Raymond Carver, *Short Cuts,* New York, Vintage, 1993, with an introduction by Robert Altman.

7. "Black helicopters flying in formations more like the Valkyrie assault in *Apocalypse Now* than like the hovering med-evacs in *MASH",* writes Geng 66.

8. The kid's dog enacts, in a comic and inverse way, the incest that had threatened Bill's child.

9. "I hope this is a true Los Angeles Movie," writes Anderson in his introduction to the script (vii).

10. I am referring to Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust,* 1939 and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive,* 2002. Note that also Magnolia is the name of a street, namely where the frog rain starts.

11. *As* Bodei maintains, the Apocalypse has already taken place in the souls of Altman's characters *and* of the average real life losangeleno. Remo Bodei, "La California di Altman," in Salvadori, 190.

12. Quoted in Davis, 375.

13. There are two attempted suicides, by Linda and by Jimmy Gator, shortly before the frog rain, as if to point out that free will has gone too far. I am also including in the list of attempted suicides the young man in the prologue, this part of the film being not at all unrelated to the rest. Apart from a trial by fire and by water for one of the three prologue characters, another one commits suicide shooting himself. In a split second we see his head shot through and all his blood staining a picture of a flower on the wall behind him. So much so, for the apparently missing connection between prologue and film.

14. Other derivative camera uses include influences from Jonathan Demme, Stephen Spielberg, Orson Welles, Brian De Palma, Robert Downey, jr., Alex Cox. See the website: www.ptanderson.com.articlesandinterviews/phillyinquirer2.htm

15. Maslin 15. Anderson himself has never wanted to explain the meaning of the title of his film (see Kornbluth 22). My idea is that, just like the ivory colored magnolia is instantly turned brown and "bruised" when handled with, so are his characters. It should be noted that Anderson puts the picture of a flower in almost all his locales. Furthermore, as a flower is opened petal by petal (an image the director superimposes on the opening scene of the film) it is revealed and destroyed. So is the film.

16. The director himself has clearly stated the ambivalence of the ending in an interview published at the end of the shooting script: "The problem is, in traditional movies, it's usually one way or the other. And for the people for whom the sort of resolution is important, then Claudia's smile in that last shot is about, yes, it's all going to work out, I am going to be happy. But for the people who are comfortable going a little deeper, hopefully what it's really saying is, yes, I

do lean toward the side of happiness, but there's just too much in life to go straight to the point of okay, we're getting married and living happily ever after. It's not that simple. And finally, my goal is [...] to write the saddest happy ending I possibly can. (Anderson 208)

17. See Camille Paglia, *The Birds,* London, BFI, 1998, for a thorough investigation of the sexual connotations in the film.

WORKS CITED

Anderson, P.T., *Magnolia. The Shooting Script,* New York, New Market Press, 2000.

Davis, Mike, *City of Quartz,* New York, Vintage, 1992 (1990).

Denby, David, "San Fernando Aria," *The New Yorker,* December 20th, 1999, pp. 102-3.

Ebert, Roger, *Roger Ebert's Movie Yearbook 2003,* New York, Andrew McMee1, 2003

Geng, Veronica, "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," *The New York Review,* November 18, 1993, pp. 66-7.

Hepola, Sarah, *Magnolia,* www.austinchronicle//videoreviews

Hillier, Jim, *American Independent Cinema. A Sight and Sound Reader,* London, BFI, 2001.

Jones, Kent, "Magnolia," *Film Comment* 36, Jan/Feb 2000, pp. 37-9.

Klawans, Stewart, "Beyond the Dollhouse," *The Nation,* November 9, 1998, pp. 34-6.

Kornbluth Jess, "Chutzpah," *Madison Magazine,* 1, January/February 2000, pp. 20-2.

La Polla, Franco, "Entropia e Apocalisse: Robert Altman e la cultura americana," in Roberto Salvadori, ed., *Robert Altman. Un acrobata nel circo americana,* Firenze, Loggia de' Lanzi, 1997, pp. 84-94.

Maltin, Leonard, *Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2002,* New York, Plume, 2001.

Maslin, Janet, "Entangled Lives on the Cusp of the Millennium," *The New York Times,* December 17th, 1999, p. E15.

May, John, *Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel,* Notre Dame and London, U. of Notre Dame P., 1972.

Paglia, Camille, *The Birds,* London, BFI, 1998

Stephens, Chuck, "P.T. Anderson Lets It All Hang Out," *The Village Voice* 12, 1999, p. 32.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson, *Writing the Apocalypse. Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction,* Cambridge, C.U.P., 1993 (1989).