

Interpreting *Magnolia* through Badiou's Axiomatic Judgment: The Visitation of the Idea that Humanity is Love

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Alain Badiou's interpretation of Paul Thomas Anderson's film *Magnolia* is a paradigmatic example of his peculiar procedure of cinematic analysis called axiomatic judgment. According to the axiomatic judgment, to read a film is to inquire into the effects it has on thought. This essay reconstructs Badiou's analysis of *Magnolia* to show how various cinematic elements—acting style, montage, music, and biblical references—are combined to arrange the visitation of a precise idea: that love is the fundamental precondition for humanity's existence. Without love, the only experience of the world would be monadic. Examining Badiou's interpretation of *Magnolia* does not simply aid our understanding of the film; it also clarifies Badiou's theories of cinema and love.

Keywords: Badiou, *Magnolia*, axiomatic judgment, philosophy of cinema, impure art.

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Judgment:

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Introduction

This essay focuses on the interpretation of Paul Thomas Anderson's film *Magnolia* (1999) by the French philosopher Alain Badiou. It has three main theoretical aims. First, Badiou's interpretation of *Magnolia* represents a paradigmatic example of his method of cinematic analysis. This essay considers Badiou's analysis of Anderson's movie as a concrete application of the "axiomatic judgment"; it explains why his method offers more effective tools for understanding a film than the indistinct or diacritical judgments. As Badiou's philosophy of cinema stems from readings of single movies rather than from a general theory of cinema, his thoughts on *Magnolia* also serve as an entry point for grasping the role he attributes to cinema as an art and the relationship he establishes between cinema and philosophy.

Secondly, the essay seeks to reconstruct Badiou's interpretation of *Magnolia* and assess its efficacy. It does so by comparing Badiou's interpretation to readings by other scholars and critics. According to Badiou, *Magnolia* is a film about love: love is represented as the only antidote to a solipsistic life and as a central element in building a human community. In line with the method of axiomatic judgment, the essay demonstrates how the film's various aspects are combined to convey this idea. Particular

attention is paid to acting style, music, montage, and the narrative device of the rain of frogs.

Thirdly, Badiou puts his philosophy of love to work in his close reading of *Magnolia*. Benefiting from this example, the essay also examines the ontological function Badiou ascribes to love as «the guardian of the universality»¹: a unifying force that ensures the possibility of humanity's existence.

1. Badiou's theory of cinema and his method of film analysis

Before approaching Badiou's interpretation of *Magnolia*, it is first necessary to explain a few aspects of Badiou's unconventional philosophy of cinema. As Bianchi and Besana note in *The Badiou Dictionary*, Badiou does not develop a proper theory of the nature of cinema: «What is missing in most of Badiou's texts on cinema is a direct philosophical engagement with the question of cinema as a specific art form»². Most philosophers of film first propose an ontology of cinema and only then use specific films to illustrate and support their theory. In contrast, Badiou often acts like a movie critic who investigates specific films. This mode of engagement results from his wider philosophical approach to art: «Badiou is interested in the activation of localized truth procedures made possible by specific works of art»³. He therefore discusses the nature of cinema in only a few texts, preferring instead to build his theory on close readings of single films. Antoine de Baecque, the editor of Badiou's collected writings on cinema, notes that «Such an approach is in fact one of the characteristic features of Badiou's thought: thinking on a case-by-case basis, deriving a whole system from one particular work of art considered in its specificity»⁴.

Rather than asking what Badiou thinks a film is and does, it is more productive to start by understanding his method of film analysis, explained in the essay "Can a Film be Spoken About?". The essay begins by describing and critiquing two established ways of

¹ A. Badiou, *What is Love* (1992), transl. by S. Corcoran, in *Conditions*, Continuum, London 2008, p. 183.

² P. Bianchi and B. Besana, *Cinema*, in S. Corcoran (ed. by) *The Badiou Dictionary*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2015, p. 54.

³ Ibid.

⁴ A. de Baecque, *Foreword*, in A. de Baecque (ed. by) and transl. by S. Spitzer, *Cinema*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013, p. IX.

interpreting a movie. The most common method is the indeterminate judgment, built on the question of whether a film is enjoyable. The indeterminate judgment consists only of an «exchange of opinions»⁵ designating the film's emotional tonality. It often highlights the most sensational cinematic elements, such as «a striking scene»⁶ or an impressive performance, but it does not integrate these impressions based on taste in an argumentative structure. The judgment thus remains indistinct and superficial.

Badiou secondly considers the diacritical judgment, characteristic of film criticism and grounded on the notion of quality. Whereas the indeterminate judgment focuses on the viewers' pleasure and tends to see the actors as the most significant components of a movie, the diacritical judgment concentrates on the film's stylistic quality. Here, the director is the central figure. The diacritical judgment is intended to save the film from a shallow evaluation based on personal taste. According to Badiou, however, it is only able to isolate «dispersed stylistic elements»⁷ without considering the film as a totality.

For Badiou, both methods are inadequate: they point out only a few elements of a film and cannot determine the *idea* that it conveys. He therefore introduces a third method of interpretation: the axiomatic judgment. The starting point of this procedure is to ask «what are the effects for thought of such and such a film»⁸. What idea does it convey, and how? The axiomatic judgment «inquires into the effects for thought of each particular film. We don't ask what the film is, but rather what it makes us think, how it transports ideas: to speak about a film axiomatically comes down to examining the consequences of the proper mood in which an idea is treated thus by this particular film»⁹. This account of the axiomatic judgment also clarifies why Badiou focuses on single movies and their productive potential for thought rather than on the nature of cinema itself.

The axiomatic judgment explores individual cinematic elements such as the performances, visual effects, and the expressive power of isolated scenes (at the center of the indistinct judgment), as well as the stylistic features such as the setting and the pace

⁵ A. Badiou, *Can a Film be Spoken About?*, in A. de Baecque (ed. by) and S. Spitzer (trans. by) *Cinema*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 94.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 95.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 96.

⁹ J. Mullarkey, *Inaesthetics*, in E. Branigan and W. Buckland (ed. by) *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory*, Routledge, London 2014, p. 265.

of the montage (essential for the diacritical judgment). All these “ingredients” are gathered together to show how their composition in a specific film «organizes the visitation of an Idea»¹⁰ within the space of the visible.

The particularity of the axiomatic judgment also lies in its consideration of a film’s formal aspects alongside aspects taken from other arts and integrated into the cinematic field. Badiou emphasizes that cinema relates to all other arts in a «parasitic»¹¹ way by stealing their typical traits. As Denis Lévy points out, Badiou’s presentation of cinema as an impure art – as a kind of Frankenstein’s monster whose individual parts are borrowed from other art forms – is not new, but has its origins already in the film theory of André Bazin¹². What Badiou adds is the thesis, that the «treatment of the Idea»¹³ depends on the unique way in which a film connects all the different art forms and that therefore any interpretation of a movie should focus on how those various artistic elements are assembled.

To better understand this aspect of Badiou’s theory, it is helpful to refer to another text, “The False Movements of Cinema.” Badiou is more concerned in this piece with an ontology of cinema, albeit only in the form of a «minimalist ontology»¹⁴. He states that three movements characterize cinema. The global movement «refers chiefly to the technical infrastructure of the film, that is, to the ordered set of edits, shot sequences and so forth by which each work is constituted as a ‘whole’»¹⁵. The local movement «refers to that most basic cinematographic mechanism, namely, the repetitive passage from frame to frame»¹⁶. These two movements thus concern the formal cinematic elements described above. Lastly, Badiou explains the impure movement through which elements «are wrested»¹⁷ from different art forms and edited together in the film. He observes that «cinema is the seventh art in a very particular sense: it does not add itself to the others,

¹⁰ A. Badiou, *Can a Film be Spoken About?*, cit., p. 97.

¹¹ A. Badiou, *The False Movements of Cinema*, cit., p. 93.

¹² D. Lévy, *Badiou, l’art et le cinéma*, in “Revue Appareil”, XI, 2010. In the same article, Lévy also coined the interesting phrase “l’impureté du déchet” to describe cinema, a formula that underlies cinema’s propensity to use the elements discarded and considered “low” by other arts.

¹³ A. Badiou, *Can a Film be Spoken About?*, cit., p. 96.

¹⁴ J. Mullarkey, *Inaesthetics*, cit., p. 264.

¹⁵ A. Ling, *Badiou and Cinema*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2011, p. 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ A. Badiou, *The False Movements of Cinema*, cit., p. 89.

while remaining on the same level»¹⁸, but instead *implies* all the others. It operates on them as a starting point for its own expression. The three movements play different roles in conveying the idea, as Alex Ling states:

While both the global and local movements serve to “carry” the Idea (formally as much as diegetically), it is the impure movement, and it alone, which is responsible for “producing” the Idea in the first place. However, this means that any cinematic Idea must first be taken—stolen—from other arts¹⁹.

Badiou thus describes the idea expressed in films as “impure” because it comes from other arts. A film does not produce a new idea; it rather organizes the idea’s transmission so that it is only possible for this art form. Returning to the function of the axiomatic judgment, we can conclude that it aims at «demonstrating how a particular film lets us travel with a particular idea in such a way that we might discover what nothing else could lead us to discover»²⁰. In this way, the axiomatic judgment recognizes a film as an indissociable set of operations that opens new fields for thought and produces intra-philosophical effects. The film, and more broadly the artwork, is thus considered by Badiou as a thinking being rather than as an object of philosophy and aesthetics²¹.

In both texts analyzed so far, Badiou illustrates his conception of the axiomatic judgment with the opening sequence of Visconti’s *Morte a Venezia* (1971). The film deals with the idea «of a man who did what he had to do in his existence and who is consequently in suspense, awaiting either an end or another life»²². The expression of this idea relies on a series of elements from other arts: the setting of Venice’s canals and ancient buildings evokes “pictorial themes already present in Guardi or Canaletto” regarding «what is finished, settled, retired from history»²³; Dirk Bogarde’s opaque facial expression belongs to the theater; the plot contains literary allusions to Proust and the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ A. Ling, *Badiou and Cinema*, cit., p. 37.

²⁰ A Badiou, *Can a Film be Spoken About?*, cit., p. 96.

²¹ Through the neologism “inaesthetics” Badiou attempts to inaugurate a new relationship between philosophy and art. While the older name “aesthetics” indicates a science of art, where art is the object of philosophical thinking, the inaesthetics reverses the relationship by stating philosophy’s submission to the truths and modes of thinking produced by artistic works. A. Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. by A. Toscano, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ivi*, p. 97.

subtle uncertainty of Henry James' heroes. Finally, Mahler's melancholic *Adagio* of the Fifth Symphony obviously comes from music.

The allusions to different art forms do not accumulate to reinforce a particular idea; they merge into each other: «Music and place exchange their own values in turn, so that the music is annulled by pictorial allusions, while every pictorial stability is conversely dissolved into music»²⁴. The film is not a repetition of the same idea in different art forms but a complex interplay, «a synthetic fusion that produces a unique effect belonging to no other art. It is not an isolated musical impression, it is not just a pictorial impression, it is not a psychological or literary impression; it is really a cinema idea, and that idea is a synthesis»²⁵. The idea manifested by Visconti's film is the «visitation of a subjective immobility»²⁶. Dirk Bogarde's apathetic face, the timelessness of Venice, «the stagnation of Mahler's adagio»²⁷, and the melancholy novelistic allusions, all edited together in an excessive, exhausting duration, contribute to a sense of suspension. They deliver the impression of a man «whose being (or desire) is in a state of suspension»²⁸: rigid, dried up, and immobile until a new external desire stimulates him.

2. «Humanity is love»: *Magnolia*'s idea and Badiou's philosophy of love

Having reconstructed Badiou's hermeneutic process, it will now be easier to follow his reading of *Magnolia*. In accordance with the principles of his axiomatic judgment, Badiou first determines the idea expressed by Anderson's movie. In his reading, the film formulates the hypothesis that «humanity is love»²⁹. In the absence of love, there is no human community — only human beings isolated with their own stories, lonely individuals trying to affirm themselves through performance. Before analyzing how *Magnolia* modulates this idea, it will be helpful to illustrate Badiou's characterization of love as an exit from the solipsism of the self and a precondition for humanity's existence.

²⁴ A. Badiou, *The False Movements of Cinema*, cit., p. 90.

²⁵ A. Badiou, *Cinema as Philosophical Experimentation*, in *Cinema*, A. de Baecque (ed. by) and S. Spitzer (trans. by) Cinema, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 216.

²⁶ A. Badiou, *Can a Film be Spoken About?*, cit., p. 98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ A. Badiou, 'Say Yes to Love, or Else Be Lonely': *Magnolia*, in A. de Baecque (ed. by) and S. Spitzer (trans. by), *Cinema*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 183.

This chapter does not intend to offer an exhaustive analysis of Badiou's philosophy of love but instead seeks to point out the central aspects that manifest in *Magnolia*.

Badiou's theory of love constitutes one of the most important domains of his philosophical work, although he does not directly reference it in his analysis of *Magnolia*. Love represents one of the four truth procedures that comprise the conditions for philosophy; the others are art, politics, and science. The truth produced in love «bears precisely on what is to be two and not one»³⁰; it thus pertains to difference as such. Badiou refuses the romantic model of ecstatic fusion between lovers, the merging of two souls into an undivided unity. In contrast to this illusion of total synthesis, he argues that love consists of a process through which the two lovers learn that it is possible to experience the world «through the prism of their difference»³¹ rather than through a solitary consciousness. Love is not the reduction of the Two to the One; it is neither the sacrifice of individuality to blend with the other nor the appropriation of the other to myself. Love is instead the construction of “the scene of the Two”: a new experience of the world on the basis of difference.

The encounter through love is also an encounter between the two completely separated sexuated positions that are given in experience. Through a (re)interpretation of Lacan's theory, Badiou posits the existence of two radically differentiated interpretative stances, two opposed positions of knowledge and experience: «nothing in the experience is the same for the positions of man and woman»³². These two positions remain disjunct in sexual desire—as Lacan claims—but Badiou stresses how they can come into contact through the love encounter. This happens without their abolition or integration, however. As Louise Burchill incisively summarizes:

[A]n amorous encounter gives rise to a disjunctive synthesis of sexuated positions since woman and man now share a common, if unanalyzable, term—the indefinable element at the basis of their love—that, by manifesting the non-substantial, or non-ontological, nature of the positions' disjunction, establishes them as belonging to a single humanity.³³

³⁰ L. Burchill, *Love*, in S. Corcoran (ed. by) *The Badiou Dictionary*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2015, p. 181.

³¹ A. Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, with N. Truong, Serpent's Tail, London 2012, p. 17.

³² A. Badiou, *What is Love*, cit., p. 183.

³³ L. Burchill, *Love*, cit., p. 187.

The two lovers constitute «the smallest possible kernel of humanity»³⁴: a seed for universality resides within their impulse toward love, because seemingly incompatible positions have found common ground for building the “scene of the Two”. Opening up to love means welcoming the difference of the other: embracing «the you of the individual lover *and* the You of humanity at large»³⁵. Therefore, love is a disrupting process that refashions ways of perceiving and knowing; it forces individuals to go beyond a solipsistic experience of reality. From Badiou’s perspective, love is thus a powerful antidote to the narcissistic «dominance of the One»³⁶: an experience of the world enclosed into individual consciousnesses and based on the impulse to affirm one’s own identity.

3. The visitation of the Idea in *Magnolia*

Badiou’s theory of love sets the stage for understanding his interpretation of *Magnolia*. This section investigates how the visitation of the idea that humanity is love is modulated in the movie. In other words, it establishes how all the elements taken from different forms of art are put into service for conveying this idea. The first element to be addressed is the film’s exaggerated acting style, which some critics celebrate for its intensity, whereas others criticize by comparison to soap opera performances. Badiou shows through the application of his axiomatic judgment why this acting style is a decisive factor in the expression of the hopeless, hysterical solitude of an existence in which performance is the only way to affirm identity. Secondly, the film’s use of montage and music aims to create a sense of organic unity, build connections between characters, and present love as the solution to fragmentation and loneliness. Finally, the essay considers one of the most spectacular and frequently discussed aspects of the movie: the rain of frogs. Badiou reads this event not as a metaphysical redemption but as a signal of the urgency of welcoming love in order to avoid humanity’s disappearance.

³⁴ Ivi, 186.

³⁵ S. Jöttkandt, *Love*, in A.J. Bartlett and J. Adam (ed. by) *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*, Acumen, Durham 2010, p. 78.

³⁶ A. Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1999, p. 83.

3.a The desperate loneliness of the (acting) performance

Badiou considers acting style to be inherited by cinema from theatre. Regarding *Magnolia*, he notes the «fairly systematic exaggerated quality about the intensity of the acting»³⁷. He further states that «each of the actors has his own aria, as in an opera, a moment when he gets to show off what he can do»³⁸. Worthmann uses a similar image in the German magazine *Die Zeit*. He claims that Anderson leaves his actors and actresses «quiet spaces»³⁹, moments in which they are free to shine and overact. Roger Ebert also speaks of an “operatic” ambition; he comments that *Magnolia* is characterized by «big scenes here for the actors»⁴⁰. With the same words — “big scenes for the actors” — Peter Bradshaw’s review in *The Guardian* highlights the accumulation of moments of intense acting. He specifies Tom Cruise’s «outstanding performance»⁴¹ as a sex coach who educates men in their relationship with women. Cruise’s aggressively misogynistic monologue also impresses Maslin, who remarks: «Mr. Cruise, like the other actors here, is allowed to come on like gangbusters»⁴².

Since the film’s acting has been debated in most of the texts about *Magnolia*, it provides an ideal opportunity to observe how Badiou’s axiomatic judgment differs from other hermeneutic procedures. Starting with the same premises — the constatation of the hyperbolic acting style — Badiou comes to a different and more thorough conclusion through his method. Most of the reviews quoted above are examples of the indeterminate judgment: they restrict themselves to praising the “outstanding performances” of the actors and the presence of “big scenes” without explaining the reasons for this acting style or connecting it with the idea expressed by the movie. The powerful acting performances alone are sufficient for considering the film worthy of being seen and recommended.

Other authors interpret *Magnolia* according to the diacritical judgment, which leads the acting back to the director’s stylistic choice. Dillman argues that Anderson intends the intense acting to imitate that found in soap operas, thus subverting the canons of

³⁷ A. Badiou, ‘Say Yes to Love, or Else Be Lonely’: *Magnolia*, cit., p. 180.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 181.

³⁹ M. Worthmann, *Das junge Gericht*, in “Die Zeit”, April 13, 2000; my translation.

⁴⁰ R. Ebert, *Magnolia*, January 07, 2000 (Accessed September 20, 2022) <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/magnolia-2000>

⁴¹ P. Bradshaw, *Magnolia*, in “The Guardian”, March 03, 2000.

⁴² J. Maslin, *Entangled Lives on the Cusp of the Millennium*, in “New York Times”, December 17, 1999.

mainstream Hollywood cinema. Sperb returns to this line of interpretation with a polemic and slightly denigrating tone; he claims that *Magnolia* recalls the tradition of televisual soap operas because of its emphasis on melodramatic intensity. According to Sperb, the movie's almost hysterical tone is the result of Anderson's excessive ambition: he accumulated too many storylines, topics, and emotions and was then unable to give the film a solid narrative and logical structure. However, such diacritical judgments are limited to a stylistic discourse. Even if we agree that *Magnolia* shows some similarity to soap opera logic, we must still explain why the director uses this style. Sperb's claim that the melodramatic elements represent Anderson's failure and hence do not require interpretation appears to be a simplifying shortcut.

In contrast, Badiou starts from the axiom that the various elements of the film express an idea and that the critic needs to identify and clarify it. According to him, *Magnolia's* thesis is that humanity is love; without it, human beings are lonely and trapped in performance. The excessive intensity of the actors is thus a «metaphor for the question of performance»⁴³. The most melodramatic moments are scenes of desperate loneliness in which the characters, unable to communicate, can only scream in a solitary, hysterical exhibition: «Anyone who's alone— without love, in other words—can only affirm him or herself through performance»⁴⁴. Until they expand their own world experience through love, the characters remain condemned to play roles (the cynical male guru, the sovereign cop, etc.). That is why they lack psychological depth and recall the one-dimensional caricatures of soap operas. Badiou focuses on Jim, the policeman who prays in despair when he loses his gun. This could seem like an overreaction, but Badiou explains that Jim is trapped in the image of the perfect cop. He has no other way of being represented; losing the gun is therefore a tragedy for him, a dissolution of the fundamentals of his personality.

3.b The interweaving function of the montage

Magnolia does not merely criticize the world of performance and loneliness; it also presents love as a way out of this condition. While the exaggerated acting style expresses

⁴³ A. Badiou, 'Say Yes to Love, or Else Be Lonely': *Magnolia*, cit., p. 183.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

the hysterical despair of solitude, a possible connection through love is displayed through several other factors, including montage. This element is so important that Badiou calls *Magnolia* «a montage film»⁴⁵. At the beginning of the movie, Anderson presents us with «a wide gallery of alienated souls who appear to have been chosen at random»⁴⁶: Earl, a dying man being looked after by his unfaithful wife Linda and Phil, a caring nurse; Jimmy, a well-known TV presenter whose daughter Claudia will not speak to him despite his cancer; Stanley, a child quiz genius who is exploited by his father; the former child quiz star Donnie; the good cop Jim; and Frank, who runs a sex advice seminar entitled *Seduce and Destroy*.

The characters' apparent unrelatedness to each other makes them appear isolated with their respective problems. However, the movie slowly builds bridges between them. These connections are often narrative in nature: we discover that the dying Earl is the father of Tom Cruise's sex guru Frank, for instance, while Jim and Claudia meet and fall in love. The growing sense of cohesion is also fostered by symmetries created through the montages that connect and merge scenes. Take the scene in which Donnie is preparing a robbery in the shop from which he has just been fired. As he looks for a copy of the shop's key, he produces a metallic sound; this sound flows into the following scene and turns into the jingling of Earl's morphine pills. The camera lingers on the morphine bottle before taking Linda's pill package into the frame: she wants to kill herself by taking drugs to atone for her betrayals. The symmetry evoked by the montage intertwines the three stories, indicating that the characters are not as alone as they believe. Instead of seeking a way out of loneliness through suicide or senseless revenge, they should recognize their similarities, communicate, and form relationships—thus opening themselves to the possibility of love.

As Badiou observes, «there's a tension between the desire for multiplicity and a counter-tendency toward unity in *Magnolia*»⁴⁷. Through montage (and other techniques explained in the following sections), «the multiplicity is subordinated to a principle of unity»⁴⁸. The striking plurality of stories, characters, and spaces does not lead to

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 178.

⁴⁶ F. X. Feeney, *This is Your Life*, in "LA Weekly", December 15, 1999.

⁴⁷ A. Badiou, 'Say Yes to Love, or Else Be Lonely': *Magnolia*, cit., p. 176.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

fragmentation and the impression that the characters are doomed to loneliness and separation. The film points to the possibility of humanity overcoming a society that has disintegrated into a myriad of monadic individuals.

3.c The construction of a complex whole through music

The music in *Magnolia* contributes to a sense of unity even more than its use of montage. Remarkably, Badiou does not mention *Magnolia*'s soundtrack, although he usually pays great attention to music. For instance, he thoughtfully considers the function of Mahler's *Adagio* in his interpretation of *Morte a Venezia*. This neglect regarding *Magnolia* could be explained by the fact that he does not examine Anderson's movie in an essay but in an interview. He is thus guided by the questions posed to him. After having explained the functioning of the axiomatic judgment, however, we can then apply it to the role of music in *Magnolia*.

Almost the entire soundtrack is made up of songs written and interpreted by Aimee Mann; indeed, Anderson refers to her as if she were another character in the film. The continuity of the same voice throughout the film «reinforces the idea of a single voice guiding, rather than disrupting, the film's multiple storylines»⁴⁹. The music's ability to link different narratives is particularly striking in some scenes. In the beginning, each character is presented in a moment of their everyday life while Mann's song *One is the Loneliest Number* plays non-diegetically: «The presence of a song about loneliness during these character introductions implies that the characters are paradoxically unified via their isolation»⁵⁰. Although the first part of the movie emphasizes the disconnection between the protagonists, the music already hints at a possible sense of unity.

The binding function of the music becomes progressively more evident. Take the film's dramatic climax. Each character is at the peak of their desperate loneliness: Linda is about to commit suicide in her car; Claudia is taking cocaine while crying in the darkness of her room because Jim stood her up; Jim, after having lost his gun, does not

⁴⁹ J. Sperb, *Blossoms and Blood: Postmodern Media Culture and the Films of Paul Thomas Anderson*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2013, p. 126.

⁵⁰ M. Slowik, *Isolation and Connection: Unbounded Sound in the Films of Paul Thomas Anderson*, in "New Review of Film and Television Studies", XIII/2, 2015, p.157.

think about Claudia but prays that he will find his weapon, and so on. In this moment of deep anguish, they start to intone Mann's song *Wise Up* to alleviate their isolation: «The overwhelming sensation is that the music exceeds the boundaries of the shots that capture each person, thereby offering an unbounded sense of human connection»⁵¹. This scene provides a powerful example of the tension between multiplicity and unity that Badiou observes. Each character sings a verse of the song interpreting it differently: one character murmurs it in the midst of their sobs, whereas another produces a guttural sound. Together they achieve an organic, harmonic unity. Their song conveys the idea of «the construction of a totality made out of complexity»⁵²; a unity obtained by bringing together diverse pieces, as in a mosaic. The scene stands as a metaphor for humanity, seen as a totality that links hitherto individual lives while still preserving their differences.

Elsewhere in the film, music not only indicates the possibility of a human community as opposed to the loneliness of performance but also shows love as a unifying force. On TV, the young genius Stanley is read a line of the *Habanera*, the famous aria from *Carmen*. He is then asked to sing the original version. The childish, pure voice in which Stanley intones the melody dissolves into a recorded version of the aria, which serves as the background for Claudia and Jim's first meeting. The song links all three characters' situations and emotions, showing that they are searching for love to prevail over their loneliness. The choice of this aria is remarkable because the *Habanera* usually characterizes a sensual and violent love. However, Stanley's innocent version modifies its classical connotation. His rendition expresses his desire for the non-sexual love of his exploitative father, who demonstrates affection only when necessary to motivate Stanley's quiz performances and thus obtain financial rewards. Claudia and Jim's meeting also side-steps the unruly erotic tension usually associated with the *Habanera*; instead, it appears sweet and clumsy. The aria's atmosphere and its classical connotation of love as a destructive force highlights, by contrast, *Magnolia*'s idea of love's unifying power.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² A. Badiou, 'Say Yes to Love, or Else Be Lonely': *Magnolia*, cit., p. 180.

3.d The rain of frogs: a biblical allusion

Another element that connects all the stories is the rain of frogs at the end of the film. This event is used as a narrative device to enable characters to meet. Donnie the former quiz genius and Jim the cop get to know each other and lay the foundation for a future friendship. Claudia and her mother, who has finally discovered that Claudia's father abused her, come closer together because of their fear of the supernatural phenomenon. The apocalyptic rain is also a literary allusion to the Bible; according to Badiou's axiomatic judgment, it is necessary to explain how it is linked to the idea expressed by the film.

Almost all critics agree that the storm of frogs is intended to relate the different storylines and create a bridge between the characters' solitary lives. Maslin criticizes the device claiming that Anderson resorts to supernatural subterfuge because he could not find a narratively coherent way to resolve the film: «Even in the Bible, that kind of maneuver was a last resort»⁵³. Wilkins is less critical, but he agrees with Maslin that the supernatural intervention is a kind of *deus ex machina* that makes the characters' redemption possible: «the rain of frogs enables the characters in *Magnolia* to move beyond their individual states of alienation and devastation. Redemption here is not the result of human endeavor or compassion, it is contingent on external factors»⁵⁴. According to Wilkins, the apocalyptic phenomenon shows that people cannot free themselves from despair without external redemptive help.

Badiou suggests a different reading. He argues that the rain of frogs brings out another aspect of the idea expressed by the movie: the radical and dramatically urgent problem of the lack of love. The supernatural event is presented neither as a punishment nor as a transcendental redemptive intervention but rather as a signal that humanity is in danger. The biblical plague demonstrates that the characters in the movie stand as an allegory for the whole of humanity; they are not a random collection of people. With a sense of worried urgency, *Magnolia* shows that the devastation inflicted by a world of loneliness and performance risks the obliteration of humankind. In Badiou's words:

⁵³ J. Maslin, *Entangled Lives*, cit.

⁵⁴ K. Wilkins, 'This, Please, Cannot Be That': *The Constructed World of P. T. Anderson in Magnolia*, in "Sydney Studies in English", XXXXII/1, 2016, p. 78.

I regard it as a Paulinian film in a certain way, a film saying: “Careful, the question of love—love one other, and so forth—is a matter of humanity’s survival and fate. It’s not a matter of morality that’s just tacked on. I’m going to show you that the humanity of performative disconnection is a monstrous, endangered humanity.”⁵⁵

David Congdon agrees with this Paulinian interpretation. Like Badiou, Congdon stresses that the presence of this apocalyptic event proves that *Magnolia* has «a cosmic scope in its diagnosis of the human condition»⁵⁶; it is not merely the contingent story of a fictional community. The Pauline nature of this event lies in its simultaneously destructive and restorative character: «The rectifying consequences of the event manifest themselves in the form of new communities and communal bounds»⁵⁷. The rain of frogs encourages the characters to overcome their isolation and egocentrism and form new relationships and alliances. For instance, Claudia and her mother are finally on the same side.

Interestingly, Anderson claims he was unaware of the biblical passage prior to shooting the scene: «The frogs are a barometer for who we are as a people. We’re polluting ourselves, we’re killing ourselves, and the frogs are telling us so, because they’re getting sick and deformed. I didn’t even know it was in the bible until Henry Gibson [one of the actors] gave me a copy»⁵⁸. Anderson holds that he was inspired by the American writer Charles Fort—thanked in the end credits—who argued that ancient societies used frogs’ health as a criterion to measure the health of a community. Even without referring to the Bible, Anderson’s own interpretation of his scene leans in the direction suggested by Badiou. The rain of frogs does not represent a transcendental redemption from loneliness, but it serves as an alarm signal; it exposes the sickness of a society in which people assert themselves only through competitive performance and ferocity. The apocalyptic event consequently emphasizes the urgent necessity to act, to be open to love as the way to overcome this inhuman situation: «each one of [the characters], whatever his or her own situation, possesses an opening, a capacity that he or she can take advantage of or not»⁵⁹. The last sequence of the film, in which Claudia smiles

⁵⁵ A. Badiou, ‘*Say Yes to Love, or Else Be Lonely*’: *Magnolia*, cit., p. 187.

⁵⁶ D. Congdon, *Reconsidering Apocalyptic Cinema: Pauline Apocalyptic and Paul Thomas Anderson*, in “*Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*”, XXIV/3, 2012, p. 413.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 412.

⁵⁸ P. T. Anderson, *Magnolia: The Shooting Script*, Newmarket Press, New York 2000, 2005.

⁵⁹ A. Badiou, ‘*Say Yes to Love, or Else Be Lonely*’: *Magnolia*, cit., p. 187.

directly at the camera, symbolizes the actualization of the possibility mentioned by Badiou. It is a signal of hope for the future existence of humanity.

Conclusion

This essay has shown through a close reading of *Magnolia* how Badiou's axiomatic judgment operates in opposition to the indistinct and the diacritical judgment. This hermeneutic procedure does not isolate the film's individual components; instead, it has the capacity to explain the movie as a whole. The film's singular parts serve to convey an idea. In this way, the essay has illuminated Badiou's conception of cinema as an impure art that integrates elements taken from other artistic forms and edits them together to allow the unique expression of an idea. In the case of *Magnolia*, the essay has illustrated how the film expresses the idea that love is the only unifying force able to maintain a human community menaced by fragmentation. The essay has therefore also analyzed Anderson's movie as an artistic exemplification of Badiou's theory of love. *Magnolia* uniquely articulates this conception of love; it shows that humanity cannot exist in the narcissistic figure of performance and highlights the urgency of actualizing the potentiality to love buried in everyone as a seed for universality.