

‘This, please, cannot be that’:
the Constructed World of
P.T Anderson’s *Magnolia*

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All cinematic narratives, those filmed on location or on a set, artificially configure their sense of ‘place.’ In the Hollywood tradition the constructed nature of film worlds are consciously and rigorously effaced—conventions of style and structure prescribe the presentation of film worlds to be believable or coherent locations in which immersive or affecting narratives play out. This paper investigates the tension between naturalism and fictionality in P.T. Anderson’s *Magnolia* as a film that employs a conventional style that promotes character alignment and narrative engagement while simultaneously interjecting text and forms associated with literary traditions that highlight its artificiality. This aesthetic and formal structure—the insertion of scriptive elements—both serves to highlight the film’s construction as a text developed from a written form, the screenplay, and amplifies its overall reflexivity. Together these tactics create a recognisable, yet impossible, film world that facilitates *Magnolia*’s narrative, aesthetic, and affective strategies. These strategies work to promote the viewer’s access and alignment with the film’s thematic concerns—the breakdown of interpersonal connection, a sense of failure, and emotional isolation—while simultaneously positioning her at a safe distance, mediated by the recognition of the film’s artifice.

Magnolia encourages the spectator to align herself with the characters and react to the film’s deeply affective qualities through the employment of what David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, describe as ‘an excessively obvious cinema’—that is, narrative formed by three-act structures with action following cause and effect linkages that play out in unified, linear, and continuous space and time and are presented through the strictures of

continuity editing.¹ And yet, in contention with these formal conventions, at times *Magnolia* exposes its formal construction by highlighting the presence of a screenplay within the film's diegesis through the appurtenances of scriptive elements that function both to structure the film and amplify its reflexive qualities. While there are scholarly debates around the autonomy and literary status of the screenplay,² the dominant approach to the screenplay's role as an interstitial literary form in film is,³ as Steven Price suggests, that of a 'structuring document that demands concentration on the shape of the story and succession of events'.⁴ Narrative cinema relies on the arrangement of images in specific sequences that enable a film's story to be discerned.⁵ Thus, in mainstream cinema traditions, the screenplay is often viewed as a blueprint that facilitates the construction of coherent and realistic film worlds and as such once the film is produced the screenplay becomes a 'frozen entity'.⁶ With the completion of its audio-visual realisation the screenplay is removed from its position as an autonomous text and enshrined within the finished film product. In conventional cinema, the audio-visual realisation of the screenplay aims to erase the written text's materiality in order to create an illusion of presence in the film that, in turn, promotes affective narrative immersion.⁷ *Magnolia*, on the other hand, inserts the written form into its diegesis through prologues, epilogues, and inter-titles. By utilising tactics from literary and dramatic traditions, *Magnolia* negotiates a film space that at once adheres to Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's excessively obvious cinema, yet, through the intercession of text, re-asserts the role of the screenplay in its final audio-visual format. The integration of theatrical devices, such as the

¹ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. (London: Routledge, 1985).

² See Ted Nannicelli, 'Why Can't Screenplays Be Artworks?' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, no. 4 (2011), pp. 405-14, and Ted Nannicelli, 'The Ontology and Literary Status of the Screenplay: The Case of "Scriptfic,"' *Journal of Literary Theory* 7, no. 1 (2013), pp.135-53.

³ Kevin Alexander Boon. 'The Screenplay, Imagism, and Modern Aesthetics.' *Literature/Film Quarterly* XXXVI, no. 4 (2008), p.259.

⁴ Steven Price, 'Character in the Screenplay Text.' Chap. 12 In *Analysing the Screenplay*, edited by J. Nelmes, 201-16, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010), p. 204.

⁵ Kevin Alexander Boon, *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), p.38.

⁶ Mark O'Thomas, 'Analysing the Screenplay: A Comparative Approach.' Chap. 14 In *Analysing the Screenplay*, ed. Jill Nelmes, pp. 237-50. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010) p.237.

⁷ Boon, *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*, p.29.

Greek chorus and monologue, gesture to the early development period of the screenplay form while allusions to the book of Exodus and paraphrased refrains from Bergen Evans' *The Natural History of Nonsense* indicates the film's (thematic, aesthetic, and structural) connection to literary traditions. These scriptive elements alert the spectator to the reflexivity of the film and encourage her to view its absurd occurrences and excessive degree of coincidence as tightly designed contrivances that highlight the film's fictive nature without disavowing its affective qualities. *Magnolia* presents its narrative world in a manner that both reveals its nature as a construct and facilitates deeply moving narrative trajectories.

In this sense, *Magnolia* employs textual strategies that approximate Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekte*. *Magnolia* echoes the *V-effekt* in that metacinematic and reflexive techniques are used to remind and reinforce the spectator's awareness of the film as a construct; however these techniques are employed for different purposes. Where Brecht's *V-effekt* seeks to intellectually challenge the spectator, to shake them from their perception of reality in the theatre in order to promote critical socio-political reflection, the referential game-play tactics employed in *Magnolia* remind the spectator of the parameters of the film's diegesis as written within a formal, structured document, in order to facilitate temporary emotional investment in the film's narrative elements and thematic concerns. The recognition of the screenplay through literary interjections within the realised film disrupts the spectator's immersion in the narrative and provides her with moments of emotional respite. By reassuring the spectator of the limits, confines, and artificiality of the film world, the film encourages her to engage with its narrative intricacies, and align herself with the characters and their emotionally devastating plights, at a safe, mediated distance. Thus, rather than depicting Los Angeles as a naturalistic, recognisable, inhabitable, and familiar space, *Magnolia*'s Los Angeles is an overtly artificial assemblage that serves to facilitate the film's narrative action; it is a virtual version of a real location.

In the introduction to the published shooting script for *Magnolia* Anderson writes, 'I hope this is a true Los Angeles Movie. In particular, I have aimed to make the Mother Of All Movies About The San Fernando Valley'.⁸ Anderson's assertion highlights the significance of place within the film. As John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel write:

⁸ P.T. Anderson, *Magnolia: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000), p.vii.

films are shot either on location or in the studio. In the first case, films take actual place—take images of places, record impressions of the world's surfaces on celluloid...place and cinema share an intriguing and morphologically consonant doubleness: both are felt and have been understood to be simultaneously natural *and* constructed, to be the effects of both ontology and the articulations of a code or codes. Cinema as a photographic medium has been notoriously and controversially appealed to as a medium of “truth” in which the natural world (often the landscape—place—*itself*) lays its impress on the physical material of the filmstrip. This same understanding has been revised, and even abjured, by an understanding of cinema as depending less on its debt to the world it photographs and more on its operations as text, or as an instance of speech, language act, or code. Place, meanwhile, as we have seen, can be experienced or understood both as the ultimate, entirely natural *a priori* (‘to be at all—to exist in any way’) and a fabrication—a product of human artifice, cultural construction, and ideology (‘landscapes, like written texts, encode powerful social, cultural, and political messages that are interpreted by their viewers’).⁹

This statement suggests that all films ‘take place’—that is, all films present their narratives as occurring *somewhere*. Los Angeles is a recognisable site of cinematic representation—not only as the real site of production in Hollywood, but also as a film setting. *Magnolia*'s film world begins with a semi-translucent magnolia bulb bursting open to the rhythm of Aimee Mann singing Harry Nilsson's ‘One’ over a road map of Los Angeles.

⁹ John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel, *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) pp. viii-x.



The title sequence of *Magnolia*

From this opening, *Magnolia* creates a relationship to the city of Los Angeles as a real location, a pre-existing filmic site, and the location prescribed in the screenplay for this particular film's diegesis. Los Angeles is a city that is deeply tied to the film industry through its reality as the geographic site of production in Hollywood and its representation on-film since the early 1920s. Colin McArthur writes 'with regard solely to the representation of cities, there must hardly be a major city in the world which...is not known primarily by way of Hollywood'.¹⁰ In this sense, Los Angeles is what Nezar AlSayyad refers to as a cinematic city; a city that is 'not only that which appears on screen, but also the mental city made by the medium of cinema, and subsequently re-experienced in the real private and public spaces of the city'.¹¹ This notion is further articulated by David B. Clarke's assertion that the American cityscape can be conceptualised as a *screenscape*.¹² Films like *Pretty Woman* and *Clueless* have presented the wealthy, upmarket Beverly Hills locations, while *Echo Park*, *Boyz n the*

¹⁰ Colin McArthur, 'Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls: Tracking the Elusive Cinematic City.' Chap. 1 In *The Cinematic City*, ed. David Clarke, pp. 19-45 (London: Psychology Press, 1997) p.34.

¹¹ Nezar AlSayyad, *Cinematic Urbanism: A History of the Modern from Reel to Real* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.2.

AlSayyad argues that the boundaries between the real city and the reel city are, in postmodern films and the time of postmodernity, no longer useful to maintain—rather he sees the line between the real and reel as now fundamentally eroded, with the two notions mutually constitutive pp.3-4.

¹² David B. Clarke, 'Introduction.' In *The Cinematic City*, ed. David Clarke, (London: Psychology Press, 1997), p.1. emphasis in original. Clarke argues that 'cinematic space cannot be simply equated with a perspectival representation of (another) space, its dynamism contained by its narrative form' p.9.

Hood, and *Mi Vida Loca* have depicted low socio-economic locations. The city's long, wide, desolate 'mean' streets where underhanded business dealings take place between Victorian homes and run-down boarding houses are readily associated with films noir of the 1940s and 1950s such as *Double Indemnity* and *Kiss Me Deadly*, later *Chinatown*, and more recently *Drive*. Conversely, the glamour—the illusion and reality—of Hollywood (as both place and as lifestyle) has been reflected in Backstudio¹³ films such as *A Star is Born*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *The Player*. Through its tapestry ensemble structure *Magnolia*'s Los Angeles is a recognisable media-centric and celebrity-consumed location. Its plotlines feature the secrets of wealthy television personalities and executives—one with an unfaithful, guilt-ridden (second) wife and an estranged son who has become a misogynistic self-help guru, the other an adulterer who molested his now drug addicted daughter—two lonely and emotionally exploited (ex and current) child-stars, a struggling actor, a bumbling and incompetent policeman, and a hardworking palliative carer. This Los Angeles is comprised of upscale mansions, middle-class homes, dingy apartment complexes, bars and diners, studio sets and backlots, lawyers' and doctors' offices, and wide streets lined with Googie-inspired structures¹⁴ and palm trees seen from secluded spaces of car interiors. P.T. Anderson presents this Los Angeles naturalistically in terms of colour palette and *mise-en-scène*. Claudia Wilson's (Melora Walters) small apartment is modest, homely, and imperfect; the backstage green room of the *Quiz Kid Challenge* is a sparse, unglamorous space inhabited by exploitative guardians; Earl Partridge's (Jason Robards) 'Contemporary style' villa is an example of 1950s-1970s Angeleno luxury architecture;¹⁵ and the film's title refers to the east-west Magnolia Boulevard in North Hollywood's San Fernando Valley.

¹³ I borrow this term from Steven Cohan, and use it as he described: 'movies about movie-making' in his conference paper 'Another Hollywood Picture?: *A Star Is Born* (1937) and the Generic Continuity of the Backstudio Film' presented at Society of Cinema and Media Studies, Chicago, 2013.

¹⁴ Googie architecture refers to a style that incorporated space-age and futuristic elements with neon lights, and geometric shapes. A notable example of this style is the 'Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas, Nevada' sign designed by Betty Willis. For more information on Googie architecture see Alan Hess' *Googie Redux: Ultramodern Roadside Architecture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004).

¹⁵ See the City of Los Angeles: Architectural Styles (2009) edited by Los Angeles Department of City Planning.



Earl Partridge's home



A San Fernando Valley street



Claudia's apartment

Indeed, Anderson specifies various actual Los Angeles locations as sites of narrative action in his screenplay. The embodiment of these

specificities on screen creates a sense of place that recalls the external, tangible city of Los Angeles. The written text designates that Quizkid Donnie (Willaim H. Macy) does not crash his car into 'a 7Eleven' but a 7Eleven in *North Hollywood*, Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly) is not 'a police officer', but a police officer in *Van Nuys*, and the misogynist self-help guru Frank Mackey (Tom Cruise) isn't 'giving a seminar', but a seminar at the *Burbank Holiday Inn*. These precise locations are presented in order to be recognisable as naturalistic, inhabited, and familiar spaces and as such the world presented is conceivable as one recognisable city depicted via a series of simultaneously occurring events through multiple interconnected, yet disparate characters. Indeed, the vast majority of the screenplay's scene headings state that each action occurs 'that moment' (or very occasionally 'moments later')—creating a sense of simultaneity that is an assumed actuality in metropolises such as Los Angeles, yet rarely presented on-screen with such defined and concise linkages.

Anderson's *Magnolia* in part employs cinematic realism, while at other times effaces the realist illusion through open acknowledgement of the world's constructed nature. In his introduction to *The Question of Realism*, Robert Stam writes:

the most conventional definitions of realism make claims about verisimilitude, the putative adequation of a fiction to the brute facticity of the world. These definitions assume that realism is not only possible (and empirically verifiable) but also desirable... Another psychoanalytically inclined definition of realism involves spectatorial belief; a realism of subjective response, rooted less in a mimetic accuracy than in spectatorial credence. A purely formalist definition of realism, finally, emphasizes the conventional nature of all fictional codes, seeing realism simply as a constellation of stylistic devices, a set of conventions that at a given moment in the history of an art, manages, through the fine-tuning of illusionistic technique, to crystallize a strong *feeling* of authenticity.¹⁶

¹⁶ Robert Stam, 'The Question of Realism.' In *Film Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller, pp. 223-28. (Massachusetts: Backwell Publishers, 2000) p.244. Stam also writes 'definitions acknowledge a certain conventionality within realism, seeing realism as having to do with a text's degree of conformity to widely disseminated cultural models of "believable stories" and "coherent characters."' Plausibility also correlates with *generic* codes. The crusty conservative father who resists his show-crazed daughter's entrance into show-business, can

Considered in Colin McArthur's terms, cinematic realism is not an actuality, but rather a discourse or convention of representation better described as 'the realist effect'.¹⁷ *Magnolia's* film world—a cinematic representation of a night in Los Angeles—could be seen to conform to the 'realist effect' present in mainstream Hollywood cinema. The events presented are recognisable character plights portrayed by known actors. These plights centre on universal themes of familial breakdown, distrust, death, and the (im)possibility of redemption. Anderson does not break with continuity editing or the classical style outlined by David Bordwell. The classical style can be described as a narrative-dominant form—in particular, writes Bordwell:

cause-effect logic and narrative parallelism generate a narrative which projects its action through psychologically-defined, goal oriented characters. Narrative time and space are constructed to present the cause-effect chain. To this end, cinematic representation has recourse to fixed figures of cutting (e.g., 180° continuity, crosscutting, "montage sequences"), mise-en-scène (e.g., three-point lighting, perspective sets), and sound (e.g., modulation, voiceover narration). More important than these devices themselves are their functions in advancing the narrative. The viewer makes sense of the classical film through the criteria of verisimilitude (is x plausible?), or generic appropriateness (is x characteristic of this sort of film?) and of compositional unity (does x advance the story?).¹⁸

Within *Magnolia's* incorporation of the realism effect, the condensed time frame of the *fabula* functions such that coincidence, chance, and fate are taken as thematic preoccupations rather than elements of narrative construction.¹⁹ Yet the constructed on-screen world of *Magnolia* does not conform to what John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel describe as mainstream film spectatorship. Rhodes and Gorfinkel write:

"realistically" be expected, in a backstage musical, to applaud her on-stage apotheosis at the end of the film' p.224., emphasis in original.

¹⁷ McArthur, 'Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls' p.35.

¹⁸ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (Taylor & Francis, 2012) p.152.

¹⁹ David Bordwell incorporates the terms *syuzhet* and *fabula* from Russian Formalism to refer to narrative construction. Loosely defined, the *syuzhet* is the narrative or story, and the *fabula* is the chronological arrangement of narrative events—or the plot.

When we watch a film, its world and its images of a world become our own: we are impinged on, pressed on and by places that consume—however temporarily—our attention and push other places out of our minds. We do not lose the other places to which we belong and that belong to us, but we do forget them, however briefly. Our experience of moving in and out of a moving image's geographic, emplaced particularity and our ability, through the image, to know places we can/not ever know grant us a model for an engagement with the world, which is both a world and worlds. The moving image offers us a means of placing ourselves in others' places, not to annihilate their specificity or ours, or the specificity of these places, but rather so that we find a way of finding in the world's manifold particularity a universality worth sharing—everywhere.²⁰

Where the intrusion of the written form through intertitles and use of the prologue and epilogue as framing devices overtly emphasise the artifice and textuality of the film, Anderson's deployment of self-reflexive cinematic allusions and pop-culture references work to both locate the film's diegesis as a recognisable and relatable place and simultaneously remove it from any completely comprehensible and immersive reality. Throughout *Magnolia*, footage from existing television programs *Entertainment Tonight*, *Cops*, and *Quiz Kids Challenge* present a verisimilitude that is incongruous with other allusions—the stylistic quotation of Martin Scorsese's tracking shots and focus on the problem of masculinity in father-child relationships,²¹ Robert Altman's ensemble narratives, a literal rain of frogs, and the bizarre and arresting use of Aimee Mann's music as a Greek chorus. This collision of allusions works against the formation of verisimilitude that is usually associated with mainstream American cinema, and instead positions the spectator to recognise that the affective narrative unfolding is a machination that emerges from a written

²⁰ Rhodes and Gorfinkel, *Taking Place*, p.xxi.

²¹ As many reviewers noted, Anderson's cinematic style is notably influenced by Scorsese and Altman. Throughout Anderson's work, there is a focus on maleness, on underlying male violence, male solitude and a focus on relationships between male characters. Anderson's focus on masculine anxiety directly recalls Scorsese's recurring DeNiro characters Johnny Boy (*Mean Streets*), Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*), and Jake LaMotta (*Raging Bull*) as clear examples of masculinity as a thematic preoccupation. In Anderson's work the problem of masculinity is often manifested in father/son tensions, be they surrogate or biological.

page. The tension between affective immersion and reflexive mediation in *Magnolia* occurs because, as Kevin Alexander Boon states, 'the film proper—the light and sound show experience—creates an illusion of presence that the screenplay does not'.²² Thus the intrusions of written text and the film's reflexivity function as the reinstatement of the screenplay within 'the film proper', in an otherwise conventional narrative form, which performs a dramatic function that distances the immediacy of the affective film experience.

The tension between narrative immersion and reflexive distanciation is established from the outset of *Magnolia*. The film begins with a prologue that details three separate cases of bizarre deaths through a voiceover narration. The first is an account of the murder of Sir Edmund William Godfrey in 1911 by three men whose surnames Green, Berry, and Hill combine to form the name of Godfrey's hometown, Greenberry Hill in London. The second is the accidental death of a scuba diver named Delmer Darian in 1983, who died after he was scooped up from a lake during an aerial firefighting mission (with the subsequent suicide of Craig Hansen, the troubled pilot of the water bombing plane). The third is the unsuccessful suicide turned successful homicide of Sydney Barringer in Los Angeles in 1958, who would have survived jumping off a building had he not been shot by his mother as he passed her window on the sixth floor. Following these bizarre stories of coincidence the voiceover states:

... in the humble opinion of this narrator 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.

Taken at face value, *Magnolia* presents a fairly conventional narrative structure from which the viewer is seemingly able to determine an intelligible story that takes place within a particular time and location.²³ The film centres on an ensemble plot spatio-temporally determined by simultaneous events occurring during one night. The nine central characters are loosely connected to one another. In this context, the voiceover prologue could be assumed to function in a fairly conventional manner as

²² Boon, *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*, p.29.

²³ For a detailed explanation of conventional narrative structure and the construction of intelligible time and space see David Bordwell's 'Narrative Comprehension' section in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1985) pp.33-40.

an introductory exposition to orient the spectator in what may otherwise be a confusing story world,²⁴ as in the case of films like *Sunset Boulevard*, or *Casablanca*. However, on second glance, this opening narration is more telling than that. The self-identified narrator's pleas for 'this not to be that' (Not Just A Matter Of Chance) are, of course, answered within his calm, measured delivery. This is not that; the events cited did not occur. The newsreel appearance of the events depicting the Edmund Berry Godfrey murder,²⁵ the naming of the Reno Gazette in the publication of the Delmer Darion/Craig Hansen case in June, 1983 (alongside the men's detailed personal histories),²⁶ and the contextualisation of the suicide/murder of 'Sydney Barringer' as an account relayed by Dr Donald Harper (the president of the American Association of Forensic Science at the 1961 awards dinner)²⁷ encourage the viewer to engage, as the narrator suggests, in the belief that 'These strange things happen all the time'. However, as none of these reported 'facts' occurred in the manner depicted, the fictionalisation and subversion of real world referents into a cinematic prologue figures as the establishment of Anderson's formal world—an artificial assemblage—in which notions of simultaneity, chance, plausibility, and actuality are intertwined with practices of deliberate temporal contrivance and narrative manipulation for both thematic effect

²⁴ Price, 'Character in the Screenplay Text.' p.204.

²⁵ The actual murder of Edmund Berry Godfrey in 1678 has been the subject of many books due to its unsolved nature, with the event sparking widespread anti-Catholic sentiment in England at the time. Anderson's use of the actual murder is secondary to his playful re-enactment of its apparent reportage in 'The New York Herald, November 26th, year 1911'. See *The Strange Death of Edmund Godfrey: Plots and Politics in Restoration London* (1999), by Alan Marshall for more information.

²⁶ The Darion/Hansen deaths portrayed in *Magnolia* is the retelling of an urban legend (sometimes referred to as the Char-Broiled Scuba Diver or The Scuba Diver in the Tree) in which a scuba diver is accidentally scooped up from a lake (or the ocean depending on the reiteration of the tale) by a water bombing plane during forest firefighting, and thus found dead, hanging from a tree in full scuba diving suit, and with equipment. There is no evidence that this event has ever occurred. The myth has been investigated by *MythBusters*, and the online fact-checker *Snopes.com*.

²⁷ Like the Edmund Berry Godfrey murder, Anderson here combines fact and fiction. The story of 'Sydney Barringer' is based on a fictional account told by Dr Donald Harper Mills in a speech at an American Academy of Forensic Sciences function in 1987. Mills told the illustrative story of 'Ronald Opus' in order to demonstrate the complexities of legal practice in relation to homicide investigations. The speech has since gained the status of an urban legend.

and narrative construction. *Magnolia* foregrounds its spatio-temporal construction in relation to narrative structure and characterisation in order to momentarily disrupt the affective nature of the drama that is otherwise presented in accordance with mainstream cinema conventions. As Jill Nelmes notes, mainstream cinema directs a contract of verisimilitude between the audience and film text through narrative immersion and affective characterisation. The organisation and design of narrative elements, such as dialogue and plot, within the screenplay heighten the appearance of cinematic realism as they guide the audience's comprehension of film story. Cinematic realism, in mainstream cinema, is an artificial construct that film audiences have, over time, learned to read as conventional representations of 'lifelike' worlds on screen.²⁸

Anderson's creation of an intricate convergence of internal narrative and formal cinematic spaces climaxes in a montage sequence in which the film's nine interrelated, yet narratively and physically isolated, protagonists sing Aimee Mann's 'Wise Up' from various states of consciousness and disparate locations throughout the city. The opening piano chords begin softly as Phil Parma (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a palliative care nurse, prepares to euthanize the terminally ill patriarch, Earl Partridge. Anderson then systematically cuts between the nine ensemble characters, establishing a linkage between their plights through Mann's lyrics and the affective tenor of the melancholic music. This linkage is not only created through the mechanisms of conventional narrative montage, but rather interacts with the internal cinematic space and temporality of the narrative world, and the viewer's position. As the screenplay reads:

INT. EARL'S HOUSE - THAT MOMENT/NIGHT

CAMERA CU on the bottle of liquid morphine. Phil's hand comes into FRAME and takes it....TILT up to his face.

Phil is in tears....he dips the baby dropper in the bottle.....

Earl is out of breath, painfully....Phil hesitates, then:

CU - The liquid morphine is dropped into Earl's mouth.

²⁸ Jill Nelmes, 'Realism and Screenplay Dialogue.' Chap. 13 In *Analysing the Screenplay*, ed. Jill Nelmes, pp. 217-36. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010) p.217

CUT TO:

INT. CLAUDIA'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT/NIGHT

She looks at the coke in front of her. She hesitates. Her stereo is playing a song....it plays softly, then gets a bit louder.... She looks at the coke in front of her. She hesitates. Her stereo is playing a song....it plays softly, then gets a bit louder.... She leans down and SNORTS the fat line of COKE. HOLD on her....she starts to sing along with the song....

CLAUDIA

"..it's not what you thought when you first began it...you got what you want.... now you can hardly stand it though by now you know, it's not going to stop....."

The SONG continues. The following has each of the principals half singing along with the song, who's lead vocal will stay constant throughout.

CUT TO:

INT. JIM KURRING'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA PUSHES in slowly on Jim Kurring. He sits on the bed, dressed up and ready to go. He starts to sing along to the song as well.

JIM KURRING

...it's not going to stop...it's not going to stop 'till you wise up..."

CUT TO:

INT. JIMMY'S HOUSE - OFFICE - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA moves in towards Jimmy, alone, sitting in his office, singing.

JIMMY GATOR

"You're sure there's a cure and you
have finally found it"

CUT TO:

INT. DONNIE'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA pushes in on Donnie smith as he starts to sing.

DONNIE SMITH

"You think....one drink...will shrink
'till you're underground and living down,
but it's not going to stop..."

CUT TO:

INT. EARL'S HOUSE - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA DOLLIES in on Phil, holding back his tears and singing along to the song...as he sits over Earl....

PHIL

"It's not going to stop...it's not
going to stop...."

CAMERA moves over to Earl, eyes closed, starts to sing as well...

EARL

"...it's not going to stop 'till
you wise up..."

CUT TO:

INT. EMPTY PARKING LOT - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA DOLLIES in on LINDA. She's passed out in her car, head pressed against the glass, but she starts to sing along....

LINDA

"...prepare a list of what you need
before you sign away the deed, 'cause
it's not going to stop..."

CUT TO:

INT. FRANK'S CAR - PARKED - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA pushes in a bit on Frank, singing along.

FRANK

"...it's not going to stop...it's not
going to stop....it's not gonna
stop 'till you wise up, no it's not
gonna stop..."

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL LIBRARY - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA pushes in, (light coming up from the book he reads)
optical, glimpse what he reads....then pulls back from
STANLEY.

STANLEY

"..till you wise up, no it's not
going to stop, so just....give up."

PULL BACK.²⁹

Despite Anderson's careful indications that the events of *Magnolia* are occurring concurrently within Los Angeles, until this moment in the film there is no suggestion that the characters are aware of one another's existence (although their personal histories intertwine) or immediate actions. The chorus problematizes the previously assumed naturalism in regard to cinematic space, as the characters appear to react to each other within the film's diegetic world and beyond that world's construction in the actor's performed roles. In this moment it becomes clear that unlike other

²⁹ Anderson, *Magnolia*, pp.153-155.

films which stress 'the interconnectedness of places within the city via networks of transportation, communication, circulation and exchange',³⁰ such as *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis*, Ruttman, 1927), or Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991), *Magnolia* does not present Los Angeles as a protagonist itself, but as a series of pre-formed frames and scenes within which characters and action may be placed. Rather than being connected by an organic, living city which forces characters to interact with one another, these disparate characters are connected by Anderson's placing them within the frame as indicated by the screenplay. *Magnolia*'s Los Angeles is a spatio-temporal location that is constructed around character connections, rather than a city that contains and perpetuates connections by virtue of its urban networks.

During this sequence, Mann's music simultaneously functions both diegetically, and extra-diegetically. The relationship between the diegetic and extra-diegetic sound creates a complex conversion of internal narrative space and formal cinematic space. What is important in this formulation, as Stephen Heath writes, is that all

space constructed in film is exactly a *filmic construction*... The filmic construction of space is recognized in its difference but that difference is the term of an ultimate similarity (indeed, a final 'illusion'); the space is 'unlike' but at the same time 'reconstitutes', using the elements lifted from real space. In fact, we are back in the realm of 'composition', where composition is now the laying out of a succession of images in order to give the picture, to produce the implication of a coherent ('real') space; in short, to create continuity.³¹

Although the formation of a chorus of nine disconnected, damaged protagonists in their isolated states (and from various states of consciousness), in response to one another as well as to Mann's song, is impossible, *Magnolia*'s 'Wise-Up' scene does not break with Heath's notion of continuity. Rather, what is confronting about this sequence is its over-fulfilment of these criteria. As Bordwell notes, rather than rejecting the continuity techniques of conventional cinema in order to depict incoherent or fragmentary narratives, many contemporary films employ an

³⁰ AlSayyad, *Cinematic Urbanism*, p.39.

³¹ Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) pp.40-41. emphasis in original

intensification of continuity techniques.³² *Magnolia* in part signals its film world's artifice by fulfilling continuity expectations to excess. The contrivance of a chain of action between these spatially isolated characters is created by cutting between what would normally function as eye-line matches. Each character is seen, alone, singing a line from the song that seemingly speaks for their personal (and collective) situation. As the individual lines of the lyrics sung by each character follow on from one another (rather than accumulate or build to an actual chorus), they are framed as they are written—as though they could be in dialogue with one another. The visual and lyrical matches spill over a naturalistic diegesis and the sequence serves as an aberration that exists, like Mann's music, neither wholly in or out of frame.

Gorfinkel describes the deeply affecting nature of Mann's 'Wise Up' in *Magnolia* as a 'sing-along effect' that:

invites the audience towards a measure of self-reflexivity but also back into a mode of affective absorption, almost as a function of their incredulity...This performed synchronicity between characters paradoxically threatens to disrupt narrative cohesion and continuity, as the overarching melodramatic realism of the film is suddenly made 'implausible'.³³

In the tradition of the Greek chorus, Mann's lyrics are used to reveal and comment on the problems and themes of the film—the unresolved isolation and unspoken guilt experienced by the characters, and their yearning for redemption and reconciliation. This moment encourages the viewer to recognise her relationship to popular cultural memory and film construction through its noted 'implausibility'. The contrivance of this sequence promotes a re-evaluation of the accepted conventions of cause and effect, and continuity, in mainstream cinema. However, as Gorfinkel suggests, this contrived moment of unification is simultaneously affecting and cathartic. The affective quality of *Magnolia* is always intertwined with reflexivity and artifice in order to demonstrate to the audience the construction of the film's world and, within it, the narrative and characters.

³² David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. (California: University of California Press, 2006) p.120.

³³ Elena Gorfinkel, 'The Future of Anachronism: Todd Haynes and the Magnificent Andersons.' In *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, ed, Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, pp. 153-68. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005) p.162.

The reflexivity of the narration in *Magnolia* is apparent at a number of instances. The film's strongest moment of visual absurdity within its predominantly naturalistic *mise-en-scène* comes at its climax—a literal rain of frogs, which while serving the film's preoccupation with change and implausible events noted through the film's references to the anomalous phenomenologist, Charles Hay Fort, undoubtedly serves as a reference to the Plagues of Egypt in the book of Exodus (Ex 8:1-15).³⁴ Exodus 8:2 reads 'But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all your territory with frogs.' The Biblical allusion speaks to the characters' inability to excise their emotional and interpersonal paralysis. The rain of frogs occurs shortly after the deeply affective 'Wise Up' sequence when each character experiences their deepest moment of despair. Phil Pharma has aided the euthanasia of Earl. Earl's adulterous wife, Linda (Julianne Moore) has attempted to commit suicide. Claudia has denied herself the chance of genuine connection with Jim after he has revealed his embarrassment at his inadequacies as a policeman. Quiz kid Donnie (William H. Macy) embarks on a larcenous act against his ex-employer in a bid for financial gain that he hopes will result in a romantic connection. And Jimmy Gator prepares to shoot himself for his sins against Claudia.

Magnolia's rain of frogs is a deluge that provides revelation for its characters. Most obviously, a falling frog knocks Jimmy Gator's gun from his hand just as he reaches for the trigger. Another frog collides with Donnie as he scales a wall in order to commit his crime, knocking him to the ground. With Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly) witness to Donnie's attempted felony, he is able to aid the injured Donnie and reinstate his own position as a competent and compassionate officer of the law. Rather than these revelations emerging from a passage of reconciliation between characters, or self-growth, 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 endeavour or compassion, it is contingent on external factors. This notion is solidified

³⁴ The anomalous phenomenologist, Charles Hay Fort, is referenced throughout the film and thanked in the credit sequence.

The Plagues of Egypt are detailed in the book of Exodus. In this book God inflicts ten plagues (water into blood, frogs, gnats, flies, death of animals, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and death of the firstborn) on Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to free the Israelites and liberate these enslaved people so that they could form a faithful nation for the future.

later in the film when, by an act of grace, Officer Kurring's lost firearm, the manifestation of his personal failure, is returned to him from the sky on Magnolia Blvd, where frogs had previously fallen.



The rain of frogs

Thus, this reference to the Plagues of Egypt is inverted—the plague of frogs is not presented as a punishment, but an overt *deus-ex-machina* in that it functions to enable redemption that can only be imagined on-screen within this particular narrative. The narrative importance of this intrusion into *Magnolia's* film world is reflexively noted by Quiz kid Stanley (Jeremy Blackman) who, in lieu of a home, is framed studying in his school library. Looking up from his books, Stanley informs the audience, 'This happens. This is something that actually happens.'



Stanley explains to the spectator, 'This is something that actually happens.'

This line foregrounds Anderson's narrative structure as one that is not simply thematically concerned with chance, purpose, and fate, but one that has these elements written into the diegesis in order to highlight the sincere concerns about death, family, obligation, guilt, and forgiveness. However, the hope for redemption and interpersonal connection that results from the 'Wise-Up' sequence and the rain of frogs is anchored in overt artifice, contrivance, and intertextuality. As the film's structure is inscribed with referential textuality, Anderson employs an ironic self-consciousness that David Foster Wallace noted had become the default tone of expression in late postmodern American culture. The pervasiveness of irony and cynicism in American cultural expression led to concerns that sincere expression would be taken as naïve or lacking sophistication. For Wallace, this self-conscious mode of address incorporates a paralysing problem in regard to conveying meaning in texts—irony has become an end in itself. *Magnolia's* structure, on the other hand, negotiates a narrative and tonal strategy whereby irony is deployed *with* sincerity. This narrative strategy and its effect on thematic concerns are perhaps most evident in a telephone conversation in which Phil Parma attempts to reconnect Frank Mackey with his estranged, dying father Earl. In that scene, Phil pleads with Frank's employee to aid him in this undertaking:

CAMERA pushes in on Earl, asleep in the bed, breathing becomes a bit irregular. HOLD on him. 30fps.

PHIL

I know this all seems silly. I know that maybe I sound ridiculous, like maybe this is the scene of the movie where the guy is trying to get a hold of the long-lost son, but this is that

scene. Y'know? I think they have those scenes in movies because they're true, because they really happen. And you gotta believe me: This is really happening. I mean, I can give you my phone number and you can call me back if you wanna check with whoever you can check this with, but don't leave me hanging on this—please—please. See: See: See this is the scene of the movie where you help me out—³⁵

If, as Jill Nelmes asserts, dialogue functions in the screenplay 'first to make the storyworld more believable, to create a world in which the characters talk, have voices, real people; and second, to provide narrative information as the film characters express themselves in their fictional world',³⁶ then articulations such as this must serve to highlight the presence of the screenplay within the film world that has been constructed to house the genuinely affective narrative presented. The address of this statement engages the audience in an interplay between cinematic imagining and plausible representation without requisite emotional detachment. Phil's acknowledgement of the scene's position within the family drama tradition at once notes the film's artifice, while simultaneously functioning as a deeply moving portrayal of human desperation. Michael Chabon writes that universal themes of grief are 'at full scale, too big for us to take it in; they literally cannot be comprehended'.³⁷ In foregrounding its formal, written construction in these reflexive moments, *Magnolia* provides a moment of respite for the spectator by creating a distance without disconnection or withdrawal from affective alignment. This distance, in Chabon's words 'can increase our understanding of grief, allowing us to see it whole'.³⁸ This scene may indeed be happening, the affective qualities of this film are real, however, it is 'that scene'—it has been sculpted by the screenplay and is only taking place on-screen.

³⁵ Anderson, *Magnolia*, p.94.

³⁶ Nelmes, 'Realism and Screenplay Dialogue.' p.217.

³⁷ Michael Chabon, 'Wes Anderson's Worlds.' NYR Daily (2013).

³⁸ *ibid*



The three deaths that bookend *Magnolia*

Gesturing to its literary antecedents and again reasserting the fictive nature of the film, *Magnolia* signals its denouement with an intertitle. This intertitle reads: 'So Now Then'. The shot cuts back to the three separate events that commenced the film. We are again presented with impossible

footage—the newsreel, the shot of the scuba diver in a tree, and the suicide while the narrator begins, ‘and there is the account of the hanging of three men; and the scuba-diver; and the suicide’. The narration is then layered over a montage sequence of Earl’s dead body being removed from his home after the deluge—

there are stories of coincidence, and chance, and intersections in strange things told, and which is which, and who only knows. And we generally say, “well, if that was in a movie I wouldn’t believe it. Someone’s so-and-so met someone else’s so-and-so, and so on.” And, it is in the humble opinion of this narrator that strange things happen all the time. So it goes, and so it goes, and the book says “we may be through with the past, but the past ain’t through with us.”

The reflexive irony of this narration is clear—the events presented *within the movie* were, indeed, *unbelievable*, yet their occurrences are, nonetheless, moving. The role of intertextuality and reflexivity in creating poignant moments is again highlighted here, through the apparent quotation of ‘the book’. Importantly, the book loosely quoted is not a spiritual or philosophical text, but *The Natural History of Nonsense*, by the prominent sceptic, Bergen Evans. Evan’s book is a wry and witty criticism of the human capacity to believe, and perpetuate, preposterous stories in the form of myth or legend. The ironic inclusion of this text signals that the film’s sincerity with regard to emotional alienation and human connection is present, while simultaneously acknowledging its position in the tradition of myth-making and storytelling—its fictivity. As O’Thomas writes of the screenplay form, the function of this ironic concluding narration enhances ‘a sense of the film *as constructed* as well as the film that *has been constructed* to which the screenplay is an unavoidable referent’.³⁹ Only *Magnolia*’s screenplay is not simply a referent, but an element of the film’s form and narrative structure that performs a dramatic function. In *Magnolia* the screenplay does not relinquish its structural constraints in order to enable the ‘film to project itself onto our lives and the lives of others’,⁴⁰ but rather it reinstates its position in the final product through intertextuality and reflexivity amplified by the visual intercession of the written word, such that the spectator may experience emotional alignment and investment

³⁹ O’Thomas, ‘Analysing the Screenplay’, pp.247. emphasis in original.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p.247.

with the narrative arcs of characters, but with the knowledge these plights have been scripted.

The tension between the affective qualities of the film and its reflexive iterations of artifice is played out in the denouement. The revelatory rain of frogs has finished and the protagonists are shown in a state of emotional reconciliation, understanding, and recognition. On-screen we see Jim first consoling Quiz kid Donnie, then escorting him to return his stolen goods. In the place of Jim's diegetic dialogue with Donnie,⁴¹ we hear his voiceover narration 'summing up' the film's thematic concerns, through his personal reaffirmation of purpose in his role as a police officer. Anderson, however, again combines the diegetic and extra-diegetic planes of *Magnolia* by cutting back to Jim, who, having rectified Donnie's situation, is shot sitting in his car reflecting on the narrative's events in the manner of a *Cops* direct-to-camera monologue. Jim's diegetic dialogue in this moment is no longer inaudible but becomes that which is heard as a voiceover. He continues, his monologue lifted from action to a more theatrical mode, reflecting on the themes of the film's narrative, 'if you can forgive someone, well, that's the tough part. What can we forgive? Tough part of the job. Tough part of walking down the street.' The convergence of diegetic and extra-diegetic planes in this final thematic summation signifies the affective function of the film world's contrived spatio-temporal organisation. These lines are spoken with sincere intent and carry a poignant, affective charge. Jim's monologue concludes with slow, piquant guitar strumming of Aimee Mann's 'Save Me' as he resolves to connect with Claudia.

In Claudia's apartment Jim's dialogue is heard faintly below Mann's music, explaining his desire to be with her. The camera is fixed on Claudia, with Jim largely positioned out of frame. Claudia's distraught face shifts to an expression of relief, as the song's lyrics—'You look like a perfect fit / For a girl in need...of a tourniquet / But can you save me? / Come on and save me.../ If you could save me / From the ranks of the freaks / Who suspect they could never love anyone'—play in the background. This moment of romantic connection would appear to provide a cathartic, hopeful resolution to Anderson's film. While the plights of the other ensemble characters are not displayed, hope is reinstated with the traditional connection of a romantic union. However, Anderson's film does

⁴¹ This dialogue is heard faintly below the voiceover, however the words are indistinguishable.

not 'come to an end' in the manner of the classical Hollywood narrative. Rather, Melora Waters steps out of her role as Claudia as she faces the camera and smiles. The screenplay reads:

INT. CLAUDIA'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA holds on Claudia. She's sitting up in bed, covers around her, staring into space....a SONG plays....for a very, very long time she doesn't move until she looks up and sees someone enter her bedroom....a FIGURE from the back enters FRAME and walks in and sits on the edge of the bed....from the back it is clear that it's Jim Kurring. She tears a bit and looks at him...HOLD....

She turns her eyes from him and looks INTO THE CAMERA and smiles.

CUT TO BLACK.

END.

In dialogue with the literary and dramatic traditions the film acknowledges throughout, *Magnolia* employs an epilogue format⁴²—in the denouement each narrative strain is revisited, and the characters are presented as though they have begun the process of resolving their individual crises. This conventional strategy provides the spectator with the impression of narrative and emotional closure. However, in *Magnolia* resolutions are *too* neat; they are unified to the point of reflexive contrivance. The reflexivity of the film's epilogue signals to the spectator that the world is an insular cinematic construction and as such, it is not that the narrative crises are resolved in the epilogue—but rather that the entire diegesis is contained between the film's first and final frames. The insularity of these diegeses reminds the spectator of the disconnection between the film world and the pro-filmic space, which in turn enables her to 'close off' any emotional engagement with the characters and their narrative plights. Yet this reflexive 'closing off' in the narrative ending does not actually resolve thematic problems presented within the film. The individual damages and interpersonal difficulties presented are not, and cannot be, reconciled with

⁴² See Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* p.157-159.

the film's conclusion. Thus, in signalling the film worlds' insularity, the safe, mediated access to the film's thematic preoccupations is reinforced. The spectator is reminded that the affecting forces of the narrative are contained. Claudia's smile is not a signal that 'everything will be alright' in the form of a classical Hollywood resolution, but rather an acknowledgement that the classical Hollywood narrative structure has been enacted to ensure that everything *appears* 'alright'; that despite the numerous unresolved issues (including Claudia's anxieties) the film must conclude, and so performs its resolution reflexively. *Magnolia's* final frame reinforces the artificiality of its world, and in doing so signals that this world has emerged from the written page. This affirmation of the constructed nature of the film's world through its structure, aesthetic strategy, and frequent intertextual references does not preclude the emotional attachment or investment that may have been elicited by its contents. *Magnolia* provides the illusion of an emotionally satisfying ending—but this ending is winking back at the spectator and reassuring her of its knowing construction.



Claudia's reflexive smile

Kim Wilkins completed her doctorate at the University of Sydney in 2016. She has published work on existential anxiety in contemporary American cinema in the *New Review of Film and Television*, and in a collection on Wes Anderson through Palgrave Macmillan. She is currently working on her first monograph, which is a study of irony and anxiety in contemporary American cinema.