

**ANYTHING GOES:
The Erratic Cinema of Paul Thomas Anderson**

by

Matthew Rodrigues, B.A. (Hons.)

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in Film Studies

Carleton University

OTTAWA, Ontario

September 2012

© 2012, Matthew Rodrigues



Library and Archives
Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-93610-8

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-93610-8

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

Abstract

The body of work of American filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson is inflected by an abundance of ambiguous and/or unusual narrative and aesthetic gambits. Three of his most strikingly peculiar features are explored throughout this argument: *Magnolia* (1999), *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007). Each chapter is dedicated to a film and its demonstration of Anderson's proclivity for incongruity, unpredictability and vagueness. These observations are mobilized here as a compelling indication of cinema's fluidity and complexity. This, it is argued, is what these films valuably bring into relief. In their eccentric and ambiguous qualities, they also speak to the necessity of a suitably fluid conception of cinema. Figuring as a source of friction between cinema's 'unruliness' and its more coherent representation in other discursive accounts, they illuminate the considerable indeterminacy and complexity that inheres in the medium – as a form of artistic expression and as a spectatorial experience.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must thank my family for their tremendous and invaluable support. I am grateful for the encouragement and kindness of my two sisters. To my mother, I offer my deepest thanks for her love and support, which has made it possible for me to be where I am today.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Marc Furstenau, for being a continued source of insight. His perceptive guidance was essential to the strengthening of this thesis. My hope is that this project bears the influence of his instruction and his infectious fascination for our object of study.

I am also indebted to Carleton's respective Film Studies and English faculties. I am particularly appreciative of the instruction and encouragement of Aboubakar Sanogo, Zuzana Pick, Joseph Lipsett, Saalem Humayun, and Franny Nudelman. Thanks, also, to Jason Sperb (Indiana University) for kindly directing me toward relevant sources during the early stages of this project.

Finally, I would also like to thank Meghan Fulford for her remarkable kindness, patience and reassurance. This process would have been considerably more daunting and arduous without her friendship and consideration, which I can always rely on to buoy my spirits and confidence.

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Introduction: “An Homage to Contingency”: Anderson and the Unruliness of Cinema	1
Chapter 1: “Accidents Waiting to Happen”: The Incongruent Flourishes and Unmotivated ‘Excess’ of <i>Magnolia</i>	23
Chapter 2: “I Don’t Know”: The Iridescent Vagueness of <i>Punch-Drunk Love</i>	47
Chapter 3: “The Phantom of the Oil Derrick”: Daniel Plainview and the Mysteries of Selfhood	75
Conclusion: Anderson’s “Hopelessly Inquisitive” Filmmaking	100
Bibliography	107

INTRODUCTION: “An Homage to Contingency”: Anderson and the Unruliness of Cinema

Sometime during the production of his fifth feature, Paul Thomas Anderson started a fire. At his behest, the looming oil derrick that production designer Jack Fisk prepared for *There Will Be Blood* (2007) was set ablaze (Pizzello 2). A team equipped with an arsenal of “petroleum products, diesel fuel and gasoline [...] [along with] electronic coils, propane poppers, pyrotechnics and [...] road flares” set siege to Fisk’s creation (6). It became an imposing, conflagrant monstrosity, burning wildly against the landscape of Marfa, Texas. “The fire was real,” recalls Anderson’s long-time cinematographer Robert Elswit, “it involved the effects team igniting a mixture of diesel fuel and gasoline that was controlled with a huge pump” (3). Although the ignition may have been ‘controlled,’ the resulting flames proved to be far less amenable to discipline. As the fire rapidly consumed the wooden structure, Anderson and his crew soon realized that their existing plans would have to be revised. “[The] original plan,” Stephen Pizzello notes, “was to shoot the burn over two days; the special-effects crew, led by Steve Cremin, would start the fire, extinguish it and then restage the burn [and the derrick’s collapse] on the following night” (3). This was no longer possible, though, as the derrick had become decidedly more combustible over the course of the production. The problem, Elswit explains, was that “it had been sitting in the hot sun for months, so it was dry as tinder [...] they couldn’t completely extinguish the top” (3). These complications precipitated a much shorter and frenzied shoot. With the derrick’s collapse now imminent, Anderson had to amass ample coverage of the flaming structure while also leaving enough time to arrange its collapse

well before it naturally gave way.¹ “The crew kept filming,” Cremin remembers, “Paul let the actors try different things; he’s a bit of a renegade, and he wanted to play it out to the bitter end [...] he kept looking back at me to make sure it was okay to keep going. Finally, I said, ‘It’s time. If we don’t drop it, it’s going to drop on its own’” (6). Yet Anderson was indeed intent on pursuing ‘the bitter end,’ perhaps compelled by a curiosity about what the enveloping chaos might yield.² “He wanted to try one more scene,” Cremin remembers, “I was sure we were going to lose the derrick” (6). This is something of an emblematic moment for Anderson. Standing amidst a chaotic event borne of his own orchestration, he concerns himself less with constraints (here, the derrick’s impending collapse) than the fertile uncertainty of his circumstances. Indeed, as he periodically turns to Cremin, it would seem that Anderson cannot help but wonder if the limits can be further challenged and tested, and if yet unforeseen possibilities and discoveries might still await him.

The fascination and vitality of Anderson’s filmmaking lies in such moments of risk and disobedience, in continued engagements with the possible and unforeseen. As will become clear over the following chapters, which focus on a selection of his films, Anderson’s work seems purposely designed to subvert, confound, and inspire. Toward this end, he draws from an eclectic repertoire of incongruent gambits, unusual aesthetic flourishes and peculiar narrative strategies. These artistic risks underwrite the distinct experiences offered by his films, which are characterized by intermittent bursts of strangeness and ambiguity. Reminiscing on the formative influence of Robert Downey

¹ “We put water on it and got the flames to go out,” Cremin explains, “but we couldn’t guarantee the derrick would still be there the next day, so we had to keep going to get the shot where it collapses” (6).

² This anecdote also recalls a point made by James Leo Cahill with regards to Georges Méliès: “[t]he act of translating

² This anecdote also recalls a point made by James Leo Cahill with regards to Georges Méliès: “[t]he act of translating accidents into the tricks, contingency into calculation [...] often produced unexpected side effects” (303).

Sr.'s *Putney Swope* (1969), Anderson notes, "I realised that you could be really punk rock in a movie. You could do anything; it didn't have to make sense [...] At the time, Downey Sr was considered to be very odd and avant-garde" (Anderson, 7). It is clear that Anderson has imbibed a similarly radical interest in venturing beyond the limits of 'sensible' filmmaking. He has cultivated an intriguing disregard for traditional or constrictive ways of conceiving of cinema, particularly in the case of the films under consideration. Through *Magnolia* (1999), *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) and *There Will Be Blood*, he charts an erratic course beyond esteemed storytelling principles. This not only accounts for the distinction of his remarkable films but also, as I will argue, their considerable theoretical significance.

In the coming chapters, I consider the value and implications of Anderson's artistic 'mischief' – what it can tell us about the medium itself, and what spectatorial experiences this mischief can engender or solicit. What we encounter in Anderson's films is an abundance of strangeness and uncertainty; these are not simply themes to be 'read,' but also characteristics of how we may experience his films. When we observe, for instance, the beautiful polychromatic abstractions of Jeremy Blake in *Punch-Drunk Love*, we are plunged into an interstitial space of vagueness whose signification is decidedly muddled. These moments of pronounced, multivalent ambiguity significantly complicate the film's claim to straightforwardness. Such perplexing 'ruptures' also emerge as fertile and exciting spaces of interpretative possibility. In the case of *Magnolia*, unforeseen turns in the weather and inexplicable bursts into song seem to gesture toward the aesthetic and narrative possibilities of the medium. In this manner, Anderson's films bring the fluidity and complexity of cinema into relief (as an artistic form and as a spectatorial experience). The uncertainty his films engender, in other words, not only pertains to his unpredictable

and peculiar artistic choices, but also the status of the medium itself. Through an array of unusual and unmotivated flourishes, Anderson's films seem to point toward cinema's prodigious aesthetic and narrative capacities. Meanwhile, his deployment of vagueness reminds us that a similar dynamism and uncertainty inheres in the act of spectatorship.

My contention, then, is that the aesthetic and narrative eccentricities of Anderson's films illuminate the complexity, fluidity, and elusiveness of our object of study. By attending to Anderson's work we may glean a sense of cinema's enduring alliance with uncertainty, strangeness, and 'nonsense.' These terms not only describe Anderson's work, in other words, but may also inform a suitably provisional and flexible conception of cinema. This, I will argue, is the conception Anderson's films implicitly lead us towards. As we will see, this is in contradistinction to alternative conceptions where the medium's traditions, coherency and stability are more esteemed and emphasized. Contrary to such accounts, Anderson's films remind us that much of cinema's fascination and 'nature' also lies in its anti-systematic, ambiguous and unpredictable capacities. Thus, in the following chapters, his 'erratic cinema' is read as a vivid index of cinema's potential and fluidity, an expressive sign of its ongoing alliance with strangeness and 'nonsense.' While these contentions will be further explored in the coming chapters, we may begin by moving backward towards film's infancy, where this 'alliance with strangeness' was first struck.

"It was life at its least controllable," Siegfried Kracauer proclaimed in 1960 (31). With his gaze cast onto the Lumière catalogue, Kracauer arrives at this, a keenly felt awareness of the uncontrollable nature of life. This declaration is offered in his *Theory of Film*, ensconced within a section that promises to specify the "general characteristics" of cinema (31). For Kracauer, then, the work of the Lumière brothers seems to help define

the medium. Their films typify a “realistic” mode, one of two “main tendencies” discussed in his text (30-3). Thus, implicit here is the possibility of understanding the ‘uncontrollable’ not only as a feature of the Lumière catalogue but also as a key characteristic of cinema. This point is reinforced through Kracauer’s citation of remarks made in 1927 by Mesguich, a cameraman once employed by the Lumières. Mesguich’s reflection on the cinematic pioneers similarly exceeds a specific appraisal of the brothers’ work, serving more as a statement on the ‘general character’ of film. ““As I see it,” Mesguich declares, “the Lumière Brothers had established the true domain of the cinema [...] [t]he cinema is the dynamism of life, of nature and its manifestations” (31). Kracauer agrees with Mesguich, and goes on to refer to similar comments made in 1928 by Henri de Parville, a journalist based in Paris. “Parville,” Kracauer tells us, “who used the image of the trembling leaves, also identified Lumière’s over-all theme as ‘nature caught in the act’” (31). A similar fascination clearly informs each of these reflections. Kracauer, Mesguich and Parville join countless others who have similarly marveled at the notion that a selection of our phenomenal world can be ‘caught’ and ‘disclosed’ through the use of the motion picture camera.³ Each of these men regards a relatively new medium, whose remarkable sensitivity to the vagaries of our world elicits their curiosity and wonder.

Following this, we may consider cinema’s definitive unruliness, its alliance with ‘nonsense and strangeness,’ as being closely related to this ‘remarkable sensitivity.’ Mary Ann Doane thoughtfully reflects on this very possibility in her study of cinema and contingency. She refers to “accident and chance [...] [as] potentially threatening” (11).

³ Cahill makes a similar point, noting, “Dai Vaughan, citing Georges Sadoul, recounts the great interest early audiences took in incidental details captured by the first motion pictures—the rustle of leaves, rising steam, brick dust [...] it is equally possible that [...] accidental appearances caught the attention of spectators habituated to reading images eccentrically” (304).

Doane draws our attention towards the uneasiness that the accidental might inspire, precisely because of its necessarily unbidden and apparently ‘senseless’ status. “Their danger resides in their alliance with meaninglessness, even nonsense,” she continues, “nonhierarchizable contingency can overwhelm” (11). However, this connection between cinema and contingency, ‘uncontrollability’ or ‘nonsense’ also exceeds the ostensibly ‘unstaged accidents’ of the Lumière catalogue. Cinema’s privileged and, as Doane stresses, *troubling* access to the unforeseen not only finds realization in windswept leaves and disruptive extras, but also the materiality of film itself. We may be able to better appreciate the broader resonance and applications of Kracauer’s observation (“It was life at its least controllable”) if we, for instance, look toward film’s nitrate base.

Indeed, there was a point where the association being drawn between cinema and the ‘uncontrollable’ manifested most vividly in the physical vulnerabilities of the medium. As reported in a 1993 editorial in *Sight & Sound* entitled “Fires Have Started,” “[u]ntil 1951, most professional 35mm films were produced on cellulose nitrate-based film stock, which has two great weaknesses – it is highly flammable and chemically unstable” (Dodd, 7).⁴ Cahill offers elaboration on this topic, noting, “nitrate celluloid film remained the industry standard until after the Second World War, and the threat of fire, even when considerably minimized, *marked the cinema as a zone of uncertainty and risk*” (294, my emphasis). In its once precarious materiality, film itself could emerge as a deadly manifestation of the uncontrollable excess that Kracauer, Mesguich and Parville so admired in the work of the

⁴ Accounts of the disastrous potential of the medium are numerous. Lawrence Weschler refers to “a [1937] massive nitrate explosion and fire in Little Ferry, New Jersey, [which] consumed almost all of the silent films ever produced by the Fox Film Corporation” (151). Other fires resulted in more disconcerting consequences. Cahill offers a fuller portrait in his own thorough account, where he notes “the infamous 4 May 1987 Charity Bazaar fire [...] in Paris [...] [which] killed upward of 120 attendees, primarily women and children” (293). Such tragedies also support Cahill’s claim that “[t]he specter of disaster haunted the early reception of cinema” (294).

Lumière brothers. This decidedly more threatening side to cinema and contingency prompts Cahill to contend that “an intimacy with accidental danger, destruction, instability, and even death” marks the history of film (295).

This also reminds us that there are nuances, gradations and contexts that we ought to consider when thinking about cinema’s association with contingency. Its relationship with the accidental can be more broadly conceived, so as to include other less-considered manifestations of contingency and the unforeseen. The medium’s link to unruliness, in other words, exceeds natural phenomena, mistakes or ‘bloopers’ (as when, in Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (1959), a small boy in the background of a scene can be spied plugging his ears in anticipation of a ‘surprising’ gunshot soon to be fired by Eva Marie Saint). It is also defined by more troubling details, like the potential hazards of film production discussed above. Yet even the accidents that are liable to occur ‘outside of the frame’ are also occasionally absorbed onto the screen. Caroline Frick, for instance, points to the intriguing example of “the Thanouser Film Company, [which] suffered a famous fire on its own property in January 1913” (8). Disasters like this, Frick tells us, came to be resourcefully appropriated, used as fodder for cinematic spectacles. “As with other studio fires later in the twentieth century,” she explains, “filmmakers at Thanouser quickly reframed the tragedy (even reusing the burnt sets) and created one of its most popular movies, *When the Studio Burned*, based upon the event itself” (8). Frick draws our attention towards a canny process of transformation; a genuine, disastrous accident is turned into an orchestrated effect.⁵ What her example demonstrates is the contrived

⁵ This recalls a more recent instance: the fictional deployment of nitrate film during the climax of *Inglourious Basterds* (2009).

rehearsal of catastrophic facts, an emulation of the thrill of the accidental.

This points us toward a significant possibility. While it seems clear that contingency plays an important role in allying cinema with strangeness and unruliness, perhaps the term does not need to refer to legitimate moments of happenstance. The medium's claim to unruliness may not only lie in the ostensibly 'genuine' chanciness of a Lumière film, but also those more conspicuously designed instances that *similarly* manage to startle and bewilder us. Even such moments can, of course, qualify as truly disruptive or curious examples of unforeseen 'strangeness.' The accidental as premeditated cinematic effect may, in other words, offer aesthetic pleasures or discomforts that recall more 'legitimate' contingencies (a sense of surprise, bewilderment, distaste, fascination, etc.). This is what we find in Anderson's films – an *orchestration* of striking, unusual features that indicate his acute awareness of the *utility* of contingency as an aesthetic and narrative effect.

Thus, if we are to link cinema's unruliness back to its foundational sensitivity to contingency, we also ought to stress that this proclivity is not dependent on the 'detached' observation of profilmic spaces. It also relates to the controlled presentation of aesthetic experiences that channel, or aspire towards, a similar sense of contingent unpredictability. Typically, however, much attention has been paid to how film 'happens to' register the abundant variance and unruliness of whatever lies before the camera. This is what Kracauer seems to be noting earlier, and this has also been discussed in other compelling inquiries into the topic (i.e., Christian Keathley's *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* as well as Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive*). As Jean Ma puts it, "discourses of indeterminacy and contingency have long figured in accounts of the medium's ontology, potentiality, and reception" (140). She

refers to other intriguing examples of writers who share an acute understanding of the bond between cinema and the accidental. Her examples include “Roland Barthes’ concept of the punctum [...] Walter Benjamin’s optical unconscious [...] [and] Siegfried Kracauer’s camera reality” (140). However, while these concepts pertain to unstaged curiosities, they also remind us of the power of both uncontrived *and* contrived effects. Indeed, each of these concepts is not incompatible with more orchestrated contingencies. Rather, they illuminate the personal ‘wonder’ that Anderson’s films (especially in their moments of deliberate vagueness and uncertainty) seem poised to invite and engender.

Miriam Hansen’s account of Kracauer’s term confirms as much. She quotes from Kracauer’s descriptions of ‘camera reality’ in her explanation of the concept: “[c]amera reality, [Kracauer] declares, ‘has all the earmarks of the *Lebenswelt*,’ the ‘practically endless, fortuitous, and indeterminate’ world of daily life ‘as we commonly experience it’” (272) As Hansen implicitly demonstrates, this does not only pertain to actualités. “Kracauer,” she explains, “extols loosely composed, ‘porous,’ ‘permeable,’ open-ended forms such as the episode film [...] types of narrative that leave ‘gaps into which environmental life may stream’” (275-6).⁶ Hansen, for example, points to Kracauer’s consideration of one out of “a host of emblematic close-ups” in D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916) (276). Recalling my discussion of *Punch-Drunk Love* and *There Will Be Blood* in their respective chapters, she refers to the provocative intrigue of such ‘emblematic’ moments. As she points out, while Griffith “seeks to direct our attention,” he also “allows the viewer to get sidetracked by details [...] corners of the screen [...]

⁶ While my point is that this does not seem incompatible with contrived contingencies, Kracauer did feel that more staid or excessively conventional contrivances could attenuate ‘environmental life.’ Rosalind Galt, for instance, has recently pointed out Kracauer’s criticism of “the historical film [...] [as] overly planned, dependent on sets and props, closed to the life of camera reality” (120).

contingent images” (276). “For Kracauer,” Hansen continues, “this *spectatorial mobility* is the condition for a centrifugal movement [...] *away from the film, into the labyrinths of the viewer’s imagination, memories, and dreams*, that is, ‘the film is in the viewer’s head’” (276, my emphasis). As will become clear, this is undoubtedly in keeping with my discussion of the vague dimensions to Anderson’s flourishes. He not only gestures toward the vast reservoir of narrative and aesthetic possibilities, but also stimulates and activates the equally vast regions – or ‘labyrinths’ – of discrete spectatorial feelings and responses.

As for Barthes’ ‘punctum,’ Graham Allen points out that Barthes illustrates this notion through a series of photographs featuring striking and idiosyncratic details. For instance, as Allen notes, Barthes discusses “William Klein’s picture of street children in New York,” identifying the photograph’s arresting ‘punctum’ as “one of the boy’s bad teeth” (127). While the emphasis here seems to be on unstaged details, Barthes’ concept, as Hansen will indicate, also recalls the ‘spectatorial mobility’ discussed above, which is clearly not reliant on ‘genuine’ contingencies. As for Benjamin’s ‘optical unconscious,’ Hansen explains that this “broadly refers to the idea that the apparatus is able to capture, store, and release aspects of reality previously inaccessible to the unarmed human eye” (156). She also notes an affinity between this concept and the ‘punctum,’ as both focus on “moments of contingency and alterity [which] may act as a hook that arrests, attracts, and jolts the later beholder” (156). It is clear that all of these concepts not only pertain to the fickle and unstaged phenomena of reality, but may also speak to the power of more contrived curiosities. Their key point of convergence, it seems, lies in a shared emphasis on how a film’s peculiarities can galvanize personal wonder and fascination.

As suggested earlier, another key point of intersection uniting some of the other

significant writing on cinema and contingency is a focus on legitimately spontaneous details that emerge from, or are ‘found’ within, profilmic spaces.⁷ There is also a tendency related to periodization; early cinema is often privileged as the preeminent site of these unanticipated occurrences. In Doane’s substantial contribution, for instance, she explores “the pressures of contingency and the pleasures of its representability” at the turn of the century (20, 3). As Ma writes, “[i]n Doane’s analysis, the medium’s affinity with the contingent finds its most compelling expression in its earliest years” (141). However, Doane is also careful to address what falls outside the parameters of her period of study. As she points out, “[t]he ideologies of instantaneity [...] of the lure of the present moment that emerge in this period have not disappeared; they confront us now in the form of digital technologies” (20). More relevant to the present argument, though, is the attention she pays to contingencies of the manufactured sort. Her conception of contingency as a *designed aesthetic feature* allows us to better define cinema’s capacity for unruliness.

Doane arrives at this other side to cinema and contingency by considering Georges Méliès. Her aim, she tells us, is to “contest the classical polarization of Lumière and Méliès by rethinking their relation to chance and the contingent in time” (113). In doing so, Doane joins scholars like Richard Rushton (2011) and Daniel Morgan (2010), who have also sought to ‘rethink’ some of the perennial conceptions and distinctions that have endured throughout the history of film studies, like the classic division between formalism and realism (two polarities that Lumière and Méliès have, of course, served to respectively exemplify). In the process, she offers a compelling reconsideration of another tendency

⁷ Of course, the ‘observance’ of profilmic spaces can belie varying degrees of premeditation. This is affirmed in Martin Loiperdinger’s fascinating account of *Arrival of the Train* (1895), where he notes, “[t]he belated enthusiasm for the realism of ‘randomness’ is derived *from the visual surface of the film* [...] [and] ignores the fact that Louis Lumière staged the profilmic event” (113, my emphasis).

(the emphasis on *unstaged* contingencies and curiosities), indirectly offering a point of departure for my argument. “In spite of the extensive control and mastery exhibited in Méliès’ films,” Doane writes, “they dramatize [...] *the effect of a loss of control*. The inexplicable appearances and disappearances of bodies [...] the independent actions of limbs, and unexpected exaggerations of scale all *pay homage to contingency despite the fact that they are carefully orchestrated*” (137, my emphasis). In forwarding this intriguing observation, Doane points us toward another avenue by which to explore cinema’s relationship to the accidental, the unforeseen, and the unruly.⁸

As with Méliès, Anderson’s films “pay homage to contingency despite the fact that they are all carefully orchestrated” (137). They engender reactions (surprise, uncertainty, frustration, etc.) comparable to those elicited by natural contingencies, but the distinction here is that the unpredictability of his films is less the hallmark of an aleatory world than a manufactured aesthetic. They may not always afford the pleasure of believing that what one is seeing actually and spontaneously happened, but they honor the unruliness of contingency, and forward a similar evacuation of sense and order.⁹ Thus, in Méliès’ work, Doane notes how chaos is affected through control (rather than a subservience to profilmic spaces).¹⁰ Cahill touches on a similar idea, as he refers to the accidental (and, perhaps, apocryphal) origins of Méliès’ practiced ‘spontaneity’ or ‘magic.’ Allegedly, “the stop-replacement technique” that Méliès used was something he accidentally discovered “when

⁸ In his account, Cahill points to “[t]he choreographed accidents of [...] British gag films [which] produce an illusion of chaos and contingency that [...] demonstrates a technical mastery of aspects of the medium and profilmic environment” (298).

⁹ As Doane writes, “[t]he camera’s function, for Méliès, was, in a sense, like that of Lumière—to register contingency, to transform it into a representational system while maintaining both its threat and its allure” (138).

¹⁰ For other intriguing discussions of cinema’s relation to control and contingency, see Lastra (1997) and Keating (2011).

his camera momentarily jammed up while filming at the Place de L'Opéra, Paris" (302). "Upon reviewing his footage," Cahill continues, "[Méliès] noticed that the omnibus he was filming instantaneously transformed into a hearse, and passing men suddenly became women, thus introducing the artist's preferred themes of radical transformations, sexual fluidity, and death and reanimation" (302-3). Despite its disputed veracity, this illuminates a valid point: in Méliès' work, control and chaos are deeply imbricated. Principles of continuity and 'sense' become less important than the 'magical' contrivance of peculiar, but no less remarkable, aesthetic feats. Méliès' films, with their array of 'transformations' and 'exaggerations,' are so clearly inflected by an intense curiosity about the immense *potential* of a medium whose 'rules' and 'nature' had yet to be prescribed and reified.

Today, this spirit of curiosity and adventure still persists. Even though cinema's traditions have been consolidated, filmmakers continue to honor Méliès' foundational artistic mischief and inquisitiveness. Some still seem compelled to regard the cinema, as Méliès must have at its infancy, as something new and not yet defined – a fertile source of strange and yet unseen possibilities. The erratic and divisive style of filmmakers like David Lynch and Terrence Malick, for instance, continue to renew our sense of cinema's elusiveness and unpredictability. Anderson's filmmaking is similarly informed by a sense of wonder and curiosity about what, exactly, films make possible (regardless of what is deemed 'permissible'). Yet even as the medium endures as a site of fruitful disobedience and strangeness, it has also been rhetorically interpreted and 'managed.'

In his overview of the history of film scholarship, for instance, Dudley Andrew makes an intriguing reference to the ambivalence that some have held toward film studies and its clarifying impetus. "In France," Andrew writes, "film scholarship has been looked

at suspiciously [...] by sophisticated cinephiles who write for the numerous French film journals” (2009, 887). Andrew accounts for these ‘suspicions’ as follows, “[m]any of them worry that the savage power of the movies, their unpredictability, will be disciplined by academic study, that is, brought into line and tamed” (887). This is germane to the argument at hand, but not because the aspirations and achievements of film scholarship are to be wholly feared or resisted. Cinema’s ‘savage power’ cannot be truly ‘brought into line and tamed,’ especially as filmmakers like Anderson erode the trends and traditions they might otherwise be expected to perpetuate. The ambivalence of these French cinephiles, however, still speaks to some of the key concerns of my argument. While not all discursive accounts of the medium suppress its ‘savage power,’ some can certainly forward problematic and insufficient considerations of what that power entails. In the selections of film criticism and scholarship that will be discussed in the coming chapters, a decidedly problematic tendency becomes apparent, wherein cinema is conceived in overly coherent and legible terms. In such cases, the medium’s continuities as well as its demonstrated propensity for intelligibility and structure are emphasized and esteemed.

Such accounts, I will argue, tend to exchange sensitivity to the medium’s undulations and eruptions (its ‘savage power’) in favor of rhetorically framing texts so that they do indeed *seem* to have been ‘brought into line and tamed.’ As will become clear, those that primarily emphasize and esteem cinema’s ‘obedience’ – its demonstrable amenability to traditions and trends – occasionally offer too limited a consideration of its enduring *disobedience*. In the following chapters, such scholarly and critical arguments are used as evidence of a prevailing conception of cinema as coherent, traditional, stable, etc. My own emphasis will be on the *friction* that exists between this conception and the

peculiar examples of *Magnolia*, *Punch-Drunk Love* and *There Will Be Blood*. The significance of Anderson's films, then, lies in how they repeatedly advance this friction, reminding us of cinema's alliance with fluidity and unpredictability. This, I will contend, points us to the value of his work. The marked peculiarities and vagueness of his films remind us of cinema's long-existent ties to mischief, incoherency, and unruliness.

Thus, in the first chapter, *Magnolia*'s narrative and stylistic eccentricities are primarily examined *in relation* to the critical and scholarly responses they have prompted. Such responses, it is argued, suggest the endurance of an Aristotelian inclination within selections of film criticism and scholarship. As indicated above, the accounts under consideration forward a conception of cinema that entails privileging traditional, coherent and organic modes of filmmaking. *Magnolia* challenges and complicates such conceptions, and emerges as a striking adumbration of the complexity of cinematic expression in all of its possibilities and permutations. The film therefore accentuates the fluidity and unruliness of cinema as an object of study and evaluation. It foregrounds cinema's erratic propensities, which are occasionally dismissed, 'contained' or neglected within film criticism and scholarship. Thus, as I ultimately contend in this first chapter, *Magnolia* urges us toward an appropriately fluid and provisional conception of cinema.

In the second chapter, I turn toward *Punch-Drunk Love* and focus on the kind of spectatorship that Jeremy Blake's contributions seem deliberately poised to encourage. Blake's intermittent and vague interpolations, it is argued, are an important gesture of provocation, and solicit an ostensible array of spectatorial responses and interpretations. Thus, while *Magnolia*'s eccentricities seem to point toward the vastness of aesthetic and narrative possibility, *Punch-Drunk Love* reminds us that a similar unruliness obtains in the

case of spectatorship. It is argued, moreover, that the interstitial spaces of flowing abstractions that open up in Anderson's film are productive insofar as they emphasize the semantic mutability of films. That is, they remind us of the necessarily diffuse, splintered, personal and multi-perspectival nature of film viewing. This is understood here as another key symptom of cinema's fluidity and complexity – texts are appropriable, multivalent objects that may continue to be renewed and rethought through competing spectatorial responses, impressions and interpretations. Thus, as with *Magnolia* in the first chapter, the peculiarities of *Punch-Drunk Love* are mobilized as a means of bringing the elusiveness and complexity of cinema into relief. I also continue to highlight the friction between such contentions and cinema's representation in other scholarly accounts. I address, for instance, David Bordwell's dismissal of interpretation as a 'dubious' source of knowledge. Similar to the discursive examples addressed in the first chapter, this recuperates a classical and coherent conception of cinema, but at the expense of a more lucid acknowledgment of its definitive unruliness. In this case, the 'unruliness' being avoided is that of the multivalence of films and how this may inspire the previously noted range of spectatorial responses, impressions and interpretations. As will become clear, Blake's art also speaks to the imbrications between cinema and other media, as well as between film studies and other disciplines. Such points are addressed through recourse to other scholars who, in their writing, remain decidedly sensitive to cinema's fluidity and unruliness.

In the third chapter, I examine *There Will Be Blood* and the vagueness of its central character, Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis). Considerable emphasis is placed on Anderson's decision to avoid presenting viewers with a traditionally coherent and readily understandable protagonist. The film therefore further demonstrates Anderson's

willingness to subvert, challenge or reject conventional filmmaking tendencies. As in the case of *Magnolia* and *Punch-Drunk Love*, this has the effect of accentuating cinema's unruliness and unpredictability as an object of study and evaluation. As with *Punch-Drunk Love*, the ambiguity of Plainview also opens up a fertile space for interpretation that once again signals the semantic mutability of texts. In this third chapter, much attention is also paid to one of the more fascinating and crucial results of Plainview's characterization. The character's vagueness, it is argued, has the intriguing effect of recalling our experience and conception of selfhood as relatively inaccessible and mysterious. I trace this engagement with the limits of interpersonal communication and knowledge back through *Magnolia* and *Punch-Drunk Love*, and connect these issues to relevant philosophical and literary discourses. Anderson, it is contended, joins a wide pedigree of thinkers and artists who have grappled with the inscrutability of individuals. Thus, in rejecting a tradition of lucid and straightforward characters, *There Will Be Blood* not only further accentuates cinema's complexity and the multivalence of texts, but also enters into a rich artistic and discursive history of debate concerning the representation and conception of selfhood.

As indicated above, such an argument demands a focus on, among others, David Bordwell. As Martin Lefebvre points out, "Bordwell is arguably one of the most important voices in film studies in North America" (2010, 8). The value of his prolific contributions to film scholarship notwithstanding, certain of Bordwell's contentions have been met with ambivalence, if not outright disagreement. As Andrew explains, Bordwell came to abandon "lofty theory" in his seminal text, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (co-authored with Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson) (902). He opted instead to focus on "the specific and systematic character of the medium" (902). As Andrew recalls, Bordwell

“built *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* around a set of films chosen not by taste and judgment but by an algorithm [...] to guarantee that the book’s description of the Hollywood system would itself be systematic and immune to bias” (902). As we will see, it is precisely Bordwell’s insistent emphasis on ‘the systematic character of the medium’ that others have come to question and contest. The “aftershock” of Bordwell’s initial work, as Andrew puts it, “still echo across film studies today, setting off allegiances and allergies” (902). Bordwell therefore figures as perhaps the most conspicuous source of a particularly *coherent* conception of cinema, which he has continued to emphasize well beyond *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. In this argument, I explore the problematic nature of this ‘systematic’ emphasis or preference, as it manifests not only in Bordwell’s work, but also the writing of other scholars and critics. The problem with such emphases, I contend, lies in the ‘strangeness’ that they exclude, suppress, or ‘uncover’ as decidedly less radical curiosities (a canny rhetorical tendency that serves to recuperate a ‘systematic’ conception of the cinema as coherent, stable, continuous, etc.). Thus, within the context of my argument, the ‘anti-systematic’ undulations and eruptions found in Anderson’s films take on considerable theoretical value. They are read here as expressive indices of cinema’s fluidity, potential, and unruliness, the very things that exceed and complicate systematic emphases or, in the case of film criticism, evaluative ‘preferences.’

Of course, it might be argued that the strangeness represented by Anderson’s work has been given ample consideration in at least one of Bordwell’s well-known articles. In “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” he describes a tendency that undoubtedly recalls what we see in Anderson’s films. As he writes, “the art cinema defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode, and especially against the cause-effect

linkage of events” (95). Bordwell, naturally, strives to motivate these peculiarities in his article. Much of art cinema’s strangeness, he indicates, can be traced back to its psychological emphasis (its ‘realism’) or its pronounced authorial dimensions (95). “In the art-cinema text,” he explains, “the authorial code manifests itself as recurrent violations of the classical norm” (98). These emerge as useful explanations that can then be applied to any case of cinematic aberrance or peculiarity. Anything too eccentric can be categorized (and, perhaps, reduced) under the heading of an ‘authorial gesture.’ For instance, he refers to “the color filters at the start of *Le mépris*” as a sign of Godard’s authorship (98). If we cannot account for something by these means, we can find recourse in the other option. As he writes, “[w]henever confronted with a problem in causation, temporality, or spatiality, we first seek realistic motivation [...] If we’re thwarted, we next seek authorial motivation” (98). Even so, he acknowledges the vagueness of art cinema, and in a manner that recalls my discussions of *Punch-Drunk Love* and *There Will Be Blood*. “[T]hat such films make you leave the theatre thinking,” Bordwell writes, “is not far from the mark: the ambiguity, the play of thematic interpretation, must not be halted at the film’s close” (99).

However, notwithstanding the example of this article, what we find in Bordwell’s writing (and that of other scholars and critics) are attempts at painting a very clean and coherent picture of messy and incoherent filmmaking. What I (and, as will become clear, numerous scholars) am addressing is not really an absence in Bordwell’s scholarship, but an emphasis or proclivity. As Thomas Elsaesser indicates in his recent article on ‘mind-game films,’ Bordwell and others sometimes approach texts with an emphasis on enduring trends and paradigms. As he writes, “[t]he perspective taken by Bordwell, Thompson, as well as Murray Smith (2001) and others is that [...] [mind-game films are] a challenge

[...] that can be ‘mastered’” (21). This ‘mastering,’ Elsaesser notes, is achieved, for instance, “simply by extending classical narratology to include some of the recent work in cognitive psychology” (21). As he argues, this risks mollifying the intriguing strangeness of texts: “para-normal features are given normal explanations, and the narratives are restored to their ‘proper’ functioning” (21). “The problem with such approaches,” he continues, “is that they tend to *reduce the films to business as usual*” (21, my emphasis).¹¹

My own account therefore deals with certain emphases, expectations and conceptions that have been discursively forwarded within film criticism and scholarship. Such accounts articulate the narrative and aesthetic tendencies that are deemed ‘permissible’ or ‘normal.’ I will highlight the eccentricity of Anderson’s films in contradistinction to this prevailing conception of cinema as traditional or ‘systematic.’ What will become clear is that the latter is found in accounts where cinema – what it is, or ought to be – is too forcefully ‘defined,’ and where its definitive recalcitrance and strangeness is less considered. This argument is therefore centered on competing ways of discussing and valuing cinema that extend across film scholarship and criticism. It is clear, of course, that at various points in time different cinematic strengths and possibilities have been valued or emphasized. I am addressing a relatively current discursive trend, wherein cinema’s continuities and apparent stability are being given considerable praise and emphasis by certain scholars and critics. In this argument, Anderson’s films are read as a striking

¹¹ The following from Hansen’s discussion of Kracauer is of relevance here. Referring to the previously mentioned “enigmatic closeups” from *Intolerance*, she writes, “[w]hat such semi-autonomous details succeed in summoning is not exhausted by a functionalist concept of ‘motivation,’ whether realistic, artistic, or compositional. Their ‘intoxicating effect’ derives from moments of indeterminacy and contingency, a material dynamics that exceeds narrative and diegetic motivation” (275). “This process,” she elaborates, “takes the viewer [...] beyond/below the [...] particular kinds of knowledge that govern our understanding of narratives, into the at once singular and historical-collective realm of experience, the striated [...] partly fluid *Lebenswelt*” (276-77).

challenge to these discursive trends and what they suggest is important about cinema. This is what the films under consideration complicate. They challenge what is often discursively – implicitly or otherwise – forwarded as cinema’s salient or definitive characteristics. The deliberate provocations of Anderson’s films prompt us to question such extant conceptions of the medium, particularly those that emphasize cinema’s continuities, coherency, stability and classicism. *Magnolia*, *Punch-Drunk Love* and *There Will Be Blood* urge us to reassess our sense of a medium whose fluidity and unpredictability exceed any discursive attempts to ‘contain’ or ‘regulate’ it. Thus, as I will contend throughout this argument, in contradistinction to numerous discursive accounts, Anderson’s films remind us of cinema’s unruly potential and complexity. In doing so, they strikingly affirm that our object of study warrants a similarly fluid and flexible conception.

It is clear that novelty can only occur in relation to tradition. Indeed, I refer to cinema’s traditions to bring the unusualness of Anderson’s work into relief. However, this point need not be adamantly or ubiquitously made. In some accounts, it is as if peculiarities have been implicitly placed within scare quotes, and it is suggested that ‘novelty’ is only a curiosity set against the larger and more important backdrop of tradition. Part of the problem, then, lies in addressing aberrant aesthetic and narrative ‘exceptions’ within an argument that primarily reifies cinema’s traditions and continuities. The alternative being proposed here is an appraisal – or, perhaps more appropriately, a ‘discovery’ – of films that entails grappling with the myriad permutations and peculiarities that define cinema just as much as its oft-noted consistencies. This means remaining sensitive to unusual ‘exceptions,’ which can in turn illuminate our object of study. Here,

these features are appreciated as revealing signs of cinema's long-existent alliance with incoherency and unruliness (even as coherency and traditions persevere). Cinema's continuities are worthy of attention, but its disobedient departures also deserve careful consideration in their own right – not as mere 'hiccups' in a relentless machine, but as telling symptoms that, if properly attended to, may help us to cultivate more compelling and nuanced accounts of what cinema is, was, or might become (at any given moment).

CHAPTER ONE: “Accidents Waiting to Happen”: The Incongruent Flourishes and Unmotivated ‘Excess’ of *Magnolia*

Late in *Magnolia*, hospice nurse Phil Parma (Philip Seymour Hoffman) stares off-screen in uncomprehending wonder and asks, “how are there frogs falling from the sky?” This is one of several peculiar moments in a film that often disrupts and resists its claim to conventionality. What is intriguing about this particular example is how Phil announces the surreal object of his gaze before it is visually disclosed. What Anderson is accentuating here is not necessarily the amphibian deluge occurring off-screen, but the confusion it inspires in Phil and, perhaps, in the spectators viewing the film. Indeed, the strangeness of this apparently unmotivated and incongruous event could be understood as reverberating across diegetic and actual spaces, confusing fictional characters while defying spectatorial expectations. It certainly precipitates a marked change in Phil’s emotional state. Before the emergence of this Fortean downpour, his attention and emotions (and arguably those of the spectator) had been directed elsewhere.¹² He had been compassionately observing a turbulent family reunion between Earl Partridge (Jason Robards), a dying television producer under Phil’s professional care, and Frank T.J. Mackey (Tom Cruise), the son he abandoned years ago. In the midst of this reunion, Phil takes on an observational role comparable to our own, remaining removed from, but also sensitively attuned to, the emotionally charged scene. He watches as Mackey shifts from angrily wishing his barely conscious father a painful death to, after succumbing to his own weeping and writhing, fervently begging him to not “go away.” Soon thereafter, legions of

¹² “A kind of antinatural meteorology,” David Bordwell explains, “frog rains are one of many puzzling events collected by the eccentric Charles Fort [...] [who] adduced thousands of coincidences and paranormal phenomena as challenges to contemporary science; for him, they pointed toward enigmatic pieces of wisdom he called ‘abstrusities’” (2008, 231).

frogs begin to fall from the sky and things get much stranger for Phil and spectators alike.

What this analogy is meant to demonstrate is that this moment may be understood as peculiar and disruptive not only within the film's story world, but also the larger context of how we understand films (or, more precisely, the expectations, values, and conceptions that inform some of these potential understandings). The strangeness of *Magnolia* is not solely attributable to the rainfall of frogs, however. Anderson also offers other narrative and aesthetic peculiarities. As Joanne Clarke Dillman observes, "[w]e have little [...] causal linearity in *Magnolia* and, therefore, no real way to anticipate what will happen next" (146). As with the frogs, unanticipated events may dislodge spectators from what might have otherwise been an undisturbed investment in the more conventional and legible aspects of the narrative. Just as Phil's attention is directed away from the involving melodrama of Earl and Frank's reunion and toward the strangeness of falling frogs, so too does our attention occasionally shift from the more logical proceedings of the film.

These ruptures are often bizarre, unmotivated and/or incongruous in nature. When, for instance, several characters from the film's ensemble inexplicably break out into song late into the film, some may rightfully feel that something has gone 'wrong.' Generic expectations and the established logic and ethos of the film are disregarded, urging us to reevaluate just what is permissible in the case of this 'unruly' film. *Magnolia* therefore becomes a rich and dynamic viewing experience, where spectatorial bearings are regularly under siege. What is fascinating about Anderson's film, in other words, is the uncertainty it generates, rather than a satisfying adherence to storytelling principles or norms. As Dillman puts it, "[s]o much is unmotivated (communal singing, frogs falling from the sky, Jim's gun falling from the sky); much is left unsaid [...] and much is unanswered" (146).

Like Phil watching a downpour of frogs, we must contend with the resultant strangeness.

Of course, a great number of films exploit the utility of contingency as a conceit or as a useful way to organize a story and/or suture elements of its plot (i.e., uniting characters in a romantic comedy through the ‘meet cute’ or introducing exciting and occasionally improbable twists).¹³ In contrast to what is going on in *Magnolia*, though, these are more conventional examples of contrived contingencies (if they can even be referred to as such, since traditions like the ‘meet cute’ are just that, traditions, and lack the surprising and affective force I have associated with ‘contrived contingencies’). Anderson’s films undoubtedly exhibit some of these conventional uses, but he also uses contingency in an arguably more interesting way – that is, as a defining feature of an aesthetic *experience* that unfolds erratically and unpredictably, rather than coherently and conventionally. Thus, in *Magnolia*, we experience the stylistic and narrative thematization of contingency. As John Bruns notes, the film “*embodies* its own thematic concerns [...] there is no single system of reference, no underlying laws to which events will accord” (206, original emphasis). This is a crucial point, one that complements the assumptions of my argument. Bruns is similarly guiding us to look beyond *Magnolia*’s thematic content and toward the striking audacity of its form, whose implications and significance warrant consideration.

This ‘striking audacity’ may be explored through two methods. The first is textual analysis, while the second involves the testimony of spectators or, more specifically, the evaluations of film critics. Bruns’ excellent account of *Magnolia* is an example of the former method. He attends to the structure of Anderson’s film and argues that it “achieves

¹³ As Sandy Carmago puts it, “the role of chance makes plot construction easier.” With regards to the ‘meet-cute,’ this is a tendency in romantic comedies wherein “the lovers-to-be first encounter each other in a way which forecasts their eventual union” (McDonald 12).

true cinematic polyphony by depicting simultaneity without unity, multiplicity without completeness” (189).¹⁴ He offers some intriguing commentary on *Magnolia*’s ensemble of characters and how this produces discrete and intertwining narrative threads that vie for our attention. “Anderson’s audacity,” Bruns contends, “is to avoid linking these events together [...] or resolving and explaining them” (205). This ‘avoidance,’ he further argues, lends *Magnolia* a decidedly complex and inorganic quality. “Anderson’s film has several distinct and irreducible centers,” explains Bruns, “[i]t achieves, as any polyphonic work will, a collage-like unity of incongruous elements” (205).

Other scholars have identified such incongruity as a defining feature of the category of films to which *Magnolia* may be assigned. In María del Mar Azcona’s account of ‘multi-protagonist films,’ for instance, she notes that *Magnolia* belongs to what Margrit Tröhler calls “mosaic films” (21). Tröhler, Azcona elaborates, “considers Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of the rhizome – an acentered structure without a hierarchical organization in which any point can be arbitrarily connected to any other [...] as the structure that best reflects mosaic films” (21). While he does not adopt the same terms, Bruns’ account clearly agrees with Tröhler’s argument. “[T]ry as we may,” he writes, “we will not be able to experience what will unfold as a whole [...] there will be no genetic or causal categories with which to bring them into some sort of logical unity, or single voice” (205). Bruns, Azcona, and Tröhler help to affirm *Magnolia*’s status as an incessantly incongruous film, a discordance of elements that fail to cohere into a satisfying ‘whole.’

¹⁴ Bruns clarifies as follows, “polyphony’s attendant definition [is] that each line is musically satisfying in itself, coordinate with other lines yet relatively independent. Imagine, then, a Classical Hollywood film in which there is not a single hero, but many [...] [and] the events [...] unfold simultaneously, but independently. Then you would have [...] the polyphonic *film*” (190, original emphasis).

The ‘audacity’ or strangeness of the film is also powerfully attested to in its divisive critical reception. This also illustrates the problematic conception or emphasis that is occasionally forwarded within scholarly and critical discourses. In the case of film criticism, this manifests itself in reviews that betray seemingly prescriptive understandings of what cinema ought to be, or at least what it must be to be deemed ‘valuable’ and/or ‘normal.’ Much of the criticism surrounding Anderson’s aberrant film is replete with the exasperated voices of several critics that believe *Magnolia* is a perplexing mess. As Jesse Mayshark writes of Anderson, “[h]e takes formal risks that do not always pay off” (70). “The rain of frogs,” he continues, “is among the most critically divisive plot devices of the past few decades” (70). Even a cursory glance at the critical reception of the film would confirm Mayshark’s assertion. Anderson’s decision to include this bizarre event in the film’s last act has greatly contributed to *Magnolia*’s infamy among a variety of critics.¹⁵

Christina Lane corroborates this point in her thorough examination of the film, noting, “[t]he rain of frogs has received major criticism by those who view it as a *deus ex machina* that erupts out of the blue” (18).¹⁶ What is of interest here is how a negative value is attributed to unpredictability; the unexpected and the incongruent are met with critical contempt. For instance, while David Edelstein is more receptive to the film’s whims and quirks than some of his fellow critics, he still ambivalently comments on the unanticipated arrival of those much-maligned frogs. As he writes, “nothing could prepare

¹⁵ This has not abated with time, either. A recent negative review of *The Tree of Life* (Malick, 2011) argues against the film’s inclusion of dinosaurs by negatively comparing it to Anderson’s infamous frogs: “[r]emember how some people tuned out when it started raining frogs in [...] *Magnolia*? This is like that times a million” (Nashawaty).

¹⁶ Lane contests this charge. As she points out, “*Magnolia*’s defenders point to [...] an internal foundation for the event. Anticipatory clues about the frogs, and the related scripture Exodus 8:2” (18). She also admits, though, that “[t]he visual and narrative cues that set up the rain of frogs are not as noticeable during an initial viewing – as scenes unfold – as they are in retrospect” (18-9). As the film’s critical reception shows, for some, this ‘internal foundation’ may be too insubstantial to ‘justify’ or conspicuously prefigure the frogs.

us for the full-scale, surreal, gross-out deluge that's the picture's splattery climax." This, Edelstein argues, is one of the ways in which Anderson "dynamites his own movie." In Desmond Traynor's review, distaste is not only attributed to the frogs but the film's other flourishes as well. "The several quasi-surreal touches," he opines, "and the mammoth one at the end [...] just don't work at all" (47). In both cases, the film's stranger, unanticipated and unmotivated moments are read as instances of failure and non-functionality.

Traynor's comments also remind us that *Magnolia's* alleged 'flaws' encompass more than a baffling meteorological contingency. For example, Janet Maslin, in her review for *The New York Times*, takes umbrage at another moment (although, as with the frogs, it is a similarly unanticipated and unusual instance). As previously mentioned, Anderson has many of his characters unexpectedly break out into song. The song in question is the melancholy "Wise Up," one of several Aimee Mann tracks incorporated into the film. Anderson cuts from character to character as the song progresses – each located in disparate locations, having reached respective emotional nadirs – and allows each actor his or her turn to sing alongside Mann's doleful vocals. As Maslin writes, echoing Edelstein's similar charge, "when that group sing-along arrives, [*Magnolia*] begins to self-destruct spectacularly." Once again, incongruity and seemingly unmotivated flourishes inspire disapproval. Like the frogs, this notorious 'sing-along' is regarded as an absurdity that 'unfortunately' upsets the cohesiveness and palatability of the narrative.

Returning to textual analysis may help to account for why some critics find this sequence so off-putting. Azcona offers one intriguing, potential explanation. "[This] sequence," she writes, "conveys the lack of a center, radically contrasting with the strong sense of purpose based on individuality so often put forward by classical single-

protagonist movies” (45). In other words, the “Wise Up” sequence accentuates and compounds Anderson’s refusal to moor his spectators to a ‘center’ by instead offering a much more diffuse ‘focus’ on *Magnolia*’s ‘multiple protagonist’ ensemble. This scene highlights some of the film’s other subversive and peculiar aspects, as well. For instance, in Jonathan Romney’s mostly positive review of the film, he points toward the generic indeterminacy of the “Wise Up” sequence, referring to it as “a sudden audacious conflation of soap opera and musical.”¹⁷ Perhaps, then, this moment is discomfiting for some precisely because it brings the film’s ambiguous and fluctuating generic identity into unsettling relief. Through these and other artistic gambits and peculiarities, Anderson seems to willfully resist his claim to organic and conventional storytelling. For critics who prize legibility and tradition, this is seen to be an unacceptable transgression of sorts.

Other critics, however, approach the film more ambivalently. Without disguising their distaste entirely, some of them place an emphasis not only on failure, but also fascination. Kenneth Turan, for example, describes *Magnolia* as follows in his review: “[a] frantic, flawed, fascinating film that is both impressive and a bit out of control, often at the same time.” Kent Jones offers similar comments in his piece, despite arguing against Anderson’s apparently reckless and perfunctory filmmaking. Jones certainly does not mince words, as he makes it clear that he regards *Magnolia* as “a maddening, deeply pretentious [...] severely miscalculated movie, as chancy as *Boogie Nights* was safe, as unsettled as that film was smugly content” (2007, 79). As for the rain of frogs, he dismisses it as “one of the most whacked out episodes in recent American cinema” (81).

¹⁷ See Dillman (2005) for an account of *Magnolia*’s status as soap opera and the way the film can be understood as “televisual.”

Not unlike his fellow critics, Jones identifies the problem of the frogs as one of ‘unacceptable’ irregularity or incongruity. He argues that this downpour is not truly cohesive with “the rest of the movie, except in the most general sense imaginable” (81). Once again, it seems the attenuated connection between such flourishes and the rest of the film lends these moments their off-putting force. Jones confirms as much in an earlier printing of his review in *Film Comment*, where he notes that the incongruity of this unmotivated device “makes it feel that much stranger” (38). Despite this, however, he concedes that “this is a movie that’s often at its best when it’s at its most careless and self-indulgent” (38). Like Turan, he is ultimately sensitive to how the film’s ‘misfires’ cannot be so quickly written off as outright failures. This ‘miscalculated’ movie still fascinates.

There are several ways to begin approaching the kind of aesthetic and narrative experience *Magnolia* offers, as well as the negative and ambivalent reactions it has provoked. Ira Jaffe, for instance, has recently written on a group of “hybrid films” characterized by strange flourishes (24-8). He notes that various American filmmakers have sought to “[combine] genres, styles, images, and moods in amusing as well as jarring ways,” while also disregarding “unity and necessity” (112). In a remark that recalls *Magnolia*’s key ‘transgressions’ (i.e., the “Wise Up” sequence and the rain of frogs), he writes, “abrupt shifts and aberrations [...] come ‘out of nowhere’ in hybrid cinema [...] [and] often seem arbitrary and accidental instead of rational and necessary” (113).

Jaffe also illuminates the recalcitrance of these choices. “As it mixes genres, styles, and moods,” he explains, “hybrid cinema [...] [defies] critics and artists who for centuries advocated a contrary aesthetic stemming from Aristotle’s *Poetics*” (109). As he notes, Aristotle places an emphasis “on necessity, logic, and causality,” and these principles have

since have been resisted “in theatrical and other arts as well as in film” (109). He also cites Susan Sontag’s 1960 contribution to this vanguard of resistance, wherein she addresses the critical tendency to valorize the kinds of ideals that Aristotle espoused – that is, to champion “the necessary in art” (109). Jaffe quotes the following from Sontag, where she specifies these problematic critical attitudes: “[u]sually critics who want to praise a work of art feel compelled to demonstrate that each part is justified” (109). That Sontag’s observation remains applicable long beyond 1960 is already well demonstrated in the critical responses that have been noted in this chapter. Sontag, moreover, feels that this emphasis on a ‘justified whole’ is tantamount to a denial of “the role of chance, fatigue, [and] external distractions” in the creation of art (109). Given my own argument, I would rather stress the denial of the eclectic diversity of cinema in all of its traditional *and* untraditional forms, as well as its remarkable capacity for coherence *and* incoherence.

Thus, while Sontag is responding to an older period of criticism than the one into which *Magnolia* was released, a very important point of continuity is discernable. An Aristotelian tendency still endures. The negative and deeply ambivalent reactions to Anderson’s film indicate that it failed to play by ‘the rules.’ It did not meet the evaluative criteria inherent to a tendency of mainstream film criticism that still seems to valorize Aristotelian conceptions of how narratives ought to operate. As Bruns puts it, “[t]he world of *Magnolia* is non-Aristotelian to say the least [...] we are given a collage of perspectives, a proliferation of disparate voices and views enclosed in the same space; all we see is interference and interruption” (206). Along with this ‘collage of perspectives,’ the film’s unmotivated twists and turns and its glaring incongruities have inspired bewilderment and distaste. This demonstrates the persistence of a critical perspective that

continues to expect and celebrate the presence of ‘necessity, logic, and causality’ in films.

The notion that Aristotelian values informs an enduring tradition of film criticism recalls Robert Travis’ intriguing account of the ‘routines’ of critics. In Travis’ view, some critics adopt a prescriptive approach to writing about cinema. They evaluate films according to an exemplary, platonic model of a ‘great’ text. Such critics, as Travis declares, “tend to work from an ideal conception of what a particular film should be” (54). Drawing from Georg Simmel, one of Travis’ key contentions is that mainstream film criticism is a strong determinant in the construction of what he calls “acceptable film fashion” (56).¹⁸ As he elaborates in his piece, film critics approach films according to various ‘aesthetic paradigms,’ which inform the interpretative and evaluative methods that are then applied to the films that they review (59, 62). What this means, of course, is that the perceived value of a text fluctuates depending on how it fares against the values and expectations entailed by these paradigms. The critical dismissals of *Magnolia* are illustrations of this point. When Edelstein claims that Anderson ‘dynamites his own movie’ or when Traynor argues that *Magnolia*’s flourishes ‘don’t work at all,’ the film is being judged in terms of functionality. What *Magnolia* fails to do ‘properly’ is function according to the ‘aesthetic paradigm’ informing the type of criticism written by Edelstein and Traynor, among others. In this case, the paradigm is one that cannot brook too radical or ‘unmotivated’ a departure from narrative and aesthetic ‘normalcy’ or, more precisely, from the Aristotelian vision of an organic narrative constituted by justified parts.

Moreover, in a statement that complements Jaffe and Sontag’s comments, Travis

¹⁸ As Shyon Baumann argues, “artistic legitimation is an essentially intellectual enterprise requiring cultural authority [...] [and] a special attention to discourse is essential for understanding cultural hierarchy” (177-8).

writes, “[f]ilm criticism is one of the last bastions of classical thinking, since Aristotelian notions of art underscore mainstream film criticism in modern society” (61-2). He argues, for instance, that Aristotle’s emphasis on “a kind of thing that might have happened, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary” is reflected in those instances where critics substitute an arguably ‘problematic’ aspect of a film with their own preferred alternatives (61-2). Unfortunately, the emphases and paradigms that characterize film criticism can produce an unnecessarily delimited portrait of what cinema is or ought to be.

These issues also recall an important interdisciplinary debate involving Janet Staiger and Terry Eagleton regarding film canons. Dudley Andrew’s response to this is of considerable relevance to the concerns of this chapter (and the remainder of my entire argument). In his response to Staiger, Andrew contextualizes this debate as part of a perennial, cultural phenomenon. “The argument over canons in film,” he declares, “is a minor skirmish in the general politics of American culture” (1985, 55). As he elaborates, “[a]rguments by [...] groups over the value of cinema [...] rehearse in miniature the movement of cultural history” (55).¹⁹ He points to a capacious, long-existent framework of cultural authorities and institutions (which, he notes, includes both film scholarship and criticism) (55). Within this context, Andrew explains, “specific films harboring specific values [are] retained while others [are] relegated to catalogues and trivia games” (55). His key contention, though, is that our rhetorical use of texts is deeply provisional and tentative. “While it may be normal for institutions to uphold some values while repressing others,” he writes, “there is nothing normal about art doing this” (56). As he puts it, “the difference of art is precisely *its resistance to any final definition*” (57, my emphasis).

¹⁹ “[C]ulture,” Andrew writes, “lifts up certain texts and represses others” (55).

His point is clear: we often use texts, but we never exhaust them, even if our arguments suggest such conclusiveness. The value of this reminder lies in how it directs us beyond the rhetorical use of texts towards what they might still unpredictably inspire. Of course, texts are amenable things; they can subtend all manner of ideas. What Andrew asks us to recognize, though, is the way our arguments are always subject to the fluidity of texts (to whatever else they might inspire, to how they might be read alternatively, and how their significance may fluctuate through time). This is not only applicable to films by Anderson, of course, but all texts. It pertains, in fact, to the ‘nature’ of the medium, since the fact that our use of a text is subject to qualification and change is another symptom of cinema’s dynamism and vagueness. Andrew’s description of canon formation clarifies this point. “It is a bureaucratic list meant to deal with a situation that exceeds bureaucracy,” he writes, “Heidegger would call it an irrelevant, reified construction meant to *hem in and control* the temporal opening of Being that art brings about” (57, my emphasis).

Indeed, some denigrated *Magnolia* because its ‘eccentricities’ amounted to a kind of disobedience. It refused to be ‘hemmed in and controlled.’ The best recourse was to dismiss its ‘eccentricities’ as something that (to paraphrase Traynor again) ‘just doesn’t work.’ However, Andrew implicitly reminds us that this is not the same as extinguishing a text’s residual value or intrigue. As he suggests, “texts live a partly autonomous existence and *are mobilized by those in authority*” (58, my emphasis). In other words, as I noted above, texts are amenable things. They can be chastised so as to perpetuate and reify Aristotelian values or rhetorically ‘managed’ so as to align the cinema with coherence and tradition (as we will see further into this argument when Bordwell is discussed). As Andrew indicates, however, texts exceed these uses. Films are not as systematic or

coherent as others may insist, but are mutable objects. Following this clear and sensible (but no less necessary) reminder, Andrew stresses the value of recognizing “the recalcitrance of texts and the politics of mobilization,” as well as the way “filmmakers, critics, and scholars [may] position [...] [a] film for the culture, without, I insist, exhausting it” (58). He concludes his excellent article by encouraging us to attend “to the *unpredictable fertility* of the texts [that Staiger] would merely use” (58, my emphasis). All of this, of course, bears significantly on my discussion of Anderson vis-à-vis a selection of problematic emphases found within film criticism and scholarship. When *Magnolia* is ‘mobilized’ by critics who dismiss it or, as we will see, when its aesthetic and narrative peculiarities are underemphasized within certain scholarly texts, this in no way ‘concludes’ or ‘exhausts’ the enduring breadth of its ‘unpredictable fertility.’²⁰

The clear remedy, then, is to take Andrew’s advice seriously and remain vigilant about whatever exceeds, or is excluded from, our ‘mobilizations’ of texts. As Andrew argues, “by engaging in an all out rhetoric of power, Staiger and Eagleton retract from texts *their own power to amaze and perplex us*” (58, my emphasis). “The humanities are different from other disciplines,” Andrew reminds us, “because their object of study is not an object at all, but an experience, and experience can’t be listed in card catalogues” (57). This conception of texts is admirable as it is informed by a lucid acknowledgment, rather than a dismissal or containment, of cinema’s fluidity. Following Andrew, discourse

²⁰ This recalls a point from Baumann’s discussion of ‘cultural hierarchy.’ He argues that “[t]here is much to be learned about the nature of cultural hierarchy *as a process* by studying cases of ‘aesthetic mobility’” (175, original emphasis). His illustrative example is the way “the meaning of jazz evolved as its connections to audiences segmented by race and class evolved” (175). Baumann refers to several key factors that initiated a long-term evolution of the perceived cultural value and status of jazz. His implicit point is very much in keeping with Andrew’s – cultural objects may continue to surprise us, and our mobilizations of texts are deeply provisional. Our institutional mobilizations, Andrew and Baumann seem to realize, ought to be contextualized within an ongoing, gradual process of understanding (rather than becoming exhaustive gestures, or attempts at imposing what Andrew calls a ‘final definition’ onto texts).

becomes not a pursuit of conclusions, but an open-minded discovery of cinema and what the ‘unpredictable fertility’ of texts includes and may *continue to generate*. This suggests a suitably tentative and open-minded mode of inquiry, which is what cinema’s fluidity (as a medium and, as we will see in the next chapter, as a spectatorial experience) demands.

The past may help us to explore, without precipitately exhausting or dismissing, the unusual experience *Magnolia* offers. Indeed, the film’s various ‘shifts and aberrations’ may also be appreciated as resonant echoes from one of cinema’s most formally audacious eras.²¹ This is the intriguing contention recently offered in Todd Berliner’s account of the ‘incoherency’ of seventies cinema.²² Berliner mostly narrows his focus onto his elected period of study but, like Doane, he also briefly discusses the relevance of his argument for contemporary cinema. This is why he mentions *Magnolia* and relates the film to the incongruous and incoherent filmmaking that he traces back to the seventies.

“Although narrative modes shifted in the late 1970s,” Berliner writes, “the influence of the seventies continues [...] in some of the most artistically risky and exciting movies to come out of the United States in the past thirty years” (217). He supports this claim by referencing some of *Magnolia*’s most notorious eccentricities or ‘aberrances’: the rainfall of frogs, the “Wise Up” sequence, and the moment where Jim Kurring’s (John C. Reilly) misplaced gun miraculously “[drops] a few feet from him hours after he lost it” (217). As Berliner astutely points out, these are “story events that defy logic and probability [...] the film [therefore] strained spectators’ willingness to resolve incongruous story information”

²¹ Other points of reference exist, of course. As Jaffe writes, “musical sequences in Godard’s films and Captain Koons’s visit to Butch’s childhood home in *Pulp Fiction* come ‘out of nowhere’” (112-113).

²² As Berliner explains, “I use the word ‘incoherence’ here [...] not in its common metaphoric sense of irrationality or meaninglessness but rather in the literal sense to mean a lack of connectedness or integration among different elements” (25).

(217). Of course, this could just as easily be read as another compelling explanation for the negativity and ambivalence that *Magnolia* elicited from a variety of critics.

It is unlikely that Berliner shares in the well-documented distaste for the film, though. Quite conversely, he argues, “[d]isunity oftentimes indicates good filmmaking—filmmaking that is unpredictable and varied” (221). He is forwarding a somewhat contentious but no less fascinating idea here, as he is arguing for “incoherence in a film as an aesthetic virtue” (219). As Berliner puts it, “[t]he fact that we [can] enjoy a group of Hollywood films so disunified, even when they arouse our uncertainty and discomfort, reveals not only the versatility of Hollywood narration but also our capacity for aesthetic pleasure” (221, my emphasis). He therefore usefully clarifies how films like *Magnolia* may be appreciated as indices of the ambiguity and dynamism of cinema or, as he puts it, its considerable ‘versatility.’ As will be stressed throughout this argument, this is what Anderson’s films may reveal as part of their ‘unpredictability fertility.’ It is also, as we have seen, the very thing that may be insufficiently considered in other Aristotelian appraisals or accounts of the film. Recalling Andrew, Berliner points us to a conception where the emphasis is on the possibility of *discovering* (and, perhaps, enjoying) films whose aberrant features might otherwise be hastily dismissed. This also recalls a crucial point made by Dillman in her discussion of *Magnolia*, “[t]hat we look for meaning, order, and sense is a habit of viewing” (147). Indeed, and one of my main contentions is that Anderson’s films not only adumbrate the myriad artistic possibilities inherent to cinema, but also the endless permutations in which we may respond, react to, and discover films.

That Berliner’s view so clearly contradicts the negative critical responses to *Magnolia* returns us to Doane’s account of contingency, and an intriguing possibility.

Perhaps the negativity of *Magnolia*'s reception affirms that Anderson's flourishes are as dissonantly charged as Doane's conception of profilmic contingencies. As she explains, "the earliest films display [...] the fact that chance and contingency are the highly cathected sites not only of pleasure but of anxiety" (31). This figures as one of her more fascinating claims. "[Contingency's] lure is that of resistance itself," Doane writes, "resistance to system, to structure, to meaning" (11). Given that her argument is primarily moored to her period of study, it is important to stress that her use of 'resistance' relates to developments that took place within that period. She offers this elaboration: "[i]n the face of the abstraction and rationalization of time, chance and the contingent are *given the crucial ideological role of representing an outside*, of suggesting that time is still allied with the free and indeterminable" (230, my emphasis). What she refers to as 'the rationalization of time' encompasses a confluence of global innovations, which catalyzed a profound re-conception of time as something manageable and orderly (as opposed to an inexorable, ambiguous process).²³ For instance, she refers to "[t]he wide diffusion of the pocket watch, the worldwide standardization of time to facilitate railroad schedules and communication by telegraph, as well as Taylorism's precise measurement of the time of labor" (6). These events, she argues, "all testify to the intensity of the rationalization of time in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (6). Contingency offers the obverse of such rationalization – it possesses a pleasurable, liberating appeal.²⁴

²³ In Doane's text, she argues that time and chance are inextricably linked, with the former being necessarily conducive to the latter. As she explains, "[t]ime's relentless movement is synonymous with the dissolving of organization, the dominance of the random and uncontrolled" (136). Returning to the films of the Lumière brothers to illustrate her point, she writes, "this potential becomes most evident in the long take [...] the sheer duration of filmic time allows for the random event" (136-7).

²⁴ As Doane argues, "[c]ontingency appears to offer a vast reservoir of freedom and free play, irreducible to the systematic structuring of 'leisure time.' [...] Accident and chance become productive" (11).

While this accounts for the ‘pleasure’ of contingent moments, the ‘anxiety’ elicited by these instances is attributable to other factors. Indeed, Doane qualifies the ‘ideological role’ that she assigns to the concept by noting, “[a]ccident and chance [...] are also potentially threatening” (11). This is because while such moments may offer a liberating reprieve from the strictures of rationality, a “danger [nonetheless] resides in their alliance with meaninglessness, even nonsense [...] nonhierarchizable contingency can overwhelm” (11). If we move beyond sensitivity to Doane’s historical context, interesting parallels become apparent. The unpredictable aesthetic experience that *Magnolia* provides clearly activates a similar confluence of opposing responses. The divisive reactions to Anderson’s film indicate that contrived contingencies – the incongruous strangeness of the “Wise Up” sequence, or the unmotivated peculiarity of the rain of frogs – can engender a *contemporary restaging* of this tension between pleasure and anxiety. As Jaffe indicated in his account of ‘hybrid cinema,’ *Magnolia* can be read as a manifestation of a kind of recalcitrant mode of filmmaking insofar as it fails to perfectly adhere to the esteemed Aristotelian ideals of causality, necessity, and so forth. The ‘anxiety’ this can generate is attested to in the film’s more negative reviews. Yet this ‘recalcitrance’ can also elicit a liberating pleasure, an ‘escape’ from the constrictive logic and order that have often been prescribed as ‘proper’ storytelling principles.

This contention can be more specifically defined, though. Within film studies, those same Aristotelian ideals have persisted and reemerged as the foundation to one of the more ubiquitous conceptions of cinematic storytelling: David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger’s “classical Hollywood paradigm.”²⁵ As Berliner explains,

²⁵ See Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985, 73).

“[c]lassical narration is committed to an unambiguous presentation of story information, *minimizing spectator disorientation*” (76, my emphasis). Of course, *Magnolia* offers an abundance of flourishes that seem purposely conducive to ‘spectator *disorientation*,’ hence its ambivalent reception. The paradigm Berliner describes is more precisely what *Magnolia* – in its unpredictability, incongruities, and complexities – resists. In her account, Lane goes so far as to assert, “[n]ot only does [*Magnolia*] defy categories such as the ‘classical Hollywood paradigm,’ it also reflexively highlights the heterogeneity of the classical era” (75).²⁶ Thus, in its unpredictable flourishes and divisive gambits, *Magnolia* *both enacts and endorses an escape from the strictures of such traditional conceptions of storytelling*. This is why, like the profilmic contingencies Doane analyzes, Anderson’s contrived contingencies are alluring and liberating. They too may be “given the crucial role of representing an outside,” of indicating that the medium and its myriad possibilities – rather than time – are “still allied with the free and indeterminable” (230).

Ma arrives at a similar conclusion in her investigation of Wong Kar-wai, another filmmaker interested in unpredictable narrative and aesthetic experiences. She specifically addresses Wong’s “deliberate mobilization of chance as a nonlinear principle of exposition in response to calcified narrative forms” (141).²⁷ Recalling Bruns’ association of *Magnolia* with the “polyphonic novel,” Ma reads this artistic choice as “an attempt to reinvent narrative by way of a return to and activation of cinema’s imbedded contingencies” (141).²⁸ As she elaborates, “[c]hance permits an infusion of ambiguity and

²⁶ This considerably valuable contention will be more closely considered in the second chapter on *Punch-Drunk Love*.

²⁷ For another consideration of contingency in relation to a filmmaker (in this case, Stanley Kubrick), see Nelson (2000).

²⁸ Bruns specifies *Magnolia*’s status as a “polyphonic film” by referring to Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the ‘polyphonic novel.’ As he points out, “Bakhtin’s position was always that the polyphonic novel wasn’t simply an abstract combination of philosophical premises, but a new kind of narrative” (205-6).

openness [...] into the diegetic process, freeing meaning from the tight bind of causal logic and driving a wedge into the closed forms of classical narrative” (141). Ma, it seems, would agree with the idea that contrived contingencies seem to ‘free us’ from strict or reductive paradigms.

These gestures of resistance are of considerable importance, especially since others have contested classical paradigms. As Murray Smith explains, “[a] charge sometimes leveled at Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson is that [...] [t]he classical system they posit becomes so [...] generalized and encompassing that anything can be assimilated and nothing can make a difference” (1998, 15). Indeed, as Bordwell himself writes, “[m]ost filmmakers [...] follow the rules [...] the principles governing classical visual style have not been overthrown” (2006, 118). He also goes on to argue that “[d]espite all the historical changes and local variants we find in contemporary film style, we are still dealing with a version of classical filmmaking” (180). As will become clearer, what he calls ‘local variants’ seem to be granted only a minimal role in his emphasis on a classical Hollywood, which is apparently inevitable and inescapable. Yet the kinds of contrived contingencies found in works by filmmakers like Anderson or Wong may catalyze and represent the ideal of such an escape. They may help us understand, moreover, that this ‘escape’ is only a matter of reorienting our focus so as to attend to the unpredictability and significance of what Bordwell seems to tidily reduce to the term ‘local variants.’

Bordwell’s tendencies are well demonstrated in his account of *Magnolia* from his text, *Poetics of Cinema*. What we seem to find here are repeated attempts at, in the face of the film’s aberrance, recuperating an emphasis on cinema’s ‘systematic character.’ For example, he stresses early on that “*Magnolia* is propelled by goals [...] [t]he long-standing

melodramatic convention of the search for love drives most of the plotlines” (2008, 228-9). As per usual, Bordwell conceives of cinema in terms of tradition and coherency, and seeks out those aspects of films that complement this conception. Thus, while he does concede that “*Magnolia* works a cunning variation on Hollywood plot structure,” these admissions are actually placed alongside a considerable amount of commentary focused on the more ‘obedient’ aspects of the film (229). This is evident when Bordwell takes on the challenge of the rainfall of frogs. His account of this flourish encapsulates, in miniature, his canny rhetorical habit of ‘managing’ cinematic strangeness so as to reinforce his familiar emphasis. He confronts the film’s more peculiar moments, only to then demonstrate how they do not *really* threaten cinema’s enduring classicism.

“The frogfall provides a very odd climax,” Bordwell admits, before adding, “but *structurally it does what it must*: Push to a crisis all the lines of purpose-driven action running through the film” (230, my emphasis). In another line, he reminds us that *Magnolia* has an epilogue and, “[c]lassically constructed films tend to close with an epilogue” (230). This leads into another instance that exemplifies Bordwell’s approach. As he considers the ending, which he calls “traditional,” he again strains to reconcile the film with his rhetorical aims (230). A conventional epilogue, Bordwell tells us, “ties up the unresolved issues and celebrates a new stability in the characters’ lives” (230). As he notes, however, this is complicated by the fact that “some characters’ fates remain unknown” (230). Yet the details of this complication are relegated to parenthesis in Bordwell’s sentence. The trajectory of the sentence is such that he briefly admits this issue and then proceeds to ultimately reaffirm the film’s alliance with tradition.

This occurs elsewhere, as well. With regards to the “Wise Up” sequence, he writes,

“[v]erisimilitude is flagrantly broken here, but the moment fits *Magnolia*’s narrational strategies” (233). For Bordwell, moreover, “*Magnolia* cleverly motivates its weird frogfall by appeal to the supernatural” (232).²⁹ It is clear that Bordwell’s presentation of *Magnolia* is very far removed from the perspectives and arguments that have been forwarded in this chapter. To return to just one earlier example, Dillman openly considers the aberrance of the film without urging us towards *Magnolia*’s apparent obedience. As she puts it, “[s]o much is unmotivated (communal singing, frogs falling from the sky, Jim’s gun falling from the sky); much is left unsaid [...] and much is unanswered” (146). Dillman, as well as some of the other scholars considered in this argument, acknowledge *Magnolia*’s strangeness without straining to reconcile it with a vision of cinema as coherent, systematic, and so forth. For Bordwell, though, *Magnolia*’s strangeness can seemingly always lead us back toward familiar and motivated forms. The film’s considerable aberrance apparently only disguises deeper functions and coherency.

Magnolia does not wholly abandon esteemed narrative principles, of course. Yet it does provide enough unpredictability and incongruity to engender the anti-systematic pleasures that, as Doane reminds us, profilmic contingencies were once able to generate. Thus, Doane speaks of “the lure not only of the nonsystematic but also of the antisystematic (which is why catastrophe—as the rupture of system and the mark of

²⁹ The ‘appeal to the supernatural’ that Bordwell locates is dubious in nature, and does not necessarily mitigate the shock of the frogs. He also argues that “[t]he frogs are prefigured within *Magnolia*’s story world by oblique citations of Exodus 8:2 [...] The figures 8 and 2 appear throughout the prologue, most intricately in a coil of hose on a rooftop” (231). Yet, as he notes, these citations are quite ‘oblique.’ Thus, as Lane indicated, it is quite unlikely that many would notice these subtle hints on a first viewing. Moreover, even if one were to notice them, it is just as unlikely that their signification would be easily apprehended (or that noticing these ‘hints’ would somehow soften the surprising force of the arrival of the frogs). This complicates Bordwell’s insistent attempts at motivating *Magnolia*’s more eccentric flourishes and rendering them coherent. Of course, these attempts are also further complicated by the plethora of scholarly and critical responses to the film that speak to the surprising, incongruent and unmotivated experience of these apparently ‘motivated’ flourishes.

unpredictability—is so fascinating” (106). Through its ‘ruptures,’ *Magnolia* prompts us to question the enclosures of rational and ordered conceptions of storytelling. As Dillman observes in her discussion of *Magnolia*’s inconclusiveness, “[t]here is no resolution to the dilemmas posed, just an arbitrary end point” (147). This, she explains, is liable to be a source of unease: “[b]ecause the viewer is conditioned to expect an end, he or she feels frustrated by the abrupt break” (147). Other frustrated expectations – for clarity, order, coherence, and so on – clearly account for some of the negative responses to the film. However, as Dillman reminded us earlier, “[t]hat we look for meaning, order, and sense is a habit of viewing” (147). The unruly and ambiguous force of Anderson’s films may be accompanied by what Doane identifies as the ‘threat’ of ‘meaninglessness,’ but they may also remind us of the ‘unpredictable fertility’ of films, and how the rich texts we study can exceed paradigms, not only ushering in new forms, but new ‘habits of viewing,’ as well.

Magnolia can therefore be appreciated as a testament to the flux and dynamism of films. As Lane points out, “[c]onsistent with its fluid structure, *Magnolia*’s cinematic approach incorporates animation, slide photography, and industrial footage, highlighting its representational repertoire” (67). She points to how the fluidity of *Magnolia*’s form is both a reflection and symptom of the indeterminacy of cinema itself. Discussing the first of the three stories with which *Magnolia* begins, Lane stresses that it takes place in 1911 and that Anderson shot this section with “an authentic Pathé camera from that time” (11). For Lane, this is an intriguing hint that “*Magnolia* is [...] interested in film’s origins – the birth of cinema” (68). However, as she also notes, in the film’s striking array of effects, techniques, and flourishes, and in the excess of its ‘representational repertoire,’ further interests are intimated. Other aspects of the film, Lane argues, hint at a broader fascination

with cinema's "ever-fluctuating nature, which encompasses still photography, animation, video, electronic broadcast, digitality, and more" (68). She draws our attention to how such attributes manifest in *Magnolia*, rendering the form of the film as dynamic, complex, and wildly unpredictable as the medium through which it was constructed. These eclectic elements – along with the contingences and 'transgressions' being discussed here – not only consolidate the peculiarity of *Magnolia*, then, but also cinema's unruly fluidity.

Anderson's film therefore renders salient the inconstant status of cinema while also implicitly arguing for a conception of the medium along similar terms. It reminds us that films can never be perfectly placed within strict paradigms, and that we ought to conceive of storytelling principles and critical evaluations in a similarly fluid (and tolerant) manner. Despite the alleged endurance of classical narrative paradigms and entrenched preferences for clarity and convention, the films that gravitate toward what Jones calls 'whacked out episodes' are actually productive in their recalcitrance. They hold out the promise of dynamism and change, of 'new habits of viewing,' and of novel aesthetic and narrative forms unanticipated (or unwelcomed) by existing paradigms, accounts and preferences.

Jones concludes his review with one last jab at Anderson: "there's still plenty of time for Anderson to understand that in order to transcend the stale dramatic formulas that are killing Hollywood, you have to actually understand them" (2007, 83). Yet in delivering this final blow, he inadvertently discloses one of the film's crucial virtues. *Magnolia* is not about demonstrating or adhering to explanatory paradigms or ossified and seemingly inviolable formulas. Rather, Anderson seems intent on resisting what is deemed aesthetically and narratively 'normal' or 'permissible.' Recalling the previously noted efforts to 'rethink' conventional distinctions within film studies, *Magnolia* prompts us to

reassess the value and limits of our explanatory and evaluative tendencies. In the wake of collapsed paradigms and transgressed storytelling traditions, an indeterminate but richer landscape awaits. *Magnolia* powerfully speaks to cinema's fluidity and unpredictability, and to the medium's enormous aesthetic and narrative potential, which remain unbound and unimpeded despite an insistence on (tentative) formulas and principles. It may be best, then, to read 'aberrant' texts like *Magnolia* not as mere exceptions to enduring traditions, or as 'failures' or 'threats,' but as revealing sites of aesthetic pleasure and productivity.

CHAPTER TWO: “I Don’t Know”: The Iridescent Vagueness of *Punch-Drunk Love*

With a recently acquired harmonium sitting upon his desk, Barry Egan (Adam Sandler) sidles backwards from his office. He distractedly turns toward the camera and, at the last moment, declares, “I don’t know.” As if on cue, Jon Brion’s ecstatic score begins to swell and the frame suddenly erupts into vivid streams of undulating colours and shifting shapes. We are briskly plunged into a strange, interstitial space dominated by Jeremy Blake’s kinetic abstractions. This occurs at the end of *Punch-Drunk Love*’s opening, and concludes our ten-minute introduction to the exuberance and eccentricity of Anderson’s film. This opening section begins far more understatedly, however. We first see Barry on the phone speaking to a representative from Healthy Choice about the details of a pudding promotion. Shortly thereafter, he wanders outside his warehouse (where he runs a business that specializes in plungers) and into the adjacent parking lot, which is still dimly lit under a rosy, early morning sky. His gaze is drawn toward the street that lies ahead, as if in vague anticipation of something. This seems to propel Anderson’s camera forward, which now begins to tread closer toward the road, expectantly.

What arrives within the next few moments is the first (but not the last) automobile accident in the film. An oncoming car suddenly topples over in an eruption of noise and movement, rolling repeatedly until it disappears off-frame. There is little time for Barry or the spectator to dwell on this event, however, as a ‘Checker Cab Co.’ van quickly overwhelms the frame, eclipsing the dust and debris left behind by the car. It screeches to a halt by the sidewalk in front of Barry. Its door slides open and a harmonium is unceremoniously deposited on the curb. In this manner, Anderson begins to initiate spectators into the erratic aesthetic and narrative experience offered by *Punch-Drunk*

Love. Through these whimsical ‘contingencies,’ he once again demonstrates that, in his films, the strange and the unforeseen are upheld as artistic virtues.

This is also well demonstrated elsewhere in the film’s opening section. Upon returning to his warehouse, Barry is eventually compelled to return back outside to gaze at the abandoned harmonium, which is still sitting on the edge of the sidewalk. It is at this point that his soon-to-be love interest, Lena Leonard (Emily Watson), makes her first appearance. She asks Barry (who nervously tries to retreat back inside when she first approaches) if he can hold on to her car keys for her, and pass them along to the nearby mechanical shop when it opens. A noticeable lens flare blossoms between them, accenting their first meeting. Cubie King argues that “Anderson uses this aesthetic technique of flaring his lens to hint [at] something which transcends his frame [...] something that is unexplainable and impossible to physically photograph: the feeling of love.” King’s interpretation is persuasive, but in no way exhausts this strange and semantically vague flourish. His sensitivity to how this aesthetic anomaly is allied with the ‘unexplainable’ is crucial, though. Just like the rattling that begins to emanate from the soundtrack as Lena walks (or, seemingly, glides) away from Barry, disappearing around the corner, the lens flares cannot be so tidily reduced. They cannot be dismissed, either, as they reinforce the intrigue of *Punch-Drunk Love*. The lens flares emerge as strange phenomena, not something to be easily ‘decoded’ so as to reveal a definitive explanation. They are, rather, conspicuous aesthetic provocations or curiosities, sources of potential thought that may inspire a kind of interpretative freedom through which *partial* knowledge may develop.

Following Lena’s departure, Barry musters the courage to take the harmonium. He hurries to his warehouse with his arms spread wide, clutching either side of the unwieldy

instrument. Sliding it on his desk, he kneels down as if in supplication, and begins to inspect the salvaged object (meanwhile, another lens flare emerges on screen). He tactilely and idiosyncratically explores the harmonium, eliciting noises from it while lulling himself into a kind of contemplative reverie.³⁰ Barry is discovering an object that now seems strange, magical even – an effect not only attributable to its unusual arrival but also, for Barry at least, its ambiguity. Indeed, a few moments later, he quietly shows the harmonium to Lance (Luis Guzmán), one of his employees, who asks him what it is. Barry mistakenly answers, “I believe it is a small piano.” When Lance nonchalantly replies, “that’s not a piano,” this does more than direct us to the instrument’s proper name. It also reminds us of its considerable mystery. Lance, after all, does not mention the word ‘harmonium’ to Barry; he only asserts that it is ‘not a piano.’ This may be appreciated less as an emphasis on Barry’s misnaming than on the instrument’s indeterminacy – if it is not a piano, then what is it? It is something that exceeds functional designations and quotidian appellations, emerging as a site of dynamic interpretations and personal meanings.³¹

The harmonium, in other words, is an enchanted object that confounds Barry even as it fascinates him. His private, meaningful encounter with the instrument provokes silent contemplation and wonder, but the object still remains deeply resistant to any final or reductive definitions (“that’s not a piano...”). The opening of the film not only encapsulates Anderson’s inclinations, then, but also the uncertainty and interpretative

³⁰ The indeterminacy of the harmonium, Barry’s posture, and his unspoken bond with it (or, rather, his silent interpretation of it) recalls Umberto Eco’s description of how a text is ‘symbolically’ utilized. This is well summarized by Martin Lefebvre, who explains that “[Eco] defines the symbol as a plurivocal, semantically open, inexhaustible, and undecipherable sign” (1999, 491). “To use a text symbolically,” he continues, “is to find in it that which one *projects* upon it (God, for example)” (491, original emphasis).

³¹ This corresponds with Lefebvre’s use of ‘encyclopedia’ as a ‘semantic model.’ As he notes, “[t]he advantage of such a model over semantic models conceived of in dictionary fashion—which are limited by term-to-term correlation between signifier and signified—is that it includes within the definition of a term its *various interpretations* (and *interpretative contexts*)” (1999, 497, my emphasis).

freedom they encourage. Anderson's films are similarly 'enchanted,' both confounding and fascinating.³² This returns us to the moment from the beginning of this chapter. Barry sidles backward as Lance continues to inquire about the instrument, asking, "Why is it here?" It is at this point that Barry turns toward the camera, bemusedly stares off screen, and declares, "I don't know." This line ushers in Blake's flowing abstractions, which, as a nonrepresentational cascade of colour, flagrantly defies any singular or readily legible meaning. Spectators may also take their cue from Barry, plunging with him into an experience where uncertainty reigns (indeed, along with the film's other peculiarities, it seems likely that some viewers would be somewhat surprised to find abstract art emerging in what they may have assumed was going to be 'just another' Adam Sandler vehicle).

"I don't know" may therefore be taken as a slogan for *Punch-Drunk Love*, the unpredictable variance of Anderson's work, as well as the rich ambiguity of his medium of choice. It anticipates the uncertain signification of key aspects of Anderson's film, particularly Jeremy Blake's abstractions, which can compel our own uncertainty. This does not mean that our experience of Blake's contributions involves the forfeiture of meaning. Rather, it means that such striking peculiarities may catalyze a mode of uncertain spectatorship ("I don't know") where the making of meaning is not so much impossible as it is conspicuously open-ended and complicated. This is a productive mode of uncertainty, then, one conducive to affective pleasures and the hazarding of interpretations. This is what *Punch-Drunk Love* solicits and accommodates. Barry's line is

³² This recalls Lesley Stern's intriguing discussion of 'things' within the cinema. As she explains, "the mass-produced and mundane ([such as] the cigarette and the kettle) turn out to be *enchanted*, value-laden (meaning-laden)" (354, my emphasis). Along with 'encyclopedic semantics,' Stern's article helps to remind us why Lance's question ('What is it?') cannot be *definitively* answered. "In the cinema," Stern writes, "solid things turn into phantasms [...] *It is the mutability of things that matters*" (354, my emphasis).

perhaps Anderson's navigational advice to his viewers, urging us to move forward in a mode of discovery and uncertainty towards the film's idiosyncrasies, whose vagueness or peculiarity may encourage a plurality of interpretations from a multitude of spectators.³³

I am not, however, referring to a kind of relativism, where anything and everything may be said about a text, while nothing can be conclusively known. We can know things about *Punch-Drunk Love*, certain textual details such as its noticeable colour palette or the fact that Anderson borrows Shelley Duvall's "He Needs Me" from Robert Altman's *Popeye* (1980) in one of the film's most memorable sequences.³⁴ Of course, this is distinct from the interpretations that the film's vagueness may inspire. Martin Lefebvre's fascinating discussion of what he refers to as "the figure" elucidates this point. "The figure," he tells us, can be understood as "a mental object, an internal representation, which belongs to the spectator and whose emergence rests on the way in which the spectator allows himself to be impressed by a film" (1999, 483-4). As he also insists, however, 'the figure' is distinguishable from the details noted above. In other words, "[i]t is not the *property* of the film. It is not something that one may discover by examining the film frame by frame" (483, my emphasis). Rather, the 'figure' is what he refers to as "an ever-open structuring of a film's content" (484). Even so, as will be addressed later, Lefebvre indicates that even such internal musings can be a source of knowledge.

"*The figure*," he further explains, "*is not the affect*: it is the meaning an affect (but also a form, a segment, or a percept) takes on within the spectator [...] not so much the expression of an affect [...] as its 'translation' [...] in an imaginary which is

³³ A similar sentiment is forwarded in Stern's conclusion. "Certain film texts [...] certain cinematic moments," she writes, "become rewarding *not by virtue of certainty* but, as Auden says, when the thing's 'formula escapes you,'" (354, my emphasis).

³⁴ Cubie King offers a brief examination of Anderson's precise use of colour throughout *Punch-Drunk Love*.

simultaneously private and shared, intimate and social” (483, original emphasis). He demonstrates these ideas through the rather intriguing example of his own ‘figure,’ as inspired by *Psycho*’s well-known shower scene and what Lefebvre would refer to as its “traits” (aspects like Norman Bates’ knife) (493, 485). Such aspects of the film catalyze a ‘figure,’ which encompasses Lefebvre’s imaginative exploration of the scene’s culinary and cannibalistic resonances, as well as its relation to consumption and digestion. Significantly, Lefebvre later adds, “I readily accept that feeding and digestion are obsessions of mine” (491). This brings the deeply personal and subjective nature of the ‘figure’ into relief, as it arises from a collision between text and spectator. The latter possesses, as Lefebvre tell us, a repository of “personal and cultural knowledge,” which (as his noted ‘obsessions’ reveal) informs whatever ‘figure’ emerges/develops (493-4).

This conceptualization of the ‘figure’ therefore entails a refreshing sensitivity to the dynamic nature of spectatorial *encounters* with texts. Lefebvre clearly understands that spectators may not only experience an unpredictable text (which, as Anderson’s films demonstrate, may surprise us in their erratic qualities), but also *unpredictably respond* to those texts. As he reminds us, “the spectator [...] does not choose what will make an impression upon him” (491). Moreover, he points to “an ‘experimental’ dimension to the act of spectating [...] the spectator lets his imagination work *without knowing in advance where it will lead him* (but [...] it will not lead him to discover the author or the text’s intention, but his own)” (494, my emphasis). This recalls *Punch-Drunk Love*’s opening, which could perhaps be taken as a dramatization of Lefebvre’s point. Barry encounters an array of contingencies, which provokes his contemplation and wonder. This is followed by his significant declaration of uncertainty. As previously mentioned, I believe this is

consonant with the idea that objects – like the harmonium or the films we watch – are conducive to a diffuse range of meanings, rather than stable conclusions. To return to my earlier point, what is being described here is not a relativistic morass where nothing can be known or anything can be said. *Punch-Drunk Love*, especially in its moments of abstraction, join films like Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), which seem to *readily* invite and stimulate a plethora of meanings or 'figures.' Even so, this does not entail an endless series of arbitrary interpretations, but responses that *pertain* to the details of a film.³⁵

Or, as Lefebvre puts it, "*the literal content of the film leads the spectator's imagination to employ a more or less vast portion of his own encyclopedia corresponding to both personal and cultural knowledge of the world*" (493, my emphasis). "[T]he figure," he continues, "*must be 'supported' by elements of the film, which I have called 'traits'*" (493, original emphasis). However, I would contend that certain films *more easily* lend themselves to apparently 'final' explanations. In other words, the marked straightforwardness of some texts may obscure their fluidity or 'unpredictable fertility.' This can then be compounded by the kinds of rhetorical accounts being investigated in this argument, such as when a film is rhetorically reduced to an exemplar of classicism.

In other words, as with *Magnolia's* flourishes, the provocative vagueness of *Punch-Drunk Love* is also a kind of resistance. The film *conspicuously* indicates that it exceeds the accounts that might otherwise be imposed upon it. Its vagueness more clearly signals to us its semantic elasticity, which inheres in all films, but is perhaps especially noticeable

³⁵ As Lefebvre writes, "[w]hen it is very private, the figure resembles the Barthesian *punctum*. [...] Does this imply that one may say whatever one wants about a photograph? Not at all [...] [since] the *punctum* must first base itself on the text" (493-4).

here, particularly in the sustained vagueness of Blake's art. Thus, through its vagueness, the film more effectively succors itself against 'definitive' interpretations or against being uncomplicatedly absorbed into accounts of cinema that emphasize classicism, coherency, or straightforwardness. Moreover, it is in *Punch-Drunk Love*'s implicit encouragement of interpretation that we can locate another aspect of cinema's fluidity. While *Magnolia* revealed the 'versatility' of cinema's narrative and aesthetic forms, *Punch-Drunk Love* reminds us of the versatility of our *responses* to those forms. Through vagueness, films like *Punch-Drunk Love* are strategically poised to solicit and encourage the hazarding of multiple interpretations. However, as we will see, scholars like Bordwell consider interpretation to be a dubious source of knowledge. More specifically, then, such films pose an *especially conspicuous* challenge to critics or scholars who would rather conceive of cinema in less fluid or indeterminate terms. Conversely, less overtly 'strange' films *seem* more compatible with (or vulnerable to) such rhetoric. It is not, then, that anything can be said about films like *Punch-Drunk Love* (or that nothing can be known about them), but rather that it is more readily apparent that so much *could* be said about them.

To put it differently, in comparison to films like *Last Year at Marienbad* or *Punch-Drunk Love*, other texts may provide less of a pointed *invitation* to (more) freely interpret. The former films remind us of the capacity to interpret and re-interpret (and thereby renew) films, which in turn leads us toward the fact of cinema's alliance with inexhaustibility and fluidity. However, this does not mean that other films are less rich or 'allow' for fewer interpretations. A film's conspicuous adherence to classicism may make it so that this appears to be the case, though. This appearance is then reified by accounts that stress this adherence. For instance, as Lane reminds us, "[t]he classical examples that

are most often used to substantiate paradigms of narrative structure, such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *His Girl Friday* (1941), *Casablanca* (1942), or *Rear Window* (1954), can just as easily be read alternatively” (75). Her valuable point is that a reoriented perspective may actually discover that, in these allegedly ‘classical’ exemplars, “a basis [still] exists to argue against causal logic and closure” (75). This, of course, is hardly the typical emphasis. Many of these films have instead been reduced to illustrations of a decidedly ‘classical’ mode of filmmaking that, as Bordwell would likely remind us, still endures.

It is significant that Lane arrives at this point in a discussion of *Magnolia*, which, she argues, “honors the complexity of classical cinema” (75). Given classical cinema’s typical association with tradition and legibility, it would perhaps be better to say that *Magnolia* ‘reveals’ the complexity that such associations elide or obscure. Lane moves toward this very point in her next sentence. “Not only does this film defy categories such as the ‘classical Hollywood paradigm,’” she writes, “it also reflexively *highlights* the heterogeneity of the classical era” (75, my emphasis). In other words, for Lane, the strangeness of a film like *Magnolia* comes to emphasize the friction between what cinema apparently is (as represented in certain critical and scholarly accounts) and cinema’s fluidity. She therefore draws our attention to *Magnolia*’s “implicit illumination of overly rigid accounts of Hollywood structure” (75-6). This is part of why the *overt* strangeness of an ‘eccentric’ film like *Punch-Drunk Love* is productive. It brings into relief cinema’s ambiguity and complexity, which is sometimes insufficiently represented in other accounts. In contrast, those films whose narrative or aesthetic is less *conspicuously* ‘resistant’ to classical storytelling may seem to more easily validate the reductive accounts

imposed upon them.

There are, in other words, gradations to the levels of resistance that films may pose. This qualifies how easily or difficultly they may be absorbed into certain paradigms (such as the coherency of Aristotelian traditions upheld by critics or the endurance of classical Hollywood traditions emphasized by scholars like Bordwell). A film like *Punch-Drunk Love* reminds us that we may still forge new paths beyond the provisional rhetorical uses that have reduced texts to exemplars or familiar readings.³⁶ As with *Magnolia*, it points us toward the fluidity of films, prompting us to ‘honor,’ as Lane put it, their complexity. Through vagueness, Blake and Anderson remind us that films are semantically mutable.

Sean O’Sullivan addresses some of these issues in his account of Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *The Decalogue* (1989) series and its relation to television shows like *Lost* and *Six Feet Under*. Each of these texts, O’Sullivan argues, shares a similar absence: “[t]he missing crucial stage [...] is the middle—that is, the space where the inchoate makes sense, or the space where things stabilize” (211). He clarifies his point by referring to various peculiar moments from *The Decalogue*. “[W]e get close-ups of such details as a bee climbing out of a glass (*Decalogue 2*),” O’Sullivan writes, “or a teabag being pushed into a glass (*Decalogue 5*) with no diegetic explanation as to why the camera is lingering on such minor incidents of everyday life” (211). O’Sullivan’s choice of words – ‘*diegetic explanation*’ – are important, and clarify the differences between a conspicuously ‘erratic’ film like *Punch-Drunk Love* and an ostensibly ‘classical’ text like, for instance,

³⁶ Consider, for instance, how often the Odessa Steps sequence is abstracted from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), screened in classrooms to illustrate Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of montage. The remainder of the film is less frequently discussed, and the same can be said for the historical circumstances that inform the film. Similarly, what is by now a common response to *The Birth of A Nation* (Griffith, 1915) involves an admiration of its virtuosity (notably, its implementation of cross-cutting) typically accompanied by an indictment of its racism. In this manner, our traditional and didactic usages of texts risks constraining them within familiar emphases and parameters.

Casablanca. Using O’Sullivan’s terms, the issue could be restated as follows. Some texts readily provide an abundance of ‘diegetic explanations’ so that we may seem encouraged, inclined even, to no longer probe into what is (by all *appearances*) a straightforward film. In the *Decalogue*, however, this manner of storytelling is expressly avoided, or at least significantly problematized at various junctures (just like in *Punch-Drunk Love*).

O’Sullivan’s account of his next set of examples is of especial relevance. He writes, “[t]he detailed views we get—of hands, of faces—do not present us with evidence to unpack [...] they present detail as a category in and of itself, free of context, *without the route to explanation we might expect*” (211, my emphasis).³⁷ *Punch-Drunk Love*, in certain respects, similarly denies us these ‘expected routes to explanation.’ Conversely, other films offer uninhibited access to these routes – ‘diegetic explanations’ are readily available, noticeable and legible. Of course, *Punch-Drunk Love* is not an *absolutely* baffling or ambiguous film. Importantly, though, Anderson refuses to mitigate its more peculiar and vague moments. These instances remain ‘unmotivated,’ and are not accompanied by a clear ‘diegetic explanation.’ When Barry calls an operator late in the film, requests the number for “D&D Mattress Man,” and thus cues the return of Blake’s abstractions (as well as a particularly frenetic piece from Brion’s score), how *should* we ‘read’ this? Is it, as per Cubie King’s earlier ‘explanation’ for the lens flares, an expression of the ineffable? That is, does it ‘communicate’ Barry’s growing love for Lena? More specifically, is it an attempt at transmuting, or somehow approximating, the state suggested by the film’s title into an aural and visual form? Or is this moment far more

³⁷ O’Sullivan’s argument clearly recalls the films of Terrence Malick, even though they are not explicitly addressed in his article.

functional in nature, serving, in its erratic visual details, to accentuate the tonal quality of this climactic moment? Perhaps it is an expression of a different ineffable feeling – Barry’s anger, for instance, as he prepares to physically encounter his extortionist tormentors. Blake and Anderson activate a horizon of interpretative possibilities.

A more specific and complicated reading could also fit here. The example could be read as an elision of the live action footage, which *gestures* toward (but does not approximate or represent) the ineffable. Daniel Morgan discusses a similar instance of elision from Robert Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), where the film’s live action footage also ‘gives way’ to abstraction, which in this case is “a white background with the black outline of a cross and a text being read over it” (120). What this suggests, Morgan contends, is that Bresson is gesturing toward what cannot be disclosed. He is grappling with the limits of his medium, while at the same time revealing just how pliable those ‘limits’ really are – that is, how much can still be revealed through cinema (or, at the very least, *intimated*). As Morgan puts it, “[during] the priest’s transcendence [...] Bresson turns *physical reality* itself into a mere sign, suggesting that what is happening is something that cannot be shown; it is spiritual, not of this world” (121, original emphasis).

Punch-Drunk Love’s vague, multivalent abstractions compel us toward a range of ineffable and interpretative possibilities. None are *explicitly* endorsed by the text, and none emerge as a revelation awaiting us at the end of ‘the route to explanation we might expect.’ Thus, to answer my earlier question, there is not one way in which we *ought* to read this moment from Anderson’s film.³⁸ As Lefebvre puts it, “[t]here are texts, films,

³⁸ This also recalls Stern’s rumination on ‘things’ and *Citizen Kane*. “Guided by film, in these and other instances,” Stern writes, “we approach ideas no longer on highways leading through the void but on ‘paths that wind through the

which touch us—make an impression upon us—and make us dream. The figure is simultaneously the memory (*memoria*) and the pursuit of this dream, *while the film finds meaning within us*” (492, my emphasis). By occasionally withholding an explicit meaning clearly endorsed by the text, Anderson’s films more powerfully urge us to ‘dream.’

This is also why *Punch-Drunk Love* reminds us of cinema’s fluidity, and its alliance with unruliness and unpredictability.³⁹ More specifically, it recalls that part of that unruliness has to do with the dynamic and personal ways in which we may apprehend and relate to texts. As mentioned earlier, Lefebvre argues that a “film leads the spectator’s imagination to employ a more or less vast portion of his own encyclopedia corresponding to both personal and cultural knowledge of the world” (493). However, with regards to “what portion of the encyclopedia the spectator should use,” he insists that “[i]n principle, there is absolutely no restriction [...] the figure is theoretically open and [...] its expanse is unlimited” (493). He compares this point with what Umberto Eco advocates in his own writing. “Eco’s interpreter (or Model Reader),” Lefebvre explains, “is someone who wonders what the text wants to *communicate* to him” (490, original emphasis). Yet as Lefebvre insists, recalling the example of his ‘figure,’ “I am not trying to explain *Psycho* nor to explain how *Psycho* and its shower murder construct some Model Spectator, nor [...] how the film signifies or how it ‘communicates’ its signification” (490).⁴⁰

thicket of things” (354).

³⁹ While I am focusing on *Punch-Drunk Love*’s arguably richest and most intriguing peculiarity, other notable examples exist. Brion’s score, for instance, greatly contributes to the unconventionality of the film. James Mottram’s description captures the aberrant character of this particular contribution. “[I]t’s a free-wheeling score,” he writes, “dominated by bleeps, beats, pulses, tics and rattles – the perfect external expression of Barry’s inner turmoil” (356). In his own account, Philip Brophy argues, “[t]he overall presence of sound [...] is designed and mixed to simulate [...] [an] impossibly broadened dynamic range where sounds either detonate or tickle” (189).

⁴⁰ Lefebvre’s own approach, rather, involves “the *semiotization* of the cinematic object through the act of spectating [...] *how the spectator turns the film into a sign in order to comprehend it and see in it some meaning*” (490, original emphasis).

Blake's multivalent abstractions therefore intensify the friction between *Punch-Drunk Love* and more systematic or coherent conceptions of cinema. A further definition and exploration of such conceptions will support my point. This necessarily returns us to Bordwell who, in *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, reiterates one of his key claims: "Hollywood storytelling fosters creative renewal within flexible but firm limits" (2006, 103). Significantly, this arrives at the end of a section focusing on "American experiments in narrative" (102). As we saw with his account of *Magnolia* in the last chapter, Bordwell may acknowledge cinematic strangeness, but he also rhetorically tempers its radical force.

This is actually characteristic of the entire book, as Bordwell often reasserts the obvious relation between novelty and tradition. "The norms can be recast in a great many ways," he argues, "but they can't be jettisoned without leaving the tradition behind" (103). His clear aim is to prove that "the richness of classical American filmmaking, as an artistic system, depends on just this capacity for flexible but bounded variation" (14). He reiterates this more pointedly later, noting that "despite the diversity that American movies have displayed since 1960, nearly all of them depend on storytelling principles established in the studio era" (21). Bordwell's reading of *Memento* (Nolan, 2000) exemplifies his rhetorical tendencies. As he explains, the film follows a character "afflicted with anterograde amnesia, the inability to form memories" (78). Nolan's radical gambit is to "[link] this condition to a formal strategy of telling its main story backward" (78). Despite its formal strangeness, Bordwell uses this film to once again ally American filmmaking with coherency. He contends that *Memento* "illustrates a more general principle of current Hollywood experimentation: *the more complex the devices, the more redundant the storytelling needs to be*" (77-8, original emphasis). This point is in keeping

with his main claim: “[m]ost of the daring storytelling we find in modern American film offers *legible* variants on well-entrenched [storytelling] strategies” (75, my emphasis).

This is not to say that Bordwell’s argument is entirely problematic. He lends some credence to his argument that “[u]nusual techniques need to be situated in an especially stable frame” (78). He carefully identifies a system whose salient features are familiarity, predictability, and a degree of redundancy conducive to clarity and coherency. However, as previously noted, this is also the system that Anderson’s films resist or complicate – not entirely or totally, but nonetheless significantly and noticeably. This creates a problem, one that has already been well articulated by Murray Smith and Henry Jenkins. Jenkins, for instance, demonstrates how Bordwell’s ostensibly valid account of Hollywood storytelling is, in certain respects, rather problematic. As Smith summarizes, “Jenkins suggests that there is a ‘necessary process of experimentation and accommodation which surrounds the adoption of alien aesthetic norms into the dominant classical system’” (1998, 16). This, Smith continues to explain, is “a process which Bordwell [et al] tend to downplay in favour of the ultimate assimilation of ‘alien’ elements within the existing system” (16). This is certainly evident in Bordwell’s interpretation of *Memento* – he admits and acknowledges Nolan’s radical conceit, but not without tracing its unusual force backwards to a bedrock of fundamental and conventional storytelling principles.

Smith’s next point is of especial relevance for my argument. “In its eagerness to avoid overstatement regarding the ‘subversiveness’ of this film or that genre,” he writes, “the functionalist bent of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* perhaps flattens the local and immediate *experience* of change and discontinuity” (16, my emphasis). The implications of this insightful statement and its particular bearing on Anderson’s films are clear. While

it may very well be that the persistence of Aristotelian storytelling principles will haunt any account of change and novelty, this need not be perpetually reiterated in the vein of classical Hollywood redundancy. Interestingly, Bordwell joins other critics in acknowledging the audacity of Anderson's work. Unlike most of the critics examined in the previous chapter, he means this as a compliment. He refers to Anderson as "one of the best, most consistently inventive directors now working in the United States" (2011, 158). It is precisely these kinds of observations that need not always be followed by an elaborate consideration of how Anderson, despite his 'inventive' tendencies, obediently complies with the fundamental principles of an enduring system.

Novelty or strangeness, after all, is always *necessarily* defined in relation to what is normal. This can be taken for granted, rather than overly stressed. Constantly referring to this fact may lead to what Elsaesser discussed in the introduction – that is, mollifying the significance and intrigue of the new or the peculiar. Warren Buckland offers similar criticisms in his discussion of 'puzzle films' (which includes *Memento*). As he points out, "Bordwell subsumes complex storytelling under Aristotle's conception of plot [...] [even though] the complexity of puzzle films far exceeds Aristotle's meaning of complex plot" (1). As Buckland proceeds to demonstrate, when Aristotle refers to something that is 'complex,' he is, naturally, really only describing something that is *ultimately* coherent and intelligible. "[F]or Aristotle," Buckland elaborates, "complex plots are *still* classical, mimetic, and unified, because reversal and recognition are eventually made to appear probable and necessary" (2, original emphasis). Thus, even when he admits the 'complexity' of a film, Bordwell does so according to the Aristotelian use of the term.

Buckland also usefully locates this emphasis on coherency over complexity within

Bordwell's discussion of "forking path plots" (3). As he puts it, "[Bordwell] finds he can easily subsume [this] under Aristotle's classicism" (3). Such approaches and emphases threaten to overshadow the recalcitrance and ambiguity of films. Buckland, in fact, corroborates one of the key contentions of my argument when he writes, "Bordwell [...] reduces these [complex] films down to a classical framework to preserve their stability and coherence – *but at the expense of their intricacy and perplexity*" (5, my emphasis). Moreover, by turning his attention to Bordwell's account of *Memento*, he further demonstrates the reductive nature of some of Bordwell's arguments. "When Bordwell wants to fit the film into the classical paradigm," Buckland writes, "he downplays its narration and the spectator's experience" (5).⁴¹ This recalls Bordwell's account of *Magnolia* as well as my earlier point: the spectator's *experience* of a text (especially a conspicuously vague text like *Punch-Drunk Love*) can remind us of cinema's complexity.

As Lefebvre stressed, the spectatorial experience can be an indeterminate or 'experimental' process. It is understandable, then, that Bordwell would 'downplay the spectator's experience,' especially given his well-documented interest in conceiving of cinema in relation to clarity and tradition. This 'downplaying' has the advantageous effect of (seemingly) fortifying his claims, since it is in the spectator's experience of a text (and the dynamic interpretative processes it may inspire) that we may locate one of the strongest links between indeterminacy and cinema. A substantial acknowledgment of this aspect of spectatorial experience would, therefore, only complicate Bordwell's argument.

In "Pragmatism and the Interpretation of Films," Lefebvre directly addresses this

⁴¹ Buckland also notes that "when a film does not conform to classical norms [...] Bordwell regards the director to be amiss" (5).

dismissive attitude toward interpretation. “Bordwell,” he points out, “has spent much of his energies, from the 1980s onward, to disparage interpretative film studies and contemporary Continental (mostly French) film theory” (9). This returns us to the previously mentioned distinction between what can be known about a text and the multiple interpretations it may inspire and accommodate. As Lefebvre indicates, the former relates to what Bordwell calls ‘comprehension,’ which he values more than interpretation (9).⁴² For Bordwell, seeing is believing, and it retains a legitimacy that our ‘dubious’ interpretative wanderings cannot provide (9-10). Lefebvre recounts Bordwell’s point as follows: “it is by virtue of its relation to sensory perception, namely the fact that the latter is what must be accounted for or ‘explained,’ that film ‘comprehension’ alone can be granted epistemic value, i.e., verifiability or falsifiability” (10). It is not, then, that Bordwell fails to consider the spectatorial experience, but that he privileges its perceptual component rather than its imaginative and far more ambiguous dimensions. As Buckland indicated, this conveniently facilitates his conception of films as classical and coherent.

As Lefebvre later indicates, this means he avoids a productive source of knowledge. Bordwell, in fact, is resisting Lane’s excellent point – the possibility that ‘classical’ texts can be ‘read alternatively.’ Interpretation is clearly how such alternative readings can be forwarded. In fact, simply acknowledging interpretation as a legitimate source of knowledge about texts would itself constitute an important ‘alternative reading.’ This would require thinking about past and current ‘classical’ films as multivalent and thought-provoking objects that are experienced (as Lefebvre pointed out) through a fertile nexus of

⁴² As Lefebvre explains, this is different from Stanley Fish’s view on ‘comprehension’ (otherwise, Lefebvre indicates that Fish’s and Bordwell’s views on interpretation are similar). “[F]or Fish,” Lefebvre writes, “‘comprehension’ or ‘literal meaning’ are just as determined or theory-laden (i.e., just as ‘interpretative’) as the most Freudian of interpretations” (10).

dynamic personal and cultural knowledge. Unfortunately, this is the avenue of exploration that Bordwell is intent on resisting. In doing so, he seems to insure his claims against the ‘contamination’ of interpretation and the unwieldy indeterminacy it accompanies. Yet it is through interpretation that we may retrieve much of the repressed strangeness and ambiguity from Bordwell’s *ostensibly* ‘classical’ texts. Bordwell’s commitment to his own rhetoric seems to preclude such a closer consideration of these texts as multivalent – as fertile sites that may stimulate the imagination, inspiring myriad feelings and ‘figures.’

Lefebvre, however, persuasively contests Bordwell’s rationale, providing “an alternative to [his] sweeping views on interpretation” (11).⁴³ “Under [Peirce’s] [...] broad understanding of experience,” Lefebvre explains, “the ‘reality’ of a film, i.e., that which is ‘experienceable’ relative to it, will be much greater than that which forces itself upon our senses alone [...] [which is] what Bordwell calls a film’s ‘literal’ meaning” (13). By using Peirce’s insights, Lefebvre effectively forwards a crucial point: there is much more worth attending to than sensory perception. Indeed, Peirce’s wider understanding of experience encompasses “what impresses our senses *as well* as the numerous feelings, thoughts, memories, and imaginings that compel us as we watch a film” (13-4, original emphasis). As Lefebvre then clarifies, “all that, relative to a film, compels our senses and our mind belongs to our *experience* of it and, as long as this ‘object’ and its effect are ‘real’ [...] their representation [...] in discourse) possesses truth-aptness” (13-4). As with Andrew’s emphasis on ‘unpredictable fertility,’ Lefebvre’s alternative is compelling because it involves a lucid acknowledgement of the fluidity and dynamic complexity of texts.

⁴³ He is also addressing a decidedly more pervasive tendency. As Lefebvre tells us, there are “a growing number of commentators in the humanities who, in the wake of Bordwell, Fish, and several others, readily hold that interpretative criticism isn’t truth-apt on the ground that what it represents isn’t independent from the interpreter’s minds” (11).

Indeed, Lefebvre insists “that we ought not to cast doubt, *without reason*, on what we perceive of a film [...] either through the senses or through the mind” (15-6, my emphasis).⁴⁴ Once again recalling Andrew’s notion, he contextualizes films within an *ongoing* and *unpredictable* process of understanding. “[S]ometimes,” Lefebvre points out, “interpretations already in circulation are revised, corrected, or made less vague” (18). This, however, is only one way to understand a film’s ‘unpredictable fertility.’ As Lefebvre adds, “in other cases, a new hypothesis addresses aspects [...] *hitherto unexplored or previously deemed irrelevant*, allowing a new perception to emerge” (18, my emphasis). This is partly why interpretation should not be hastily dismissed. Interpretative thought can strengthen our understanding of texts or, more specifically, their immense complexity.⁴⁵ Addressing the importance of interpretation may accompany greater sensitivity to the inexhaustible dynamism and ambiguity of texts. “The point,” Lefebvre contends, “is that there can be no limitation on the determinability of facts, including films [...] because of the continuous nature of reality no representation can ever be *absolutely determinate*” (18, original emphasis). What this means is that “a film [...] can *grow indefinitely through an indefinite amount of interpretations*” (18, my emphasis).

The contentions being forwarded in this chapter are also well supported by Brian Price’s excellent account of *Punch-Drunk Love*. He further outlines its resistance to the accounts of scholars like Bordwell while specifying what the strangeness of Anderson’s

⁴⁴ As Lefebvre explains, “[not] all such perceptions [...] will withstand inquiry, nor [...] possess equal relevance with regards to film studies as an academic ‘discipline’ (14). Thus, while he argues for the significance “of what has been perceived *beyond* sense perception [...] those inner compulsions that have obtruded upon the student in terms of feelings, thoughts, ideas, memories, imaginings,” he also notes that this “can grow [...] into arguments” (15, original emphasis).

⁴⁵ As Lefebvre writes, “rather than supposing vagueness [...] to be an obstacle to knowledge [...] interpretation is *always* an opportunity to explore *the reality of possibilities* of a film” (21, original emphasis).

film can illuminate for us. He not only helps reveal the recalcitrance of Blake's art, then, but also affirms that the film can indeed remind us of cinema's fluidity. Thus, through *Punch-Drunk Love*, Price emphasizes cinema's cross-pollination with other media. He uncovers an important collision between separate disciplines and art forms, further proving that cinema's fluidity requires similarly fluid conceptions and modes of inquiry.

"What we witness in *Punch Drunk Love*," Price declares, "is the emergence of color abstractions [...] setting the narrative, and thus the clarifying patterns of conventional cinema, toward dissolution" (24-5). He argues that these "color abstractions [...] not only interrupt the narrative, but threaten the legibility of the image, and thus narration, altogether" (23). He is referring specifically to the abstractions within the *live action* portions of the film, but his comments also apply to Blake's contributions (which encompass the entire frame). Directly addressing Blake's artwork, he notes, "[a] juxtaposition of abstraction and narrative comes early in the film and announces a tension in Anderson's aesthetic between storytelling and abstract visual expression" (24). Indeed, as has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, Anderson is less interested in providing a steady stream of narrative clarity or explanations. He prefers to rupture that clarity in bewildering ways. This is the very point that Price defends throughout his fascinating article, through reference to both Blake's art and other instances of abstraction. He is, moreover, similarly sensitive to the way in which *Punch-Drunk Love*'s overt vagueness seems to solicit interpretation. "[C]olor abstraction," he writes, "*signals the necessity of subjectivity and solicits a polyphonic response to an object*" (34, my emphasis).

As noted above, Price draws our attention to how abstraction is not solely relegated to Blake's contributions. A similar kind of vagueness resurfaces elsewhere in the film and

actually encroaches upon its many live action segments. His key example is a scene that takes place in Barry's car, wherein "[he] and Lena are rendered in a seemingly conventional shot/reverse-shot sequence" (24). Price uncovers the recalcitrance of this moment and, in doing so, offers a more intriguing account of the previously mentioned lens flares. As he explains, "the clarifying potential of alternating close-ups is undone by streaks of blue-lit lens-flares that partially erase the figure" (24). What is appealing about his reading of this particular flourish is the compelling way he relates its unusualness to discursive trends within both film studies and art history. In doing so, Price manages to touch upon broader interdisciplinary issues, such as the potential for key debates within art history to speak closely to those within film studies. In doing so, he uncovers another important way in which *Punch-Drunk Love*'s peculiarity 'highlights' the broader complexity of film studies' object – or, as Andrew would put it, 'experience' – of study. As with Lane, Price's experience of one of Anderson's films also leads him to rethink restrictive or unnecessary tendencies within film studies. He therefore finds in *Punch-Drunk Love* what Lane also discovered through her consideration of *Magnolia* – an "implicit illumination of overly rigid accounts of Hollywood structure" (75-6).

More specifically, Price directs our attention from *Punch-Drunk Love*'s lens flares toward "a longstanding debate over the priority of line (or drawing) over color, and the enforced integration of figure and ground in realist production" (25). His considerably insightful reading warrants a brief summation, as it persuasively clarifies the value and significance of *Punch-Drunk Love*'s 'ruptures,' while also implicitly supporting a parallel between the film and Blake's own interest in multimedia hybridity.⁴⁶ As Price elaborates,

⁴⁶ As Lev Manovich points out, "Blake was the earliest and most successful in developing his own style of hybrid

“[u]ntil the Renaissance [...] the mimetic accuracy of drawing had been consistently privileged over the decorative charm of color” (25). He also points out, however, that this emphasis on verisimilitude over the unwanted ‘excess’ of color was a serious point of contention. As he goes on to explain, “a debate about the priority of line over color became a central philosophical and art historical discourse [...] *and is of much interest for film studies*” (25, my emphasis). Once Price turns to Jacqueline Lichtenstein, his argument becomes even more intriguing and pertinent to the reoccurring concerns of my argument. As he notes, “Lichtenstein traces the origin of the privileging of line over color back to Aristotle” (25). She refers to how Aristotle himself stated, “...a random distribution of color would never yield as much pleasure as a definite image without color” (25).

Extrapolating from Lichtenstein’s findings, Price clarifies Aristotle’s contentious position as follows. “[C]olor disrupts order,” he writes, “[t]he closer we look at color, the less legible forms become, and the less able we are to comprehend the narrative” (25). In other words, color is conducive to illegibility and attenuates the possibility for narrative clarity and semantic legibility. Or, as Price puts it, “[c]olor thus defies the goal of Aristotle’s *Poetics*: to establish narratives that effectively convey moral lessons” (25-6). It is through these observations and claims that Price arrives at one of his most intriguing statements. “In terms of painting, then, and ultimately cinema,” he argues, “line controls color by creating a figure in which color can be contained [...] the more distinct the line, the more recognizable the figure, and ultimately, the narrative” (26). Line therefore figures

media” (5). To demonstrate this point, he turns to “[Blake’s] video *Sodium Fox* [...] a sophisticated blend of drawings, paintings, 2D animation, photography, and effects available in software” (5).

as a disciplinary device – it mollifies color’s ‘unruly’ excesses.⁴⁷

Price uses two stylistically distinct paintings to illustrate his argument. He compares Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s “famous work *The Drunken Cobbler* (late 1770s)” to Henri Matisse’s “celebrated painting *The Joy of Life* (1905-1906)” (27). The former painting, Price indicates, would more likely receive Aristotle’s approval, because Greuze’s intended message remains perspicuous. “The moral lesson,” Price explains, “is clear: drinking endangers the well-being of family” (27). As he notes, and as Aristotle might have argued, “ostentatious use of color would only contradict this lesson in asceticism, stealing our attention from this moral scene” (27). Such ostentation, Price demonstrates, is quite abundant in *The Joy of Life*. “Matisse enjoins a perceptual multiplicity,” he observes, “spatial and figural shifts [...] continually take place even when we try to anchor our attention” (28). As he further explains, “by refusing to let line dominate color, Matisse creates an erotic image free of the moral dimension [...] we see in Greuze” (28). It is at this point that Price relates the opposing trends exemplified by Matisse and Greuze to cinema and, specifically, Anderson’s film. “The dominance of color over line in Matisse,” he declares, “is precisely what we witness in [...] *Punch Drunk Love*, especially if we extend line to include not only the figure but also the clarifying aspects of film style” (28).

Not surprisingly, this claim leads to an excellent interrogation of Bordwell’s conception of storytelling. In his argument, Price complements the account of Bordwell’s rhetoric that has been forwarded in the previous and current chapter. As he suggests, “classical narration—especially as it has been institutionalized by David Bordwell in widely adopted textbooks—[is] a machine designed to regulate perception” (28). He offers

⁴⁷ For more on the historically contentious status of colour, see Galt (2010) and Arnheim (1957).

a useful reiteration of Bordwell's emphasis on the saliency of intelligible narratives. "According to Bordwell," Price elaborates, "style in classical narration serves only to clarify *fabula*, or story construction" (28). Thus, he points out, "[i]n Bordwell's conception [...] style is always in service of perceptual efficiency" (28). As Price goes on to demonstrate, this is rather problematic. "Any stylistic element that does not contribute to perceptual efficiency," he writes, "is relegated to the category of excess, [...] secondary to the serious concern of narration" (28). As with Bordwell's other critics, he is acutely aware that dominating emphases can diminish the importance of unusual 'exceptions.'

Moreover, Price uncovers a very intriguing correspondence between key debates within art history and the challenge films like *Punch-Drunk Love* pose to Bordwell's conception of narrative. Referring to Greuze and Matisse, he writes, "color abstractions emerging from within the space of narrative cinema are like their art historical precedents in their efforts to interrupt the moral dimension of narrative" (29). He regards *Punch-Drunk Love* as embodying a radical aesthetic that runs contrary to prevailing storytelling norms, not unlike how Matisse's use of color ran contrary to Aristotelian values.⁴⁸

Price therefore forwards a rather compelling historical analogy. He aligns Bordwell with Greuze and, more broadly, the Aristotelian values the latter's aesthetic exemplifies. This is accompanied by a comparison of *Punch-Drunk Love*'s departure from narrative trends with Matisse's own departure from those Aristotelian values. Moreover, he locates Anderson's films as part of a burgeoning and important trend – a vanguard of resistance against the strictures of Bordwell's paradigm and the pervasive formal trends it observes.

⁴⁸ It is worth noting, moreover, that this also recasts some of the other issues that have already been discussed. Here, Greuze's artistic disposition recalls the tendency that O'Sullivan highlighted, wherein films offer us 'expected routes to explanation.'

Price therefore further illuminates what I have been arguing is the ‘resistant’ quality of films like *Punch-Drunk Love*. As he declares, “we are witnessing the emergence of color abstractions in narrative cinema as a reaction to the imperializing gestures of formalism—*as an institutional account and an actual practice*” (30, my emphasis). This, of course, also recalls the last chapter and my discussion of how *Magnolia* seems to proffer an ‘escape’ or radical alternative from the constrictive, over-determined specificity of certain paradigms and conceptions. Building upon Lane and Doane, I argued in that chapter that *Magnolia* ‘holds out the promise of dynamism and change.’ It is an ‘escape,’ in other words, from prescriptive accounts of how films *ought* to operate or unnecessarily limited accounts of how they *do* operate. It is clear Price reads *Punch-Drunk Love* in similarly radical terms, and his article agrees with, and substantiates, several of my contentions.

As with Lane in the case of *Magnolia*, Price is also sensitive to how *Punch-Drunk Love* speaks to the fluidity and complexity of the medium itself. As he puts it, “Anderson’s work [...] suggests the extent to which we are witnessing a unique merger of art and cinema [...] a promising disregard for the institutional border between the gallery and the multiplex” (29).⁴⁹ In making this claim, he reminds us of another unnecessary (in this case, institutional) limitation beyond the dismissal of interpretation. It is not only that we ought to attend to how films operate within a larger category of experience, as argued by Lefebvre (via Peirce). It is also that the capaciousness of that experience *also includes* potential points of intersection between separate disciplines. The ‘unpredictable fertility’ of texts may urge us beyond unnecessary disciplinary ‘borders,’ where we may more

⁴⁹ A similar and more recent example can be found in Malick’s *The Tree of Life*, which, like Anderson’s film, speaks to the ‘promising disregard’ that Price discusses. In the case of *The Tree of Life*, Malick uses Thomas Wilfred’s light art piece, “Opus 161” (1965-66).

accurately trace the erratic itineraries of our object of study. Once again, then, we are reminded of the fluidity of texts, of their ability to, as Andrew put it earlier, ‘amaze and perplex us.’

Thus, in its recalcitrance and vagueness, Blake’s art is instrumental in consolidating *Punch-Drunk Love* as an amplification of Anderson’s proclivities. His contributions help to ensure that Anderson’s film may continue to bewilder spectators and stimulate their imaginations. In the process, we may be reminded of a medium whose force and intrigue does not lie entirely in its amenability to oft-discussed and perpetuated traditions, but in its wonderful capacity for disobedience and ambiguity. We may also be reminded, as Price demonstrates, of cinema’s imbrications with other media. While such points are sometimes insufficiently acknowledged in other accounts, many of the scholars covered in this chapter present valuable alternatives. Their arguments are admirable, as they remind us that while texts are always rhetorically mobilized, this need not produce restrictive or impoverished accounts of the medium’s immense and constantly shifting complexity.

Thus, Lane turns toward *Magnolia* and acquires a clear sense of the value of its strangeness, and how it may remind us of the ‘complexity’ that inheres in cinema’s supposedly classical texts. *Punch-Drunk Love*’s vagueness, I argued, similarly accentuates the semantic elasticity of films. Lefebvre’s experience of *Psycho* does not lead him toward an exhaustive explanation ensconced within its textual details. Instead, he finds something more fascinating, a source of intrigue that catalyzes an ‘experimental’ mode of spectatorship and the dynamic application of culturally and personally inflected meanings. Price, meanwhile, embraces the uncertain, adventurous spirit with which *Punch-Drunk Love* so ecstatically begins (“I don’t know”). Rather than neglect the film’s peculiarities,

he follows their erratic trajectories, which leads him into the past and across disciplines, as he pursues our elusive object of study and marshals considerable insight along the way. All of this recalls how, throughout *Punch-Drunk Love*, Barry becomes the unfortunate target of incessant questions and demands (“Why are you wearing that suit again?” “Do you think you’ll ask her out?” “What’s the matter with you? Are you okay?” “What is that piano? What is this pudding?”). His responses are usually evasive or vague, and rely on his familiar declaration of uncertainty (or a variation of it): “I don’t know.” Barry reminds us that not all questions can (or should) be answered exhaustively and pithily, and that not all curiosities can be reduced to coherent and straightforward explanations. Rather, as his weary responses indicate, certain matters are considerably more complicated...

CHAPTER THREE: “The Phantom of the Oil Derrick”: Daniel Plainview and the Mysteries of Selfhood

“I don’t like to explain myself,” Daniel Plainview declares in *There Will Be Blood*.

This is less a disclosure than a stern warning; the film’s guarded protagonist is reasserting a boundary. Curiously, this arrives in a scene that had seemed poised to offer more substantial insight into Plainview. Set outdoors and at night, it finds the surly prospector drinking alongside Henry (Kevin J. O’Connor), a drifter claiming to be his half-brother. The revelatory promise of this scene is not only attributable to its sense of seclusion and intimacy, but also Henry’s presence. He conveniently arrives shortly after Plainview’s oil strike, a cataclysmic event that ensures the latter’s wealth as well as his alienation from his adopted son, H.W. (Dillon Freasier), who is deafened as a result of the eruption. In the wake of this tragedy, Henry fulfills Plainview’s yearning for familial ties while granting him someone in whom he can confide (“Having you here gives me a second breath of life,” Plainview tells him, “I can’t keep doing this on my own, with these...*people*”). In a film otherwise filled with characters that Plainview tries to inveigle or defeat, Henry joins H.W. (or, rather, briefly replaces him) as something of an anomaly.

Affirming his entrenched misanthropy to his ‘brother,’ Plainview confesses, “I hate most people [...] There are times when I look at people and I see nothing worth liking.” It is precisely this myopic contempt that Henry manages to evade through his (dubious) claim to kinship. This is why some viewers might initially suspect that their private discussion in this scene will yield insight, rather than serving as another example of Plainview’s dissociative hatred of ‘most people.’ Insight is exactly what Anderson refuses us, though, as he instead opts to renew Plainview’s intrigue and mystery. What we are left with, then, is not a ‘plain view,’ the resolution of mysteries into certainties, or any similar

transition from ambiguity toward clarity. Instead, this scene offers us another tantalizing, oblique glimpse at a character whose interiority will remain elusive.

Thus, as with the spectator, Henry finds himself in proximate relation to a man who he is unable to intimately understand. “Why did you leave?” he inquires in the scene under consideration, “I know you didn’t get on with our father...” Plainview hesitates, glares at Henry and, following a beat, offers him a characteristically evasive reply: “I worked for Geological Survey and went to Kansas.” Henry’s question, of course, pertains to the interior realm of arcane motivations and untold feelings that Plainview has deemed ‘forbidden.’ Consequently, Henry cannot hope to understand Plainview (and, perhaps, neither can Plainview himself – this may account for why he feels more comfortable volunteering banalities). Whether it is because he is unable or unwilling to understand his own interiority, Plainview only offers the compensation of surface details. His past employment and travels are mere facts that belie a more elusive phenomenon: selfhood.

This is what remains undisclosed here and throughout the film. Anderson does not dilute Plainview into a legible and coherent approximation of selfhood, as we often see in cinema. He also does not try to fully ‘represent’ selfhood in all of its fluidity, uncertainty and complexity. Selfhood is never ‘revealed’ here, but it may be, as in life, partially and provisionally inferred (through the nuances of Day-Lewis’s memorably expressive performance and the suggestive and economical dialogue of Anderson’s script). For instance, Plainview follows his response by trying to ‘earnestly’ address Henry’s question. “I couldn’t stay there,” he confesses, “I just couldn’t.” Of course, this is only another instance of evasion. Once again, it seems that we must resign ourselves to the character’s vagueness. However, we have been given a ‘glimpse’ into a past marked by an ostensible

antagonism between a father and son as well as a resolute but unexplained desire to flee from a childhood home in Wisconsin. Interior trauma is not disclosed, but it is intimated.

Following this, Plainview voices his forbidding line, as if in awareness of the frustratingly oblique nature of his answers, “I don’t like to explain myself.” Those hoping that Plainview’s ambiguities would now cohere into certainties are instead made to recognize the resolve underwriting his guardedness as a character and Anderson’s restraint as a writer and director. Thus, through Plainview, Anderson rehearses an epistemological fact or limitation – our inability to comprehensively and assuredly ‘know’ others, and perhaps ourselves. This also means Plainview represents a pointed refusal. The ambiguous mode of characterization that Anderson adopts is distinct from a conception of characters as sites of clarity and coherency. Rather than present a character that is readily amenable to explication, Anderson *accentuates* the very fact of Plainview’s (relative) vagueness.

The friction between Plainview and more legible characters is also hinted at in another scene, shortly after he is made privy to the oil in Little Boston. He sets out to deceive its residents and uncomplicatedly reap as much profit as possible. Plainview does this, moreover, under the humanitarian guise of ‘progress,’ framing his work as a boon to their community. He promises that his exploits will lead to agriculture, roads, and schools. In his own consideration of Plainview’s practiced deceit, Jonathan Murray reminds us that the character’s exteriority is often a dubious source of knowledge. As he writes, “[i]n the set speech he delivers to rural townsfolk about to be gulled in the wake of another oil strike, Plainview declares, ‘This is the face, no great mystery’” (87). Yet as Murray then points out, “uninterrupted sight of the face is often withheld, and the sense of mystery

(‘Who is this man?’ ‘What does he signify?’) comes to seem ever greater still” (87).⁵⁰

The alternative that Anderson rejects is what Lloyd Michaels calls “the notion of character as stable, knowable, and nameable” (xv). Such ‘knowable’ characters point us toward what he refers to as “the efficacy of Hollywood’s formulaic depictions of *readily comprehensible characters*” (26, my emphasis). These are characters “whose traits readily resolve themselves into a recognizable type—the rogue cop Dirty Harry [...] the blessed innocent Forrest Gump” (5). “Mainstream cinema,” Michaels explains, “has relied on [...] institutionalized practices through which character is [...] *given*, made present in fullness and comprehensible” (9, original emphasis). As he elaborates, these ‘practices’ involve “specifying motives, clarifying nuances, effacing inconsistencies, [and] revealing secret desires” (9). Thus, the ‘readily knowable’ constructs that Michaels notes are those whose signification is legible and lucid. This generates a sense of epistemological clarity that is never found in life, but is often achieved in cinema. Such ‘knowable’ constructs can thus be understood as *coherent variations* on our conception of selfhood, which is, of course, characterized by a greater degree of vagueness. Anderson, however, resists this tendency.

Michaels is ultimately interested in a more radical conception of character, something closer to what we see in *There Will Be Blood*. He clarifies the aim of his study as an “attempt to explain how various individual films explore the complex, ambiguous, and elusive nature of character” (xv). In contrast to the legible characters noted above, Michaels refers to these as “‘phantoms of the cinema’ [...] [that] haunt our imagination and memory because, as mimetic representations, they reflect our unrequited desire for

⁵⁰ Murray is actually overstating his case (we are given sustained glimpses of Plainview’s face). His fundamental point is still valid, though: “*There Will Be Blood* [...] reminds us that reliance upon physicality as the key to character can be deceiving” (87). As in life, interiority exceeds outward appearances, as the latter can never give us uncomplicated ‘entry’ into the minds and feelings of others.

human contact, and [...] remind us of the camera's capacity to deceive as well as to reveal" (xv). This is more in keeping with Plainview (although, in this case, it would be more accurate to replace Michaels' use of 'deceive' with 'attenuate' or 'withhold'). As Michaels argues, "these spectral figures compel our attention by their very quality of remaining unpossessible" (xv). Conversely, 'readily comprehensible characters' seem more 'possessible,' and lend themselves to *ostensibly* exhaustive explanations. In *There Will Be Blood*, as in *Punch-Drunk Love*, Anderson complicates our access to such expected, readily available explanations through significant and unresolved ambiguities. As a result, *There Will Be Blood* emerges as a similarly multivalent invitation to wonder.

Drawing from Stanley Cavell, Aaron Taylor argues, "in both content and style [...] [*There Will Be Blood*] seems to expressionistically represent 'our *response* to this new fact of our condition – our terror of ourselves in isolation'" (199, original emphasis). For Taylor, then, "Plainview can be perceived as a surrogate for our experience of an alienating subjectivity" which makes us feel isolated from others, who we cannot intimately know (199). It is precisely Plainview's relation to our limited and complicated knowledge of others that I am interested in, albeit more so through an examination of characterization than performance (the latter being Taylor's emphasis). My own view is that this 'relation' is quite reliant on Plainview's mysteriousness as a character. This recalls our own experience or 'sense' of others, which is complicated by similar ambiguities and doubts. Of course, Plainview has been interpreted as if he unequivocally 'means' something. He has been read as an embodiment of themes and concepts; that is, as a legible character rather than an illegible 'phantom of the cinema.' As Plainview's refusal to 'explain himself' reminds us, though, Anderson has actually constructed a

character that is not easily amenable to definitive explanations. Plainview is not absolutely ‘unpossessible,’ but he cannot be *easily* moored to one explicit meaning or explanation. Taylor arrives at a similar claim, albeit somewhat indirectly (since, here, he is primarily attempting to demonstrate Cavell’s ‘moral of skepticism’). “A viewer may wish to make a claim about Plainview,” he writes, “to know with certainty that his diabolical mania for competition cannot tolerate those who oppose [him] [...] but she cannot be sure that these expressions are not the products of her own mind” (192). I am inclined to agree; we encounter Plainview as part of an experience of uncertainty rather than cumulative clarity.

Our experience of Plainview in *There Will Be Blood* may, therefore, be best understood as a sustained variation on the intermittent abstraction we find in *Punch-Drunk Love*. Jonathan Murray indirectly lends credence to this possibility in his review. As he writes, “oil and *There Will Be Blood* are one and the same: only because their own inner depths are so perfectly opaque do they appear so vividly reflective of other things (the psychic costs of free market capitalism, the course of modern American history, the global energy and ecological crises, etc.)” (87). While he directs his statement to the film more generally, it is just as apt a description of its central character. I would, however, contest Murray’s use of ‘perfectly opaque.’ As noted earlier, we do receive crucial intimations.

It is due to his vagueness that Plainview, as Murray indicates, has accommodated a plethora of varying interpretations.⁵¹ As in *Punch-Drunk Love*, Anderson is less interested in mooring us to, or guiding us towards, legible meanings. Toward this end, he honors the previously mentioned ‘epistemological fact’ (that we cannot truly know the interiority of

⁵¹ To add another example to the ones provided by Murray, Steven Shaviro offers the following interpretation. “Marx famously compared Capital to a vampire,” Shaviro tells us, “dead labor feeding on living labor.” In Shaviro’s view, “Plainview has no feelings to hide, let alone to express or to confess; as ‘capital personified,’ he is truly *Homo economicus*” (original emphasis).

others). In doing so, Anderson recasts on screen (or at least recalls) what we are used to in life, but perhaps less so in cinema: the epistemological limits of interpersonal relations.

Murray Smith's writing on character helps to define this proposed relation between vague, enigmatic characters and selfhood. In a follow-up piece to his text on characters, he reminds us that "[p]erhaps the most basic of everyday assumptions about characters is that they are fictional equivalents of real people" (2010, 234). However, as Smith tells us, this is "a mimetic *hypothesis* rather than a simple mimetic achievement or fact" (234-5, original emphasis). Thus, one of his key contentions is as follows: "characters come into being initially through an imaginative, mimetic act – but they are not *bound* by this initial condition" (235, original emphasis). As he elaborates, "just about every attribute of human existence [...] can be stripped away, but perceiving such entities *as* characters still requires the initial frame of the mimetic hypothesis" (235, original emphasis). This 'initial frame,' Smith explains, "is *agency*: a fictional entity which lacks [this] [...] dissolves into an aspect of setting" (235, original emphasis). Thus, he re-conceptualizes the previously noted assumption as a *necessary* component to the creation and reception of characters.

Bordwell has similarly engaged with the complexities of character and this 'mimetic hypothesis.' "It is evident," Bordwell writes, "that constructing characters on the model of the person is fundamental to comprehension" (1989, 153). In this case, Bordwell's point is less related to enduring cinematic trends or traditions (although, these issues are of course relevant) but our own *predispositions*. As he contends, "[h]umans are predisposed, biologically and culturally, to attend to humanlike agents in representations. The character-as-person schema seems obvious because it is ours; it is us" (153).

However, as Bordwell stresses, "[t]he critic does not believe that the film presents

‘real people.’ The critic constructs the characters by means of a schema she also applies to real people” (156). His elaboration of this point is of especial relevance for the present argument. “This schema shapes our conception of agents within the film,” Bordwell explains, “and whatever character constructs result may be more *or* less consistent, variable, or fleshed out than any conceptions we have of the people we know” (156, original emphasis). Bordwell’s crucial point here is that varying distances separate characters from the totality and complexity of personhood as it is inferred and experienced in our daily lives. This ‘distance’ does not render these concepts irrelevant to each other, though, as they are always bound together – ‘more *or* less’, as Bordwell puts it – due to how we are “predisposed [...] to attend to humanlike agents in representations” (153).

Bordwell and Smith’s conclusions help to account for the assumptions underlying this chapter. Our understanding of people, as they suggest, is a constant reference point of sorts. Films can only ever conform to this reference point ‘more or less.’ Fundamentally, however, it is always a matter of ‘less’ because, of course, characters are not equivalent to people. We understand characters not as people, then, but always *in relation* to people.⁵² As Michaels explains, “James Phelan [...] [questions] the assumption that we know what a person is when we encounter one in real life” (xv). Michaels clarifies this claim as follows, “[r]eal persons, experience seems to tell us, are frequently easy to meet but very difficult to understand” (xv). Such observations can be used to amend and specify Bordwell and Smith’s respective discussions of character. Our conception of people – that ‘reference point’ that always informs our reception of characters – inevitably entails an

⁵² As Smith argues, “even as we drop the requirement for a global referential adequacy—a sense in which the artwork reflects the ‘totality’ of reality—in comprehending narratives we are still initially obliged to accept certain mimetic assumptions in order to get the game going” (1995, 34). As he then elaborates, “to admit a notion of character at all is to acknowledge an element of narrative texts which is analogous to the human agent” (34, original emphasis).

acknowledgment of the mystery of people. It involves, in other words, an acknowledgment of how the psychological complexity of other individuals eludes our understanding, and *how this very elusiveness therefore figures as a necessary and significant constitutive element of our conception of people*. Consequently, when films offer us characters that are especially clear and unambiguous – or, as Michaels put it, ‘readily comprehensible’ – the fissure separating said characters from our conception of selfhood necessarily widens. This is why ‘phantoms of the cinema’ closely relate to our experience of others. As Michaels puts it, “[i]t is this evanescence and mystery of character as found in the movies *and in life* that interests me here” (xv, my emphasis).

In other words, he accounts for his interest in such ‘resistant’ characters by tracing a correlation between them and his own conception of selfhood. “I am interested in them,” he explains, “because they correspond more closely than the majority of representative types to my own experience encountering historical figures and personal acquaintances in real life” (5). Since elusiveness is characteristic of Michaels’ conception of selfhood, the presence of that quality in characters draws them closer to that conception than simpler and more legible characters. Thus, using Bordwell’s ‘more or less’ scale, vague characters like Plainview are necessarily situated closer to the ‘more’ than the ‘less.’

Anderson’s fascination with this topic (the vagueness of selfhood, and how this complicates interpersonal knowledge) is not restricted to *There Will Be Blood*, however. *Magnolia* and *Punch-Drunk Love* also exhibit an interest in these issues. Matthew Sewell, for instance, argues that “[a]nxiety about the futility of personal revelation motivates *Magnolia* on a nearly scene-by-scene basis.” Sandy Carmago offers similar insights in her article on *Magnolia*, arguing, “[t]wo of the most useful ways of conceptualising the

process by which we interact with characters in film – those of Murray Smith and Carl Plantinga – are put at a disadvantage by the multi-protagonist film.”⁵³

In *Punch-Drunk Love*, Anderson memorably addresses this epistemological fact in an early scene where Barry confides in his brother-in-law, Walter. This takes place after a manic eruption of violence wherein Barry shatters his sister’s sliding glass door (the climax to a scene of insidiously building familial torment and social unease). “I’m sorry about what I did,” Barry ashamedly murmurs, before adding, “I wanted to ask you something, because you’re a doctor... I don’t like myself sometimes; can you help me?” Walter, a dentist, is noticeably uncomfortable but nonetheless inquires, “What exactly is wrong?” Barry’s response is a succinct crystallization of the epistemological limitations that Anderson addresses within his work (or, in the case of *There Will Be Blood*, not only addresses, but stages/enacts through character). “I don’t know if there is anything wrong,” Barry admits, “because I don’t know how other people are.” This moving confession may be read less as another example of Barry’s characteristic awkwardness than, following Sewell’s observations, a lament of sorts. On the one hand, Barry’s professed inability to ‘know how other people are’ defines the terms of his debilitating anxiety and loneliness. As a thematic lament, however, it also powerfully reverberates across Anderson’s work. As Sewell writes of *Magnolia*, certain characters “articulate something of their suffering, and the wellsprings of their behavior are uncovered for viewers, but whether their experiences are genuinely understood by any other character remains at best ambiguous.” This resounding ‘anxiety’ about our inability to know others therefore reaches beyond

⁵³ As Jones writes of *Magnolia*, “Anderson withholds vast amounts of information about his characters and keeps them as mysterious as he can for as long as he can” (81). Carnago makes a similar point, noting, “although the characters in [*Magnolia*] clearly have pasts, they do not have histories.” See Azcona for another discussion of the ambiguity of narrative information in Anderson’s films (33-4).

Magnolia and emerges as one of Anderson's most fascinating ongoing preoccupations.

With Plainview, though, the 'wellsprings of behavior' that Sewell mentions are more conspicuously absent. Moreover, this absence affects both fictional characters and spectators, who are similarly put at a disadvantage in their attempts at 'knowing' Plainview. While we are granted suggestions and indications of past trauma, as in the earlier exchange between Henry and Plainview, explicit disclosures are often withheld. As Hannah McGill writes in her *Sight and Sound* review, "Anderson permits [...] no introspective monologues, no tears, no 'Rosebud'." McGill's slightly inaccurate remark (for instance, as we will see, Plainview is brought to tears at one point) refers to what is by now a familiar and ubiquitous reading of *Citizen Kane* as a film that expresses the vagueness of individuals. McGill's point seems to be that 'Rosebud' in no way elucidates Kane (or fully 'explains' him), but that the reference to this object at least provides us with an intriguing detail upon which we may build *provisional* interpretations.

It is worth stressing, however, that such details are not wholly absent in *There Will Be Blood*. Anderson certainly does not provide 'introspective monologues' nor are there any explanatory voice-overs, excessive or didactic intertitles, or an overreliance on flashbacks. We do witness a few instances of emotional candidness, though, as when Plainview is brought to tears while reading his actual, deceased brother's diary. Also, before *There Will Be Blood's* final scene (wherein Anderson fulfills the film's eponymous promise), we are given its sole flashback – a few brief, wistful moments between Plainview and a young H.W., who has just been cast away by Plainview in the present. Yet even here this anomalous flashback has the effect of bringing Plainview's ambiguity and unresolved contradictions (his love and apparent resentment for his son) into relief.

Such glimpses ‘into’ Plainview are not upheld as clarifying moments of disclosure that lend themselves to conclusive statements. They are, rather, sources of intrigue that complicate Plainview and allow us to infer (but never resolve or render coherent) his complexity. My point, then, is that while McGill recognizes Plainview’s elusiveness, she may be overstating her claim. His interiority is attenuated, not absent. As I have argued, that our ‘knowledge’ of him is reduced to intimations serves to preserve his mystery and, moreover, allows him to closely correspond to our conception of selfhood as ambiguous.

Other oblique glimpses include an especially intriguing scene on the beach, where Plainview alludes to his past. Once again, Anderson avoids presenting an over-determined character by inflecting such moments with considerable vagueness. These instances are not examples of revelation, then, but intrigue, from which we may speculate about Plainview without total assurance or conclusiveness. Near the beginning of this scene, Plainview reminisces about “that house in Fond du Lac that John Hollister built.” He tells Henry, “I thought as a boy that was the most beautiful house I’d ever seen, and I wanted it. I wanted to live in it. And eat in it. And clean it. And even as a boy I wanted to have children to run around in it.” When Henry asks him if he will now, given his wealth, build a house just like it, Plainview grimly replies, “I think if I saw that house now it’d make me sick.” This intriguing statement is not granted further contextualization or explanation. As with *Punch-Drunk Love*’s abstractions, it could be thought about in several ways. It may, for instance, suggest that Plainview’s competitive and misanthropic disposition have now contaminated that innocuous dream. The house is not so much unobtainable now as it is grotesquely incongruous with the man he has become. The tragedy and rapacity that has alienated him from his son contributes to this grotesque incongruity. Plainview, on some

level, seems to bitterly realize this fact here, which may account for why the house in Fond du Lac would now ‘make him sick.’ Intriguingly, his refusal to contextualize or account for this declaration not only complicates our knowledge of Plainview but also further suggests his own inability to render himself coherent. Plainview declares his feelings here, but he does not elaborate on them. As we will see, Charles Peirce contends that we cannot know ourselves better than we can know others. Plainview’s reliance on curt, declarative statements suggests such an introspective limitation, where one’s interior stirrings and impulses are keenly felt, but cannot always be translated or rendered legible.

The examples I have provided certainly recall the presence of ‘Rosebud’ in *Citizen Kane* insofar as they intimate interior complexities without disclosing or overtly explaining a character (i.e., reducing them to a type, message, or a legible set of traits). While in this case the absence of explanations relates to character rather than unusual flourishes like Jeremy Blake’s abstractions, Anderson is once again intent on complicating what O’Sullivan called the ‘the route to explanation we might expect.’ Through the obstinate mystery of Plainview, *There Will Be Blood* complicates our understanding of character, reminding us of our similarly equivocal knowledge of selfhood in the process.

Of course, interpersonal knowledge and communication are not entirely defined by vagueness. We clearly have at our disposal an economy of visual and verbal gestures whose signification is fairly coherent and legible (even as they vary from culture to culture, and are inflected by context, tone, purpose, and so forth). Anderson, however, is less concerned with the efficacy of knowledge and communication. He is interested, rather, in the ellipses and ambiguities that complicate these processes, and how our knowledge of others can be hindered. The film, after all, focuses on two treacherous and

dishonest men who exploit the tool of communication for their own selfish ends. Eli Sunday (Paul Dano), an evangelical preacher and Plainview's nemesis, tends to wildly gesticulate and bombastically preach before his congregation. Like Plainview, he subsists on fraudulent performances that at once facilitate and obfuscate his true motivations. He possesses a competitive and entrepreneurial spirit, an obsession with wealth and enterprise that rivals Plainview's, and he is prone to a similar pettiness. Whereas Plainview pursues his success through a false guise of humanitarian progress, Sunday uses his own meretricious front (the preacher with the approbation of God) to win hearts and minds.

In the film's final scene, the superficiality of this performance is exposed when Sunday offers Plainview the opportunity "to have business with the Church of the Third Revelation [...] to drill on one of the great undeveloped fields of Little Boston." Plainview 'agrees' to this proposal, but only on the "condition" that Eli finally declares himself "a false prophet" and admits "that God is a superstition." Eli protests initially, and in his typical unctuous manner, replies, "It's a lie. I cannot say it." He quickly relents, however, reciting Plainview's lines for the sake of his business interests, which clearly supersede his devout pretenses. This is the obverse of an earlier moment, wherein William Bandy refuses to allow a pipeline to be run through his property unless Plainview is baptized at Eli's church. Plainview begrudgingly agrees and the next scene finds him uncomfortably kneeled before Sunday's congregation. "You have abandoned your child," Eli announces, circling him, "your child, that you raised, you have abandoned all because he was sick and you have sinned." Here, it is Plainview who yields to Eli's ventriloquism, reciting the lines imposed upon him. He does so reluctantly at first, and then, upon Eli's cruel insistence, with greater vehemence. As this sadistic 'cleansing' continues, we witness a

fascinating transformation. Goaded by Eli, Plainview's rote declarations give way to something much more candid: a rare instance of vulnerability. Despite himself, Plainview offers us another 'glimpse.' In an incensed fit of catharsis and shame, he shouts with maddened conviction, "I have abandoned my child, I have abandoned my boy!" Here, he reaches a startling crescendo of manic and harried intensity; his eyes become frantic and searching, his face clenches into a flushed grimace, all while the tightness of his jaw and his tremulous breathing further intimate the burden of this involuntary outpouring.

Among many other possibilities, then, *There Will Be Blood* explores the regulation and deceptive performance of selfhood. As Murray suggested, Anderson seems intent on reminding us that (contrary to Plainview's dubious assertion) the face can indeed be 'a great mystery.' Thus, Anderson emphasizes the uncertainty that complicates our 'acquisition' of interpersonal knowledge not only through our own experience of the film's mysterious character, but also through the diegetic instances where he brings the falsehood of his characters' diegetic performances into relief.⁵⁴ Through these two distinct approaches, *There Will Be Blood* powerfully recalls and substantiates Barry's professed epistemological crisis (our 'inability to know how others are').

For others, however, the peculiarity of Plainview owes a lot to Daniel Day-Lewis. Aaron Taylor investigates this point in his fascinating article on theatricality and *There Will Be Blood*. He speculates as to the reasons behind the reactions his performance has inspired. "For voting members of the Academy," he writes, "Day-Lewis's blackly comic grotesqueries are [...] an Oscar-worthy achievement. For his detractors, [...] his overripe

⁵⁴ The involuntary confessions from *There Will Be Blood* also powerfully echoes Mackey's interview from *Magnolia*. As a showman who similarly tries to set the terms in which he is viewed and 'understood,' Mackey clearly prefigures Plainview and Sunday.

histrionics bring about an unwarranted shift in tonal register that destroys the film's stylistic and emotional continuity" (185). This suggests that the peculiarity of Plainview not only lies in his characterization, but also Day-Lewis's allegedly erratic performance.

The reactions to his performance also further indicate the endurance of a critical paradigm that valorizes the organic and cohesive. "Day-Lewis," Taylor writes, indirectly recalling *Magnolia* and *Punch-Drunk Love*, "[veers] so wildly from the conventional dramatic principles [...] to modes of behavior that have been evaluated as excessive, unrealistic, and even farcical" (185). Whether we attend to Day-Lewis' performance or Plainview's characterization, the resulting 'strangeness' may be understood as another example of Anderson's artistic 'disobedience.' Recalling the aversion to *Magnolia*, and some of the key concerns of my argument, Taylor notes the dissonance between Day-Lewis's performance and prescribed 'norms.' "[T]he distancing effect produced by pronounced artifice," he explains, "is experienced affectively by some as [...] aesthetic failure – especially when judged against the absorptive 'norms' of classical realism" (190). Thus, Anderson's work again emerges as a source of friction between conceptions of (or rhetorical attempts to 'contain') cinema, and the medium's unruly potential.

Taylor's use of Cavell's notion of "the moral of skepticism" also intriguingly demonstrates how Day-Lewis's performance contributes to the kinds of issues I have been exploring through character (192). Cavell's crucial point, Taylor explains, is that we ought not to (and apparently cannot) approach the outside world as something to be finally and

unequivocally known (191).⁵⁵ Indeed, for Cavell, it is not only imperative that we recognize the futility of this pursuit of certainty, but our very humanity relies upon this recognition. As Taylor puts it, to do otherwise would entail “a repudiation of one’s own existence within a human community [...] foregoing acknowledgment of others for a desire for certainty about them renders us unknown to and isolated from them” (193). We cannot really know others, then, but we may accept or ‘acknowledge’ (on faith, rather than with any assurance) their discrete and autonomous existence. Rather than provoke a sense of frustration, this can inform a kind of harmony and kinship. As Taylor makes clear, in this scenario, we are no longer bound to an acute sense of our epistemological limits, but can accept these limits. In fact, they become the foundation to our relations with others, whom we no longer recognize as ciphers. Instead, they are discrete beings with unique feelings and struggles. As Taylor indicates, this elicits empathy and ‘understanding.’⁵⁶

Intriguingly, Taylor’s main contention is that the reason Day-Lewis’s performance garnered distaste from some is because it short-circuits this expected opportunity for ‘acknowledgment.’ The ‘theatricality’ of Day-Lewis’s performance, Taylor speculates, renders salient the very act of performing; it makes us aware of ourselves as viewers, eliminating our ability to intimately ‘acknowledge’ Plainview’s autonomy. As Taylor writes, “theatrical performances only inescapably exhibit our isolation [from others] and

⁵⁵ This shares clear affinities with the Cartesian conception of selfhood (something that Taylor recognizes). As will be discussed later into this chapter, however, Peirce refuted Descartes’ propositions. Thus, Cavell’s conception may be vulnerable to similar criticisms.

⁵⁶ Taylor quotes Cavell as follows, “[t]he world is to be accepted; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged” (192). “Acquiring knowledge about an other,” Taylor further explains, “requires [...] coming to an awareness of an other’s situation without recourse to certainty” (193). “[T]o label our distinctness as ‘isolation’ misconstrues the nature of our separateness from others,” he elaborates, “separateness becomes perceived as alienation, or distance – a state of unknownness – rather than being acknowledged (i.e., being accepted and affirmed)” (193). Thus, with regards to certain characters, “audiences [...] will grant them their responsiveness [...] [which] might take the form of empathy [...] fundamentally, it is an acknowledgment of their humanity: ‘I am moved to recognize that she alone is feeling this way and in this manner.’ [...] her autonomy from me is accepted and affirmed” (196-7).

thus reinforce it” (197). Taylor’s point is clear. The histrionics of Day-Lewis’s performance are so pronounced that it self-reflexively reminds us of its constructed status as a performance, rather than a separate character or mind that we can potentially ‘acknowledge.’ Through this, Taylor more or less arrives at the claim I am forwarding, albeit through performance rather than characterization. “Theatrical screen actors,” he declares, “speak of a perceived *epistemological dilemma*. Hailing us as viewers rather than confederates, far removed from any possibility of proximity or shared subjectivity, their radical otherness does not permit intimacy, only helpless scrutiny” (200, my emphasis).

For Taylor, in the absence of such ‘proximity’ and ‘shared subjectivity,’ we receive something far more mysterious and troubling: a reminder of the epistemological limits that separate us from others. Day-Lewis’s theatricality, Taylor argues, leaves us with “an incomprehensible, unknowable character whose interiority is denied [...] Or, I behold a mere actor who offers only performance signs, and who is in turn equally inscrutable as a ‘distantly knowable’ person” (197). This reading of the film reveals that it is not only Plainview’s characterization that complicates our ‘connection’ to the character, but also the ‘theatrical’ terms of Day-Lewis’s performance. While I am hesitant to argue that the necessary effect of the performance is a *total* loss of a sense of Plainview as a possible character or mind, Taylor’s point is still intriguing and relevant to the issues at hand.

Anderson’s engagement with the vagueness of selfhood not only recalls Cavell, however, but also resonates with a rich literary and philosophical context. As Philip F. Herring points out, “[l]ate-nineteenth-century fiction contains many examples of mysteries or indeterminacies of identity” (103). For instance, he points toward Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James (103). Of course, this

preoccupation with the ‘indeterminacies of identity’ is pervasive; it exceeds a late-nineteenth-century literary context. Thus, while the writers Herring mentions grapple with the enigma of selfhood, they also prefigure subsequent examples. This is affirmed by Ed Mendelowitz and Chae Young Kim, who emphasize that “Melville anticipates the modernist literature of the 20th century with his insight that the mysteries of worlds within rival the mysteries of the worlds without” (466). Megan M. Quigley supports this point in her account, further defining this link between modernist literature and the ambiguities of selfhood. “Rather than attempting to eliminate vagueness,” she explains, “modernist fiction probes vagueness as the best way to examine psychological depth” (105).

While it is clear that no exact correspondence can be drawn between *There Will Be Blood* and these disparate contexts, we may at least consider Anderson as another successor to this pedigree of thinkers and artists fascinated with the uncertainties of selfhood (indeed, as a filmmaker, he also utilizes vagueness in order to intimate a vast reservoir of ineffable ‘psychological depth’). Not surprisingly, selfhood has attracted considerable philosophical interest, as well. As Quigley explains, “many early twentieth-century novelists, such as Henry James, Woolf, and Stein, had personal ties to the philosophers investigating vagueness, particularly William James, Charles Peirce, and Bertrand Russell” (110).⁵⁷ With regards to Peirce, his engagement with this issue came in the form of a resistance to existent conceptions (as we will see, the same can be said for Virginia Woolf). More particularly, he offers an understanding of interiority in “Some

⁵⁷ Mendelowitz and Kim also locate in Melville’s writing an adumbration of William James’s (Henry James’s brother) considerations of the complexities of personhood. “Herman Melville’s *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (1852/1995) is now recognized as one of the great psychological novels of the 19th century,” they write, “[t]he very subtitle of the book (a book that Melville thought to be of more significant moment even than *Moby-Dick*) suggests what would become a Jamesian touchstone: that world and mind are infinitely complex” (462). “James,” they further explain, “would soon speak of the infinite ‘inward iridescences’ of the mind” (462-3).

Consequences of Four Incapacities” that, as Garry Hagberg explains, departs from the Cartesian conception of selfhood. It is in that essay that Peirce argues against Descartes’ view, declaring, “[w]e have no power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts” (141). As Hagberg points out, contrary to Cartesian thought, Peirce held that selfhood is not “a hermetically isolated mental content that exhibits a degree of clarity and distinctness sufficient to call it true” (165). What Peirce means, Hagberg clarifies, is that our selfhood is not an unmediated and legible entity we may assuredly access (165). This is the conception of selfhood we see honored, or evoked, via Plainview’s characterization.

Gérard Deledalle offers a succinct explanation of this tension between Peirce and Descartes. “While Descartes reaches knowledge of the external world by analyzing the content of his thoughts,” Deledalle explains, “Peirce maintains that we can acquire knowledge of the internal world only through analysis of external facts” (12-3). For instance, as Elizabeth F. Cooke points out, for Peirce, “even an emotion is a predication concerning some external object. For example, a man’s anger implies that there is something in the external world which makes him angry” (14). However, it is not that Peirce was positing a wholly knowable, brute, and purely external reality in contrast to our always-mediated inner selves. Rather, William V. Dunning points out that, for Peirce, “we know reality only through signs [...] [and] we understand even this personal self externally, as a linguistic sign” (332).⁵⁸ Descartes, in other words, envisioned a clear and

⁵⁸ Haci-Halil Uslucan clarifies this point, noting, “[t]here is, according to Peirce, no way that facts of the world stand for themselves, and we have no example of thoughts that are not manifested in some type of sign [...] Peirce denied direct access to cognitions” (99). On the related note of “Peirce’s astonishing dictum of ‘*man as sign*,’” Uslucan explains that when “trying to illustrate this cryptic analogy, [Peirce] explained that, just as we say that a body is in movement and not

knowable self, whereas Peirce instead insisted that both outer and inner worlds are always necessarily mediated (and, thus, only partially understood) through signs. This is why, Andrew Garner explains, “the self is not given [...] [but] must be inferred. It is a conclusion that is drawn from chains of signs” (363-4). Again, no exact links can be drawn, but what we can detect here is a fundamental tension between perspicuous and ambiguous notions of selfhood. This recalls Plainview’s differences from a tradition of lucid, knowable characters. An intriguing correspondence therefore emerges through a consideration of this philosophical and literary context. Through films, and the gradations of legible and illegible characters they offer, we witness a rehearsal of this fundamental and long-existent tension between competing understandings of selfhood.⁵⁹

A fascination with these issues also compelled Franz Kafka, from whom Mendelowitz and Kim quote the following, “[h]ow pathetically scant my self-knowledge is compared with, say, my knowledge of my room [...] There is no such thing as observation of the inner world, as there is of the outer world” (466). Kafka’s musings guides us toward a significant literary debate concerning the tendency to privilege physical or minute descriptions at the expense of more substantial inquiries into ‘inner worlds.’ This is what Virginia Woolf adamantly argues against across several essays. Certain authors, she contends, too singularly focus on the prodigious and readily available

that the movement is in a body, we should say that we are in thought and not that thoughts are inside us” (103, original emphasis).

⁵⁹ It is worth stressing that what is being cited in these pages mostly pertains to Descartes’ and Peirce’s competing discussions of *self-knowledge*, as opposed to a particular emphasis on knowledge of others. As Aaron Taylor explains, “[f]ollowing Descartes, one’s mind only has direct knowledge of itself and cannot be known by, nor can it know, other minds except through inferences it makes based on observing the behavior of others” (192). Given this, Descartes’ position is not entirely unrelated to what is going in *There Will Be Blood*. Even so, what Peirce appears to do in his own writing is amend Descartes’ proposal so that this inferential process also extends to our knowledge of ourselves. This returns us to the possibility that Plainview’s previously mentioned forbidding line (and his overall unforthcoming and taciturn disposition) could be read less as the declaration of a man who ‘doesn’t like to explain himself’ than a dramatization of Peirce’s claim. He is a man who *cannot* explain himself – drawing from Peirce, a man who cannot ‘access’ his self.

objects of perception, which, as Kafka suggested, we can apparently know better than the deep recesses of our minds. As James Harker explains, “[Woolf] pit a generation of novelists including Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett, whom she calls the Edwardians in one essay and materialists in the other, against a succeeding generation, the Georgians or the moderns, including Forster, Joyce, Eliot and presumably Woolf herself” (3).⁶⁰

Woolf’s view on these matters, as elaborated by Ray Monk, was that “[life] is not to be found in the material objects that make up the fabric of external reality, but in the ‘myriad of impressions’ that one finds when one ‘looks within’” (12). Recalling the title of Lloyd Michaels’ book, Monk adds, “[a]s the narrator in [Woolf’s] ‘The Mark on the Wall’ remarks, and as *Jacob’s Room* attempts to illustrate, we are to others *mere phantoms*, as they are to us [...] yet, it is the pursuit of these phantoms, those shadowy constructs, that is the task of the novelist” (11-2, my emphasis). Woolf, moreover, emphasized the considerable difficulty of this ‘task.’ Quoted by Monk, she writes, “[s]ome Brown, Smith, or Jones comes [...] and says in the most seductive and charming way in the world, ‘Come and catch me if you can’” (13). “Few catch the phantom,” Woolf stresses, “most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair” (13-4).

Woolf not only demonstrates this acute sensitivity to the elusiveness of selfhood, but also to how this phenomenon is liable to change depending on the observer and the observed. As Monk puts it, “Woolf’s central concern [...] is to preserve Mrs Brown *as an impression* inside the mind of Virginia Woolf” (19, original emphasis). These concerns recall certain points from Woolf’s 1926 article, “The Cinema,” where she directly

⁶⁰ Harker is discussing two of Woolf’s essays, “Modern Fiction” (1925) and “Character in Fiction” (1924). It is also worth noting that Harker challenges the idea that Woolf abandons the material world entirely for the vagaries of interiority.

addresses the medium. It is here where she envisions an unfulfilling adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, arguing that cinema's innate visual emphasis impedes any sensitivity to the interiority of the titular character. Her point recalls her charge against the Edwardians and their allegiance to banal outer details. "A voluptuous lady in black velvet wearing pearls comes before us," Woolf writes, "[b]ut the brain says: 'That is no more Anna Karenina than it is Queen Victoria.' For the brain knows Anna almost entirely by the inside of her mind – her charm, her passion, her despair" (2-3). For Woolf, the onscreen Karenina is compromised because "[a]ll the emphasis is laid by the cinema upon her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet" (3). Woolf is comparing the more perspicuous version of Karenina gleaned from the novel with her onscreen approximation. Yet she also seems to be suggesting that film's innate visual emphasis *necessarily* attenuates 'inner worlds.' In fact, Woolf notes the *insufficiency* of live-action footage, suggesting that the promise of cinema lies in expressive abstract forms, à la *Punch-Drunk Love* (3).⁶¹

What Woolf does not consider, perhaps, is that the emphasis on *unrevealing* visual and aural information she seems to dismiss (in literature and, as seen above, in cinema) can still inspire a sense of others. This is perhaps especially the case in cinema thanks to its necessary visual proclivity. Whether we are regarding the striking velvet of Karenina's dress or the sheen of her pearls, our onscreen experience of such unrevealing information is keenly redolent of our experience of people. At the very least, it reminds us that our knowledge of others is *similarly attenuated*, and *similarly reliant* on such 'unrevealing' aural and visual details. This correspondence, this sense of attenuation, is of course

⁶¹ For Woolf, such abstraction may channel thoughts and feelings more effectively than footage of actors emoting. "[A] shadow at a certain moment," she writes, "can suggest so much more than the actual gestures and words of men and women in a state of fear" (3).

amplified in a film like *There Will Be Blood*. Thus, while films lack the reciprocal and tactile dimensions of interpersonal contact, it is worth entertaining the possibility that they may still channel this other important dimension. As in *There Will Be Blood*, they may capture, recall, and perhaps recreate, the sense of pervasive uncertainty we feel regarding the feelings, motivations and complexities that always exceed what a person does or says (or wears).⁶² As Jonathan Murray declares, “[*There Will Be Blood*’s] effect is a sense that potential knowledge of Plainview is always slipping away from our grasp, *even as the man, his works, actions and body, are ever on-screen before us*” (87, my emphasis).

Plainview’s ambiguity – his unrevealing appearances – results in more than a sense of psychological veracity, though. We can also appreciate his vagueness as another of Anderson’s successive attempts at conceiving of cinema as openly as possible. Through Plainview, he solicits our interpretation by honoring the mysteries of selfhood (i.e., not overdetermining a character, inviting our wonder). Indeed, as in *Punch-Drunk Love*, *There Will Be Blood* opens up fertile spaces for multiple and competing interpretations and, in doing so, accentuates the (spectatorial) complexity of films. He also rejects a more conventional mode of characterization, thereby reminding us of the complex potential of cinematic artistry. In other words, it is by adhering to the vagueness of selfhood in *There Will Be Blood* that Anderson is again able to accentuate cinema’s unpredictability and fluidity.

Thus, through such unconventional gambits, Anderson continues to guide us toward a productively indeterminate understanding of cinema. His recurrent challenging of the

⁶² In her review, Stephanie Zacharek criticizes Day-Lewis’s performance as “the kind of turn that often wows moviegoers precisely because they don’t know what to make of it. It’s suitably mysterious (‘Why is he doing that? I have no idea, but it’s cool!’).” Yet it is precisely this uncertainty that makes our experience of Plainview consonant with our experience (or our conception) of selfhood.

'limits' of aesthetic and narrative possibilities, as well as his ambiguous gestures of provocation, illuminate the 'unruliness' of cinema as an object of study. This accounts for much of the value of Anderson's refusal to adhere to a tradition of readily legible characters in favor of the ambiguities of selfhood. Through Plainview's marked vagueness, Anderson allies the cinema with a productive sense of uncertain potential, rather than perpetuating its association with narrow traditions or coherence. Plainview reminds us of cinema's enduring capacity for recalcitrance, while his mysteries once again reveal (and encourage) the dynamism and multi-perspectival nature of spectatorship. His stated refusal to 'explain himself' is, therefore, not simply a withdrawal from traditions and prevailing conceptions of cinema. It is also a radical gesture that propels us toward the compelling uncertainty of both selfhood and cinema alike.

CONCLUSION: Anderson's "Hopelessly Inquisitive" Filmmaking

Throughout the past chapters, I have pursued the significance and implications of Anderson's erratic filmmaking. I began with *Magnolia*, which most boldly declared Anderson's interest in the unexpected, unusual and incongruent. Not surprisingly, its most glaring 'transgressions' – its baffling Fortean climax and its generic indeterminacy – inspired considerable ambivalence. While it is clear that *Magnolia* fails to comply with certain critical mores and paradigms, I argued that Anderson exchanges such 'obedience' for something more intriguing and promising. In its unmotivated 'excesses,' his film is a striking reminder of cinema's capacity for unruliness. This is not typically valorized within mainstream criticism, where incoherency and incongruity are often read less as points of interest than failure. This is also occasionally elided or suppressed within film studies, particularly in cases where intelligibility and tradition are the reigning points of emphasis. Given this, I contended that the value of Anderson's films lies in the friction they generate between such emphases and cinema's long-existent, unruly potential. His films remind us that part of cinema's distinction and fascination derives from its enduring alliance with discontinuity, fluidity, and ambiguity (of texts, and of spectatorship).

Thus, as I have argued, by attending to the peculiarities of films like *Magnolia*, the necessity of a more fluid conception of the medium becomes clear (one that is necessarily subject to change). Cinema demands a suitably 'messy' and tentative portrait informed by an acute sensitivity to the aesthetic and narrative possibilities the medium affords, as well as what Dudley Andrew calls 'the unpredictable fertility' of texts. Todd Berliner's comment, as quoted in my first chapter, helps to remind us what such a 'portrait' might reveal. Thoughtfully considering the 'incoherency' of films like *Magnolia*, he writes,

“[t]he fact that we [can] enjoy a group of Hollywood films so disunified, even when they arouse our uncertainty and discomfort, *reveals not only the versatility of Hollywood narration but also our capacity for aesthetic pleasure*” (221, my emphasis). Indeed, as I have stressed throughout the past chapters, Anderson not only accentuates the considerable ‘versatility’ of Hollywood’s aesthetic and narrative repertoire, but also reminds us that a similar complexity inheres in our spectatorial relations to films. This ‘reminder’ is particularly clear in the abstractions of *Punch-Drunk Love*, which also marks a significant evolution in Anderson’s ‘erratic’ artistic tendencies. The film is not only punctuated by peculiarities and incongruities (as in *Magnolia*), but Blake’s contributions are also suffused with a greater degree of vagueness. I argued that this beckons a response from viewers, whose discrete encounters with such ambiguity may yield an idiosyncratic range of responses and readings. Anderson’s films, I concluded, are especially well poised to stimulate this interior realm of interpretation and thought (particularly from *Punch-Drunk Love* onward).

With that being said, *Magnolia* and *Punch-Drunk Love*’s ‘eccentricities’ are joined by a similar effect and ostensible intention. In both cases, Anderson seems to be conceiving of cinema as fluidly and broadly as possible. Toward this end, the peculiarities of *Magnolia* come to adumbrate the sheer elasticity of the medium’s narrative and aesthetic capacities (and, as Berliner put it, ‘our own capacity for aesthetic pleasure’). In the case of *Punch-Drunk Love*, Anderson conceives of signification in similarly complex terms. Indeed, Blake’s abstractions catalyze an uncertain mode of spectatorship, where the ‘expected routes to explanations’ are intriguingly absent. Much of the distinction of *Punch-Drunk Love* is attributable to Anderson’s refusal to *wholly* present his film legibly

and clearly. An uncomplicated, straightforward mode of storytelling runs contrary to the kind of freely interpretative spectatorship that Anderson seems intent on encouraging. Blake's contributions are essential in this regard; they insure *Punch-Drunk Love* against interpretative stagnation, investing the film with a reserve of provocative and multivalent vagueness. The possibility to 'read alternatively,' as Lane put it, may apply to all texts, but it is particularly striking here thanks to the muddled signification of Blake's interludes.

In *There Will Be Blood*, we witness an even closer engagement with vagueness. Plainview's sustained ambiguity, which honors the mysteries of selfhood, again reminds us of how films can figure as accommodating and fertile catalysts for thought. They can solicit what Martin Lefebvre, in his insightful account, describes as the personally and culturally inflected process by which we relate to, and imaginatively conceive of, texts. The fascinating complexity of films, Anderson seems to recognize, not only lies in the myriad formal and narrative permutations they may unpredictably exhibit, but also the similarly prodigious array of discrete responses and musings that they may inspire.

Anderson's work therefore generates our own uncertainty while also reflecting the uncertainty of the medium – its enormous stylistic and narrative potential, its semantic elasticity, and its fluid identity. The latter is clear not only in the multimedia collisions of *Magnolia*, as Lane observed, but also the vivid meeting of cinema and art in *Punch-Drunk Love*. Such gambits may precipitate a parallel sense of adventurousness in our scholarly and critical practices, encouraging an itinerant mode of inquiry that leads us, uncertainly, across the 'borders' of our discipline and into contiguous areas of study. Here, we may uncover new insights, casting illumination on our increasingly elusive and chimerical 'experience of study.' Thus, as addressed in my second chapter, *Punch-Drunk Love* leads

Brian Price into the annals of art history, whose debates and issues, he discovers, prefigure some of the ‘unique’ tensions of film studies. Anderson’s film comes to speak not only to the issues of perspicuity and incoherency within our discipline, but also to this rich history of vying conceptions and evaluations of art. By showing the imbricated relations between ‘separate’ media, Anderson and Blake remind us of the necessity of pursuing and re-discovering cinema as it continues to restlessly migrate and transform, eluding our grasp.

We can perhaps find a kind of correlate for the achievement and significance of Anderson’s filmmaking in the writing of André Bazin. As Kevin W. Sweeney notes, recalling some of Bazin’s well-known contentions, “[since] cinema is identified as the vehicle to achieve the ‘perfect illusion’ of the world, it should also provide viewers with experiences like those they have when they exercise their free choice to interpret and assign meaning to objects and events in the world” (179). It is clear that something similar is being honored in Anderson’s decidedly multivalent films. However, it is not necessarily a pursuit of realism that relates Anderson to Bazin and these issues, but a similar (albeit implicit) desire to conceive of cinema as ambiguously as possible. That is, a desire to emphasize the prodigious aesthetic, narrative, and spectatorial *possibilities* of cinema.

Of relevance here is Dudley Andrew’s recent account of the dynamic conception of cinema we can glean from Bazin’s writing. Bazin, he tells us, “theorized and exalted the medium’s diversity, its ‘impurity’” (2010, 112). Recalling Price’s conclusions from the second chapter, he explains that Bazin “examined [cinema] not by looking inward at its cellular makeup but, rather, looking outward toward its place relative to the arts around it [...] a tangled cultural field” (112). In forwarding these claims, Andrew reveals that what I have been advocating as a suitably fluid conception for a decidedly fluid medium may

find its discursive exemplar in Bazin's writing. Indeed, as he explains, Bazin felt that "cinema must adapt to conditions around it, sacrificing its putative self-identity (its ontology) as it matures into the shape it takes on in history (its adaptations)" (112). This fluid vision of cinema agrees with much of my argument, as does Andrew's elaboration: "[a]long the way [cinema] acquires affiliations and vocations, just as people do" (112). As Andrew then declares, "'Whatever Cinema Is' changes underfoot" (112).⁶³

Also, as Sweeney's earlier comments indirectly remind us, "The Myth of Total Cinema" is not necessarily a prescriptive account of the medium. The relevant emphasis does not have to be on pursuing a truly 'total' sense of reality, but on retaining 'reality' as a galvanizing concept. Its value lies less in the pursuit or feasibility of high-fidelity reproductions of 'reality' but in the *connotations* of reality: ambiguity, indeterminacy, incoherency, etc. In other words, it is useful and productive to conceive of films in relation to diffuse concepts like 'reality' (or, in the case of *There Will Be Blood*, 'selfhood') not because these concepts can be 'realized' or 'reproduced,' but because they guide us toward a suitable conception of the cinema that focuses on indeterminacy and ambiguity.

Anderson's films underscore this understanding of cinema as multivalent, fluid, and ambiguous – as something "not yet [...] invented" (Bazin 21). As Bazin clearly realized, indeterminacy informs the medium and it should also inform our conception of it. Thus, contrary to what Sweeney entertains as a criticism against Bazin, the latter *does* allow "for aesthetic creativity in inventing, extending, or transforming our conception of film as a

⁶³ Andrew concludes his text by writing, "cinema [...] is all about adaptation, all about what it has been led to become and may, in the years to come, still become. Those of us who care enough to take on Bazin's charge must be vigilant in our quest for cinema, for it appears in ever new guises, changing only in itself" (140-1). Earlier, Andrew writes, "cinema's vitality, its necessary impurity now comes through contact with comic books, television, popular music, video games, and computer culture" (94). "[C]inema," he continues, "must press forward into the new century, by taking into itself the subject matter that surrounds it, increasingly a new media culture. The impure films that result will no doubt comprise a different cinema from the one we have known" (94).

medium” (177).⁶⁴ As Andrew puts it, “[a]n attitude, rather than a doctrine, is what André Bazin passed down, an attitude of curiosity, spontaneity, and responsiveness to a reality conceived of as indefinitely enigmatic and worthy of our care” (94). We can glean a similar ‘attitude’ in Anderson’s peculiar, erratic films – this lends his work, and cinema itself, its remarkable qualities. In this sense, Anderson’s artistic risks honor the productive conception of cinema intimated in Bazin’s writing – a cinema ‘not yet invented,’ but always changing in confounding, unforeseen, and undoubtedly fascinating ways.

The importance of Anderson’s ‘erratic’ filmmaking, in other words, lies in how it may accentuate, and guide us toward, such a suitably fluid conception of cinema. As demonstrated in the past chapters, his decidedly peculiar films emerge as an important source of friction between cinema’s unruliness and its ‘systematic’ or overly coherent representation in other discursive accounts. The promise and value of the aberrant kind of filmmaking exemplified by Anderson therefore lies in how it may continue to complicate those representations, urging us to acknowledge the unwieldy and decidedly unruly nature of our object of study. In their striking idiosyncrasies, peculiarities and mysteries, Anderson’s films illuminate the unpredictability of cinema. They underscore the ways in which the medium and its output exceed our rhetorical uses, and the ways in which cinema continues to restlessly and unpredictably transform, develop, and inspire. They remind us of a medium that, in its infancy, provided spectators with the unpredictable pleasures of one of the Lumière Brothers’ moments of ‘happenstance’ or the striking tricks of Méliès. This foundational spirit of mischief, possibility, and chance continues

⁶⁴ As Daniel Morgan writes in his recent and intriguing ‘rethinking’ of Bazin, “while Bazin’s realism is oriented by the ontology of the photographic image, it is not determined by that ontology and *remains open to a range of styles*” (113, my emphasis).

onward in the work of filmmakers who, like Anderson, continue to use the cinema as a site of strangeness.

Given the unpredictable – and, as I have stressed, revealing – peculiarities and strangeness found in the films discussed throughout these chapters, it will be intriguing to observe how Anderson’s next feature, *The Master* (2012), amplifies his proclivities. While the nature of this potential ‘amplification’ remains to be seen, a piece of dialogue from one of the trailers (which was cut by Anderson himself) for the forthcoming film certainly speaks to the significance and effect of Anderson’s artistic tendencies.⁶⁵ Therein, the film’s eponymous ‘Master,’ Lancaster Dodd (Philip Seymour Hoffman) declares to Freddie Quell (Joaquin Phoenix), “above all, I am a man. A hopelessly inquisitive man, just like you.” Given my argument, this may also be another apt way to describe and think about the value and intrigue of Anderson’s erratic artistry. *Magnolia*, *Punch-Drunk Love* and *There Will Be Blood* bear the traces of a filmmaker who is ‘hopelessly inquisitive’ about the narrative, aesthetic and spectatorial possibilities of cinema. It may also be said that it is a ‘hopelessly inquisitive’ mode of spectatorship that Anderson inspires, directing our fascination and curiosity not only towards the remarkable eccentricities of his art, but also the wonderful uncertainty of the medium itself.

⁶⁵ The trailer in question, titled “Hopelessly Inquisitive,” can be viewed at <http://www.themasterfilm.com/> (that Anderson prepared the trailer himself is confirmed at <http://cigsandredvines.blogspot.ca/2012/05/master-teaser-trailer-has-arrived.html>).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Graham. *Roland Barthes*. London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.
- Arnheim, Rudolf. *Film as Art*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1957.
- Anderson, Paul Thomas. "Paul Thomas Anderson's Ten Films That Influenced *Boogie Nights*." *Neon Magazine* 20 (August 1998). 7.
<<http://neonmagazinescans.wordpress.com/2010/09/11/paul-thomas-andersons-ten-films-which-influenced-boogie-nights-aug-98>>.
- Andrew, Dudley. "Of Canons and Quietism: Dudley Andrew Responds to Janet Staiger's 'The Politics of Film Canons'". *Cinema Journal* 25:1 (Autumn 1985). 55-58.
- . "The Core and Flow of Film Studies." *Critical Inquiry* 35:4 (Summer 2009). 879-915.
- . *What Cinema Is!: Bazin's Quest and its Charge*. Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Azcona, María del Mar. *The Multi-Protagonist Film*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Baumann, Shyon. *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Bazin, André. *What is Cinema?: Volume 1*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 2005.
- Bell, James. "Interview: Jonny Greenwood". *Sight & Sound* 18:2 (February 2008). 34.
- Berliner, Todd. *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010.
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge, 1985.
- Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- . "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice". *The European Cinema Reader*. Catherine Fowler, ed. London: Routledge, 2002. 94-102.
- . *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

- . *Poetics of Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- . *Minding Movies: Observations on the Art, Craft, and Business of Filmmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Brophy, Philip. *100 Modern Soundtracks*. London: BFI, 2004.
- Bruns, John. "The Polyphonic Film". *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 6:2 (2008). 189-212.
- Buckland, Warren. "Introduction: Puzzle Plots". *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*. Warren Buckland, ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 1-12.
- Cahill, James Leo. "How It Feels to Be Run Over: Early Film Accidents". *Discourse* 30:3 (Fall 2008). 289-316.
- Carmago, Sandy. "'Mind the Gap'". *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 5:5 (2002). <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0210/Carmago.php>>.
- Chang, Chris. "Jeremy Blake". *Film Comment* 39:6 (Nov/Dec 2004). 17.
- Cieply, Michael. "Filmmaker's Newest Work Is About...Something: Paul Thomas Anderson Film May Be About Scientology". *The New York Times* (April 18, 2012). <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/movies/paul-thomas-anderson-film-may-be-about-scientology.html?pagewanted=all>>.
- Cooke, Elizabeth F. *Peirce's Pragmatic Theory of Inquiry: Fallibilism and Indeterminacy*. New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Deledalle, Gérard. *Charles S. Peirce: An Intellectual Biography*. Amsterdam, Benjamins., 1990.
- Dillman, Joanne Clarke. "Twelve Characters in Search of a Televisual Text: *Magnolia* Masquerading as Soap Opera". *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 33:3 (2005). 142-150.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Dodd, Philip. "Fires Have Started." *Sight & Sound* 3:8 (August 1993). 3.
- Dunning, William V. "The Concept of Self and Postmodern Painting: Constructing a Post-Cartesian Viewer". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49:4 (Autumn, 1991). 331-336.

- Ebert, Roger. "Magnolia". *Chicago Sun-Times* (January 7 2000).
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20000107/REVIEWS/1070303/1023>>.
- . "There Will Be Blood". *Chicago Sun-Times* (January 4 2008).
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080103/REVIEWS/801030301/1023>>.
- Edelstein, David. "The Masked and the Unmasked". *Slate* (31 December 1999).
<http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/1999/12/the_masked_and_the_unmasked.html>.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "The Mind-Game Film". *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*. Warren Buckland, ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 13-41.
- Forest, Michael. "Peirce and Semiotic Foundationalism". *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 43:4 (Fall 2007). 728-744.
- Frick, Caroline. *Saving Cinema: The Politics of Preservation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Galt, Rosalind. *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Garnar, Andrew. "Power, Action, Signs: Between Peirce and Foucault". *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy*. 42:3 (Summer 2006). 347-366.
- Gilbey, Ryan. "Interview with Q. Tarantino." *Sight & Sound* 19:9 (September 2009). 16-21.
- Hagberg, Garry. "Imagined Identities: Autobiography at One Remove". *New Literary History* 38:1 (Winter 2007). 163-181.
- Hansen, Miriam Bratu. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. University of California Press, 2012.
- Harbidge, Lesley. "A New Direction in Comedian Comedy?: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Punch-Drunk Love* and the Post-Comedian Rom-Com". *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*. Stacey Abbott & Deborah Jermyn, eds. London; New York: I.B. Tauris; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 176-189.

- Harker, James. "Misperceiving Virginia Woolf". *Journal of Modern Literature* 34:2 (Winter 2011). 1-21.
- Herring, Phillip F. *Joyce's Uncertainty Principle*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Jaffe, Ira. *Hollywood Hybrids: Mixing Genres in Contemporary Films*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.
- Jones, Kent. "Kent Jones Tours P.T. Anderson's *Magnolia*". *Film Comment* 36:1 (Jan/Feb 2000).
- . "Magnolia". *Physical Evidence: Selected Film Criticism*. Wesleyan University Press, 2007. 79-83.
- Keathley, Christian. *Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Keating, Patrick. "Art, Accident, and the Interpretation of the Modern World". *Arnheim For Film and Media Studies*. Scott Higgins, ed. New York: Routledge, 2011. 141-157.
- King, Cubie. "Punch Drunk Love: The Budding of an Auteur". *Senses of Cinema* 55 (April 15, 2005). <http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/feature-articles/pt_anderson/>.
- Kolker, Robert Phillip. *The Altering Eye: Contemporary International Cinema*. Cambridge: Open Book, 2009.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1960.
- Lane, Christina. *Magnolia*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Lastra, James. "From the Captured Moment to the Cinematic Image". *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*. Dudley Andrew, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997. 263-291.
- Lefebvre, Martin. "On Memory and Imagination in the Cinema". *New Literary History* 30:2 (Spring 1999). 479-498.
- . "Pragmatism and the Interpretation of Films." *Iconics* 10 (2010). 7-29.
- Leffingwell, Edward. "In Freely Associative States". *Art in America* 96:4 (April 2008). 134-139

- Loiperdinger, Martin. "Lumière's *Arrival of the Train*: Cinema's Founding Myth." *The Moving Image* 4:1 (Spring 2004). 89-118.
- Ma, Jean. *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.
- Manovich, Lev. "Understanding Hybrid Media". *Animated Paintings*. Betti-Sue Hertz, ed. San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2007.
<http://guidoalvarez.typepad.com/files/hybrid_media_manovich.pdf>
- Maslin, Janet. "Magnolia (1999) FILM REVIEW; Entangled Lives on the Cusp of the Millennium". *The New York Times* (17 December 1999).
<<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=940CE3DD1430F934A25751C1A96F958260>>.
- Mayshark, Jesse Fox. *Post-Pop Cinema: The Search for Meaning in New American Film*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2007.
- McDonald, Tamar Jeffers. *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*. New York: Wallflower, 2007.
- McGill, Hannah. "There Will Be Blood". *Sight & Sound* 18:2 (February 2008). 82-83.
- Mendelowitz, Ed and Chae Young Kim. "William James and the Spirit of Complexity: A Pluralistic Reverie". *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 50:4 (October 2010). 459-470.
- Michaels, Lloyd. *The Phantom of the Cinema: Character in Modern Film*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Monk, Ray. "This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality, and Character". *Philosophy and Literature* 31:1 (April 2007). 1-40
- Morgan, Daniel. "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics". *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*. Marc Furstenu, ed. New York: Routledge, 2010. pp. 104-130
- Mottram, James. *The Sundance Kids: How the Mavericks Took Back Hollywood*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2006.
- Murray, Jonathan. "There Will Be Blood". *Film International* 6:33 (2008). 86-87.
- Nashawaty, Chris. "Contrarian Corner Takes on Terrence Malick's 'Tree of Life': My Head Hurts". *Entertainment Weekly: PopWatch* (14 October 2011).
<<http://popwatch.ew.com/2011/10/14/tree-of-life-contrarian-corner/>>.

- Nelson, Thomas Allen. *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- O'Sullivan, Sean. "The *Decalogue* and the Remaking of American Television". *After Kiesłowski: The Legacy of Krzysztof Kieslowski*. Steven Woodward, ed. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009. 202-225.
- Peirce, Charles S. "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities". *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2:3 (1868). 140-157.
- Pizzello, Stephen. "Blood for Oil." *American Cinematographer* 89:1 (2008). 1-6.
<http://www.theasc.com/ac_magazine/January2008/ThereWillBeBlood/page1.php>.
- Price, Brian. "Color, the Formless, and Cinematic Eros". *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 47:1 (Spring 2006). 22-35.
- Quigley, Megan M. "Modern Novels and Vagueness". *Modernism/modernity* 15:1 (January 2008). 101-129.
- Romney, Jonathan. "Every Petal Tells a Story". *New Statesman* (20 March 2000).
<<http://www.newstatesman.com/node/137172>>.
- Rushton, Richard. *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011.
- Sewell, Matthew. "'But It Did Happen' – Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*". *Bright Lights Film Journal* 73 (August 2011).
<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/73/73magnolia_sewell.php>.
- Shaviro, Steven. "Daniel Plainview". *The Pinocchio Theory* (February 20th, 2008).
<<http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=623>>.
- Smith, Murray. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- . "Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History". *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. Stephen Neale and Murray Smith, eds. New York: Routledge, 1998. 3-20.
- . "Engaging Characters: Further Reflections". *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*. Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2010. 232-258.
- Stern, Lesley. "Paths That Wind Through the Thicket of Things." *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): 317-54.

- Sweeney, Kevin W. "Medium". *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*. London; New York: Routledge, 2011. 173-183.
- Taylor, Aaron. "Playing to the Balcony: Screen Acting, Distance, and Cavellian Theatricality." *Stages of Reality: Theatricality in Cinema*. André Loiselle and Jeremy Maron, eds. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012.
- Travis, Robert. "The Routinization of Film Criticism". *Journal of Popular Culture* 23:4 (Spring 1990). 51-65.
- Traynor, Desmond. "Magnolia". *Film Ireland* 75 (2000). 47.
- Turan, Kenneth. "Random Lives, Bound by Chance". *Los Angeles Times*. 17 December 1999. <<http://articles.latimes.com/1999/dec/17/entertainment/ca-44701>>.
- Turvey, Malcom. *The Filming of Modern Life: European Avant-garde Film of the 1920s*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011.
- Uslucan, Haci-Halil. "Charles Sanders Peirce and the Semiotic Foundation of Self and Reason". *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 11:2 (2004). 96-108.
- Weschler, Lawrence. *Uncanny Valley: Adventures in the Narrative*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011.
- Woolf, Virginia. "The Cinema." *The Nation & Athenaeum* (July 1926). <<http://www.woolfonline.com/?q=essays/cinema/full>>.
- Zacharek, Stephanie. "Too Great to be Good". *Salon* (February 20 2008). <http://www.salon.com/2008/02/20/daniel_day_lewis/>.