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Andrew C. Cate

Rhode Island College, acate_7721@ric.edu

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“NEW” HOLLYWOOD NARRATIVES:
AN ANALYSIS OF *BOOGIE NIGHTS* AND *MAGNOLIA*

By

Andrew C. Cate

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“New” Hollywood Narratives: An Analysis of *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia*

Introduction

To discuss Paul Thomas Anderson the filmmaker is to consider the current age of Hollywood filmmaking and the idea of the “new” Hollywood narrative. As writer-director of such acclaimed films as *Magnolia* (1999) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007), Anderson was praised for appearing to have “arrived at his mastery virtually overnight” with his first major release, the 1997 ensemble film *Boogie Nights* (Gleiberman). Anderson has long been compared to veteran filmmaker Robert Altman, whose take on the typical Hollywood narrative format has clearly influenced Anderson’s films. Though Altman worked in Hollywood, his films were considered to be rather unlike Hollywood because they often used large casts of characters and interweaving narratives. Anderson’s career, to date consisting of only five feature films, can be considered something of a mirror to that of Altman’s, as he too has made films that seem to depart from the typical Hollywood narrative format in similar ways. Like Altman, Anderson’s filmmaking brings to the forefront questions related to the possible existence of a “new” Hollywood narrative. Are the films of Paul Thomas Anderson really “new” in the narrative sense? Are these films really telling stories in a completely different way? Or, are these films actually quite dependent on the same old Hollywood narrative formula?

The idea of a large cast of characters and interweaving narratives is certainly not “new” to Hollywood, and such films can be defined as “ensemble” films. Although contemporary filmmakers such as Anderson – like Altman before him – have become

associated with the ensemble film, this is certainly not a recent innovation of contemporary Hollywood. As far back as the 1930s filmmakers were making ensemble films, two notable examples being Edmund Goulding's *Grand Hotel* (1932) and George Cukor's *Dinner at Eight* (1933). Anderson's film *Magnolia* is a clear example of the ensemble film format used by Goulding and Cukor in that it focuses on the stories of no fewer than ten characters. There is no clear-cut protagonist in *Magnolia* as is the norm in the typical Hollywood narrative, a norm that is, on the other hand, certainly maintained in Anderson's film *Boogie Nights*. In this film, although we are given the stories of an ensemble cast, all of these stories are anchored by the story of the central protagonist Eddie Adams/Dirk Diggler. What makes Anderson different as a filmmaker than those who have tried the ensemble film before is the greater attention he pays to each one of his characters; they each have motivations. In a Robert Altman ensemble piece such as *Nashville* (1975), the characters bounce off one another and their actions are seemingly arbitrary. Characters seem to accidentally or coincidentally move from one particular location to another. The audience gets very little insight into exactly why the characters act the way they do. To get insight into why Anderson followed Altman in making these ensemble films, it first needs to be understood what exactly an ensemble film is in comparison to other kinds of films with large casts of characters.

The main issue is whether labeling Anderson's *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* with the term "ensemble" is correct. Various scholars and critics have offered other terms to discuss films involving interweaving narratives and large casts of characters. Evan Smith has talked about using the phrase "thread structure," but Smith openly admits that there

are major differences between “thread structure” and “ensemble film.” He defines the ensemble film as featuring “only one main story, a single dramatic journey” which is shared by multiple characters, whereas “thread structure” involves “several bona fide protagonists, each the hero in his or her own story” (90). John Brunns writes about the “polyphonic film” in terms of the “visualization or arrangement of multiple voices of equal importance,” the voices being the characters, and he even discusses Anderson’s *Magnolia* as the finest example of polyphonic film (189). However, Brunns also goes on to state that “every character seems to participate as a minor character” in polyphonic film, which certainly cannot be said in the case of *Boogie Nights* (203). David Bordwell uses the term “network narrative,” saying that these are films that involve characters that all seem to be connected, which is certainly the case with *Magnolia*. However, he also includes films like *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which is concerned with telling an out of order story, and *Sliding Doors* (1998), which “intercuts two possible futures for its heroine,” in his discussion of “network narratives” and films such as *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* are clearly very different in structure to these films (*The Way Hollywood Tells It* 93-100). Each of these other terms not only limits the possibilities of discussion within Anderson’s films, but also is associated with films very different from the intentions of both *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia*. Using the broader term “ensemble” to identify both *Magnolia* and *Boogie Nights* allows for a comparison of two Anderson films which, although similarly boasting large casts of characters and multiple storylines, have intriguing differences that need to be explored in order to truly understand the inner workings of narrative in this so-called “new” age of Hollywood. In the case of Anderson’s overall filmmaking, there

seems to be no other term that encompasses the range of what Anderson does with his varying narrative formats.

“New” Hollywood narratives are not necessarily all that different than the typical narratives that have dominated the American film industry since its fairly early development after the inception of cinema, but they are commonly recognized as veering off course from the standard format. Emmanuel Levy talks about Anderson’s “passionate exploration of the possibilities of a new kind of storytelling” in reference to *Boogie Nights*, which, at least in comparison to *Magnolia*, can be viewed as the more typical Hollywood film (Levy). What Levy says about a “new” kind of storytelling is what should be discussed in reference to the way Anderson’s films differ from the typical Hollywood fare. The narratives present in his ensemble films, whether they are “new” or not, definitely explore different territory in film and veer off course when it specifically benefits the story Anderson wants to tell.

It is at these points in the narrative – when they veer off course – where interesting aspects of Anderson’s *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* can be discussed. Whether or not the narratives present in either film are “new” overall is an intriguing issue, one that can be further explored by looking at the specific narrative differences, not only between *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia*, but also between Anderson’s films and typical Hollywood film narratives. In this thesis, the typical Hollywood narrative will be discussed by directly comparing and contrasting the narrative strategies of Anderson’s *Boogie Nights* with those of *Magnolia*. Film openings will be analyzed with respect to how Anderson chooses to set up this “ensemble” world. Issues of time and space within each narrative

will also be discussed and related to how the ensemble narratives play out across the film. Specific attention will also be paid to the cause and effect chains typical of film characters, as well as Anderson's specific use of crosscutting as a tool used to showcase the ensemble format. The payoff of Anderson's variance from the typical Hollywood narrative will be discussed in light of the idea of a "new" Hollywood narrative. Anderson's films may play out differently in a narrative sense but at the end of each film he still achieves the same typical effect of Hollywood narratives, that of yielding and sustaining a strong emotional reaction from the audience as well as providing the audience with a sense of closure.

The Typical Hollywood Narrative

Narrative, as defined by David Bordwell, is "a type of filmic organization in which the parts relate to one another through a series of causally related events taking place in time and space" (*Film Art* 480). This is to say that in a respective film, there will be a cause and effect chain of events for the characters, these chains characterized by the goals and obstacles that drive the story of each character forward. These chains of events occur in a relatively clear space and time, the story often being told in a linear fashion and moving from location to location in a clear manner. Bordwell defines narration as a "process through which the plot conveys or withholds story information" with this narration often being "restricted to character knowledge" within a film (*FA* 479). It is with regards to what Hollywood has come to define as the typical narrative format where the films of Anderson become even more intriguing.

In his book *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Bordwell describes the major characteristics of the typical Hollywood narrative. He discusses narrative in terms of “fabula” and “syuzhet” – in other words, “story” and “plot” – and explains how the typical Hollywood narrative often hinges on the issue of causality. “Story” is the audience’s understanding of all the events occurring within a film, while “plot” is the way in which this story information is organized in terms of what is specifically shown to an audience and when it is shown to them. It is causality that Bordwell defines as the “prime unifying principle” of story construction, in which the characters of the narrative go through a series of causes and effects to move the story forward in search of their respective goals (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 157). Essentially, the typical Hollywood narrative is always moving toward an “absolute truth,” which occurs when the audience finally has a complete knowledge of everything related to story and plot at the film’s end (*NFF* 157-59).

Bordwell also discusses the typical Hollywood narrative as comprising two main plot lines, that of the heterosexual romance and the personal quest. Each of these plot lines consists of their own goals and obstacles and often coincide with one another at the film’s climax (*NFF* 157). The heterosexual romance is the typical male-female romantic story arc and in the Hollywood format usually ends happily with the romance being fully realized (a kiss, marriage, etc.). The personal quest consists of our protagonist having some sort of mission or quest separate from the romance, whether it be in regards to his/her work or even in regards to other personal relationships separate from romance. The typical Hollywood narrative consists of this dual plot line within a cause and effect

chain of events that consistently moves the story the filmmaker is trying to tell forward. To put the Hollywood narrative into simpler terms, it is essentially the norm that has come to be standard in the film industry, a norm that is defined by its movement toward a complete sense of closure for the audience with respect to all the major characters involved. It also occurs within a relatively clear and straightforward space and time, events often occurring one after the other in a linear fashion without dramatic relocations to entirely different spaces without a specific motivation for the relocation.

Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946), though having a famously convoluted plot, is a clear example of a typical Hollywood film following the characteristic narrative norms of the film industry. The film's protagonist, private detective Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart), is subject to the dual plot line structure. He is hired by General Sternwood (Charles Waldron) to solve an ever-evolving case regarding his younger daughter Carmen (Martha Vickers). In the process of figuring out the case, Marlowe becomes romantically entangled with the elder Sternwood daughter Vivian Sternwood Rutledge (Lauren Bacall). The plot of *The Big Sleep* grows ever the more complicated as the film progresses, but Hollywood narrative norms are still preserved, stabilized in Marlowe's dual plot line. Despite the ever-changing plot involving characters constantly being killed off – many soon after they are introduced – Marlowe is the singular force that drives the narrative forward, a causal agent that keeps the cause and effect chain moving. At film's end, despite the incredibly complicated plot ripe with murders and betrayals galore, all is fine for Marlowe. He calls the police after solving the case and dispatching of the principal antagonist and stands next to Vivian at the crime scene.

Marlowe says, “What’s wrong with you?” and Vivian replies, “Nothing you can’t fix” while police sirens sound and the film fades to black. *The Big Sleep* is not telling a simple, straightforward story, but it is still typical in the Hollywood sense because it achieves what most other Hollywood films do through its clear forward momentum toward closure for the protagonist and his plot line. The Hollywood ending is not always necessarily happy, but closure is present nonetheless, providing the audience with both a logical satisfaction and a specific emotional reaction. Events in *The Big Sleep* occur in a linear fashion and the locations used are limited to those where the protagonist Marlowe directly goes about his search. In respect to the films of Paul Thomas Anderson, we will see that the issue of space and time often differs greatly from that of *The Big Sleep* and the typical Hollywood narrative.

Bordwell characterizes the plot of the typical Hollywood narrative as consisting of segments, individual units within a film, yet he believes that each “classical segment is not a sealed entity” (*NFF* 158). He argues that although each respective segment is spatially and temporally closed, “causally it is open” (*NFF* 158). He is basically stating that time and space within a segment of a film’s plot might very well be preserved within that segment, but when it comes to a chain of cause and effect, time and space must open up beyond the segment in order to allow characters to move the story forward. In such claims, Bordwell is building off of the work of film theorists Christian Metz and Raymond Bellour. Metz, who in his article “Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film,” identifies and discusses the different types of film segments possible within a film, these segments almost all being composed of multiple shots. Metz does not read it any

deeper than that, as his interest lies in understanding the relationship between time, space, and plot across different shots within a particular segment. To Metz, segments are just “units” used to break up a film for analysis “within which the ‘shots’ react to each other” (75). Bellour, like Metz, tends to consider segments as a closed system. Bellour explores ways in which meaning is generated within individual segments of a film. In his article “The Obvious and the Code,” Bellour discusses a single segment from *The Big Sleep* in which the “identity of characters and location is absolute”: Marlowe and Vivian have a conversation in a car while Marlowe drives (69). He believes that even in a supposed dull moment such as this segment, in which nothing really seems to be happening, something interesting and necessary still occurs beneath the surface (69-76). Bordwell, however, believes that causality is the key in that a segment “works to advance the casual progression and open up new developments” (*NFF* 158). The issue of segments applies to Anderson’s films in the way time and space within each film play out. If, as Bordwell states, segments of a film are indeed “open,” then how specifically does this affect the narratives of Anderson’s ensemble films? Whereas a single chain of cause and effect will propel the narrative forward from segment to segment, an ensemble film with multiple chains may make things narratively more complex. Examining different segments of both *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* will be helpful in finding how Anderson’s filmmaking differs from the typical Hollywood narrative.

Anderson’s films *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* have been talked about differently in terms of his other films, and the issue of time and space within each respective film is an important reason why. When looking at a given segment from *Magnolia*, although there

are characters whose story arcs drive the narrative forward, each segment does not consistently occur within its own defined space and time. There is no centered protagonist, but rather an “ensemble” cast in the film, and although some have goals others appear not to. Through crosscutting Anderson breaks up what Bordwell would define as a classical segment into many smaller segments. We observe one character being interviewed but are then cut off, and the action on screen is moved to an entirely different place and character. Eventually we return to our original character, but it may be in an entirely different space after an extended period of time has passed.

The existence of a “new” Hollywood narrative is questioned by film scholar Kristin Thompson in her book *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*. She states, “The term ‘New Hollywood’ is now commonly applied to the American film industry since its financial crisis of the late 1960s and early 1970s. During all these changes, have American filmmakers moved away from narrative clarity and coherence as central values?” (2). Her answer to this question is a resounding no, as Thompson does not believe that there was ever really a profound shift in storytelling but rather a slight “detour” that had a “lingering impact” on the film industry. The “auteurist” films of this time period to Thompson only accounted for a small portion of the films overall that Hollywood was releasing, and these filmmakers such as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Francis Ford Coppola were only able to make these supposed “new” “auteurist” films because of the financial success of one of their more traditional early films. She even discusses Robert Altman in these terms, and argues that because he “pushed too hard to create unusual, personal films” he became marginalized

by the industry and was pushed aside (2-3). Paul Thomas Anderson then makes an interesting point of comparison.

Although his career often draws parallels to that of Altman's, his current place as one of Hollywood's leading auteurs seems to fly in the face of Thompson's "new Hollywood" argument, or does it? Anderson continues to make films that mainstream audiences may consider "unusual" and "personal," but he still achieves critical success, evidenced by the multiple Academy Award nominations for his latest film *There Will Be Blood*. His continued success seems to be just a product of the fact that although the narrative of an ensemble film such as *Magnolia* may vary from typical narratives, it is still achieving what most Hollywood fare sets out to achieve: an emotional response from the audience as well as a sense that the story told within the film is complete once its over. *Magnolia* was actually a flop in theatres as with a budget estimated at 37 million, it made approximately only 22.5 million in the United States (www.imdb.com). The mainstream effect generated by *Magnolia* was not a monetary one, but rather an effect produced by the narrative. Although *Magnolia* chose to tell a story involving a large cast of characters and interweaving storylines that alternate between each other, these storylines come together thematically in the end to give the audience a focus to the film, a focus often provided by the protagonist and his/her journey. Anderson's ensemble films end up in a typical Hollywood place once over, but it is all about the journey of getting to that point.

Narrative Openings & Causality

In order to truly understand how Anderson's ensemble films differ from each other, it is best to start with different opening strategies found in the beginning sequences of *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia*. As with most Hollywood fare, the opening sequence is an opportunity to introduce the main characters of the film and set the story in motion. With *Boogie Nights*, Anderson tells the tale of Eddie Adams (Mark Wahlberg), a young man who has no support system in his family but soon finds it in the guise of adult film director Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds) and the rest of his film crew. Horner and his crew become Adams's family, and although Adams, or Dirk Diggler as he comes to be known, is consistently the main focus of the film's narrative, the stories of the rest of the adult film crew are dispersed throughout the film. What is interesting to note about *Boogie Nights* is that within the first sequence of the film the typical Hollywood narrative already seems altered by Anderson.

The film opens, after a long musical interlude plays over a black screen, with an extended tracking shot. The shot begins outside a nightclub named Hot Traxx, as the camera follows a car that pulls up in front of the entrance. Jack Horner and his adult film star Amber Waves (Julianne Moore) exit the car and are taken inside by the club's owner Maurice (Luis Guzman). Anderson does not cut and move the camera to a different angle but rather follows them into the club, in the process introducing the audience to more of the ensemble cast. The camera follows Maurice through the busy club as he greets some of his guests, introducing us to adult film stars Reed (John C. Reilly), Buck (Don Cheadle), and Becky (Nicole Ari Parker) who dance together on the dance floor. It then tracks back to Jack and Amber who sit down at a table where Rollergirl (Heather

Graham), another adult film star, greets them as she roller skates through the club. The camera then follows Rollergirl through a crowd where we eventually find Eddie, our protagonist, a busboy at the nightclub.

As soon as we catch our first glimpse of him, Anderson immediately initiates his first cut in the film. This extended opening tracking shot does not simply display Anderson's bravura style, but it also works to tell the audience from the very beginning that all of these characters we have been introduced to will be an integral part to the film's story. Upfront there is an understanding that these characters each have their own stories, and with Anderson cutting immediately after our first glimpse of Eddie we can surmise that this character has some greater importance. The character of Eddie is stylistically foregrounded because he merits the first cut of the film. As the film progresses, the fact that Eddie is the anchor of the film and the protagonist around whom the story revolves is undeniable, but it is due to this opening sequence that audiences understand upfront that he is the specific narrative focus. By beginning the film in this manner, Anderson may stylistically be calling attention to how different the shot is, but what is important is how it functions the same way a typical Hollywood opening would. It presents the protagonist to whom the audience will relate throughout the film, and sets up the environment which he will be exposed to within the narrative, that of the adult film community. At first glance, Eddie's problem or goal is not overtly presented, but in subsequent scenes information is given that reveals why he chooses to work at this club and how he could end up falling in with this industry that is normally viewed in a negative light. The plot has been set in motion and the story has begun, with Eddie at the

center of it.

Eddie, as the protagonist, does have the dual plot line of heterosexual romance and personal quest found in Hollywood narrative, although at first glance it may appear otherwise. Eddie's personal quest is the most overt, as early on in the film he states to a recent fling, Cheriline, that he is going to be "a big, bright shining star," his personal quest therefore being that of success on his own accord. Eddie's heterosexual romance plot line is less overt, but it is present in the form of his relationship with the middle-aged Amber Waves. Throughout the film Amber tries to serve as a mother figure for Eddie, whose transformation into Dirk Diggler, adult film star is met with Amber's pleasure. However, due to the situations they are placed in and the rampant drug use within the adult film industry, their mother-son relationship is complicated multiple times due to sexual interactions between the two. When the film moves into its third act, and Eddie/Dirk's fame and drug use has finally gotten the best of him, he gets into an argument with his director/father figure Jack Horner, and Amber tries to intervene. Dirk yells at her, "You're not my mother!" and he is subsequently fired, with the heterosexual romance plot line seemingly doomed. Such an obstacle – to both the romance plot and the personal quest – is fairly conventional for a film's third act. However, by film's end, Dirk and Amber are reunited when Dirk gets rehired by Jack. Although their relationship does not appear on the surface level as the typical Hollywood romance, it does represent everything that we associate with the specific plot line: a male protagonist, a female love interest (in this case complicated by motherly love), and even a happy ending. Dirk's character arc is nothing "new" in terms of its function. The emotional effect such an arc

generates in tandem with its progression toward resolution and closure is quintessentially Hollywood.

The centrality of Dirk's character in *Boogie Nights* may seem to suggest that although ensemble films involving large casts of characters may be trying to be different from typical Hollywood fare, they essentially need a protagonist present in the narrative to anchor the film and propel its narrative forward. This is not the case, however, with Anderson's 1999 film *Magnolia*. With this film Anderson basically took his ensemble narrative format from *Boogie Nights* and removed the central protagonist. *Magnolia* interweaves the stories of no fewer than ten characters, but not one of them is what the typical Hollywood narrative would define as the film's principal protagonist, thus leading to a film with a seemingly different narrative structure. Joanne Clarke Dillman describes how *Magnolia* differs in structure to that of the typical Hollywood narrative: "In writing of a 'countercinema,' Peter Wollen suggests criteria by which one can measure mainstream style: narrative transitivity, single diegesis and protagonist, closure, pleasure, transparency, hierarchy of discourses, and identification. *Magnolia* resoundingly breaks out of these narrative and stylistic conventions" (143). What *Magnolia* does so differently from the typical Hollywood narrative is that its lack of a protagonist seems to drop – or at least underemphasize – both the dual plot line and the cause and effect chain that are ever present in typical Hollywood narratives.

Magnolia begins with a nondiegetic prologue that focuses on three random events of chance that do not involve any of the characters of the main story of the film. The first event is that of a murder in the town of Greenberryhill, London, with the last names of

the three accomplices – Green, Berry, and Hill – together forming the name of the city in which the murder took place. The second event involves the death of a casino dealer named Delmer Darion, who, while scuba diving in a lake, was caught in a large bucket and then poured onto a blaze by an airplane fighting a forest fire. It turns out that the pilot of that plane was in fact the very man who had blamed and attacked Delmer for dealing him a bad hand at the casino just two nights prior, and this pilot ended up committing suicide when he found out the sheer coincidence of this encounter. The third event revolves around an attempted suicide-turned-homicide of a young man named Sydney Barringer. Barringer, having jumped from his apartment rooftop in an attempt to end his life, ended up being killed by a gun fired off accidentally by his mother who was fighting with his father three stories below. It turned out that Sydney had in fact loaded the gun himself because he was tired of his parents arguing all the time, and he actually ended up being charged as an accomplice in his own death. What made this event even more interesting was that were it not for the homicide, Sydney's suicide attempt would have not been a successful, as a safety net that would have stopped his fall had been recently installed due to work being done on the building. These three nondiegetic events were put in the film by Anderson to directly call attention to the idea of chance, that the order and relationships between a series of events may not always have a specific causality.

Whereas *Boogie Nights* opens by providing the audience with the characters involved in the film's storylines upfront, *Magnolia* opens with none of the major characters. Anderson is letting the audience know that he is going for something

different with this ensemble film by setting up the theme of the film with events from outside the story world instead of introducing the principal characters. This prologue occurs in an entirely different space and time from *Magnolia*'s story world, while the opening of *Boogie Nights* is directly preserving the space and time of its diegesis, not only with the extended tracking shot, but also through its systematic introduction of the major characters within the filmic world. *Magnolia*'s effect on the audience is somewhat jarring, and it certainly is not typical of the conventional Hollywood narrative. Anderson does not set the plot of *Magnolia* in motion until the sequence that follows this prologue and the opening credits, a sequence that appears very similar to *Boogie Nights*' opening. Instead of an extended tracking shot, Anderson uses crosscutting in *Magnolia* to introduce all the major players. First there is a television screen, on which Frank Mackey (Tom Cruise) is advertising his "Seduce & Destroy" method on how to get women. We move into the TV with Frank and then back out, now at a bar where Claudia (Melora Walters) watches the TV and meets a random guy, who she takes home and has a sexual encounter with. Her father Jimmy Gator (Phillip Baker Hall) is then shown on TV as the host of the game-show "What Do Kids Know?" and then we move to his home where he and his wife have sex. Then there is Stanley (Jeremy Blackman) on the TV, a young boy who is a contestant on the game show. Stanley is then seen at home with his overbearing father, who is rushing him off to school. Donnie Smith (William H. Macy) is then introduced through the TV as a former quiz kid like Stanley, but is now a middle-aged man with severe problems, as we observe him at the dentist office getting ready for braces, and then arriving at his work. Then there is Phil (Phillip Seymour Hoffman), a

caretaker for a dying man named Earl Partridge (Jason Robards), who arrives at the Partridge home as Linda (Julianne Moore), Earl's wife, is leaving for work. Finally there is Officer Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly) who we see praying at home, sitting at the police station where he works, and talking to himself in his squad car where the sequence ends. Whereas in the opening to *Boogie Nights* Anderson is emphasizing characters first and foremost, in *Magnolia* he is first emphasizing the theme in the prologue and then decides to introduce each character involved in the narrative after the fact. With *Magnolia*, Anderson takes the theme of chance provided in the prologue and essentially uses it as part of the film's narrative structure, as each of his characters appears to not experience as strong a chain of cause and effect as is typical of Hollywood narratives. Instead, the idea of chance runs their lives, as seen with the character arc of police officer Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly).

Officer Jim investigates a couple of domestic disturbances throughout the film, and at one he ends up meeting a woman named Claudia (Melora Walters) with whom he immediately falls in love and asks on a date. Jim's meeting with her was a chance coincidence on the job, as he essentially did nothing out of the ordinary to meet Claudia. There appears to be no cause and effect chain, but on further review there actually is. The cause is the disturbance that brings Jim to Claudia's apartment that leads to the effect of meeting Claudia. This meeting in turn leads to Jim and Claudia going out on a date later that night. This is a clear chain of cause and effect, but it is veiled through the idea of chance so that although Jim was not specifically the cause of these events happening, he is still a part of the chain. Even later in the film, Jim ends up chasing a man down a

road and loses his gun. As the film draws to a close, Jim's gun miraculously falls from the sky right in front of him. There is essentially no reason for the gun to show up, but it does nonetheless, just as there appears to be no particular reason or rhyme to any of *Magnolia's* events. This does not change, however, the fact that Jim's losing of the gun was a cause in and of itself, and the effect is the gun falling from the sky. Throughout the film, Jim may appear at first to not have any goals that are typically Hollywood, but he actually does. It is clear he wants love, and although chance is what brought him and Claudia together, he acts on this by asking her out on a date and kissing her on that date. It could also be argued that finding the gun is a goal for Officer Jim, but it is solved much like his love problem. There is a scene in *Magnolia* in the aftermath of losing his gun that he does indeed search for it, but after this all Jim seems to do is mention that he lost it to Claudia, rather than continuing his desperate quest to find it. His goal of finding the gun only comes about because it has been lost, and although this is not as well-formed a goal as say Eddie's in *Boogie Nights*, it is still a goal. The point is that although in *Magnolia* these cause and effect chains and goals and obstacles are not as well developed as those of a typical Hollywood film, they are still present and yield similar results. They function differently in that chance has a major say in where these characters like Jim end up, but even chance is prone to a cause and effect chain.

In a typical Hollywood narrative, there is a protagonist with a set of specific goals and this protagonist initiates a cause and effect chain of events, eventually reaching his/her goal. In *Magnolia*, there is no protagonist, and no characters (except perhaps Donnie) appear to have any strong specific goals, at least ones that they go about

achieving themselves. On the surface, most of the character's actions appear to be arbitrary and not one of them seems to have the pervasive dual plot line present in the typical Hollywood narrative. Once again, however, chance is keeping this beneath the surface. Officer Jim has a heterosexual romance plot line as well as a personal quest plot line. He wants love, as evidenced when the audience hears him recording a personal ad for a dating service, and although chance decides that he and Claudia should meet, once this meeting occurs it plays out like a romance plot line would. Other than love, there is nothing that Jim appears to really want or need, but this changes when his gun is lost and a new goal of finding it is born: the personal quest. The ensemble film often contains shortened and less developed storylines for each of its characters, as without the focus of a protagonist, a filmmaker often needs to create balance between each character. Anderson does this in *Magnolia*, but clearly takes it to another level by incorporating his theme of chance into the narrative structure of his story world.

A Protagonist's Presence/Absence

Both *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* are discussed as ensemble films and are often viewed as companion pieces in Anderson's filmography, but when viewing them through the lens of the Hollywood narrative format they are clearly doing different things. In regarding a protagonist-centered ensemble film like *Boogie Nights*, it is clear that there is narrative stability in having Eddie/Dirk be the main focus, the character whose story arc is most developed. No question, this focus on Dirk anchors both the sense of movement toward closure and the emotional responses arising from it, but how does the ensemble

narrative format affect this sense of closure and its emotional effects? Anderson could have turned *Boogie Nights* into a film just about Dirk, but it is clearly more than that and in providing the audience with multiple stories of other characters, he is doing something that appears at first different from typical Hollywood.

The presence of characters like Dirk's director Jack Horner, his best bud Reed, and the African-American cowboy Buck do not simply serve as a means to tell Dirk's story more interestingly, but each of their stories is unique to their very own problems. Jack dreams of making adult films so good that audiences will want to actually find out what happens within the story of his films, Reed wants to be a magician, and Buck wants to open his own store where he can sell stereos. Dirk has no real stake in any of their stories, but these stories are still told. Perhaps Anderson is using each character's story as a means of illustrating how people involved in similar lines of work such as the adult film industry might all have different things going on in their lives. Anderson structures the film around Dirk as a coming of age tale. The remaining characters' stories show that once you grow up and seem to settle into a profession, the problems are not necessarily over. Similar uncertainties and angst facing the adolescent are also faced by the adult, and Anderson's narrative structure seems to emphasize this theme. Here, the narrative of this protagonist-centered ensemble film functions by having these separate, shortened story arcs for supporting characters anchored by a central idea that is present in the protagonist. With *Boogie Nights* the central idea is that despite the adult film industry's contentions and flaws, ultimately, responsibility falls with the individual – i.e., Dirk – who participates in this industry. This responsibility and its consequences are something

reflected in all the other characters as well.

An ensemble film with multiple, or no, protagonists functions differently than *Boogie Nights*, which is clearly the case with Anderson's *Magnolia*. Without a central character like Dirk to anchor the action with a central idea, Anderson instead plays out the central idea or theme in each of the ensemble's characters. This idea of chance that he incorporates into the narrative structure not only veils the presence of a strict cause and effect chain of events, but also provides the audience with a means of understanding the narrative. With *Boogie Nights* Dirk's central idea of responsibility and taking his actions into his own hands is reflected in all of the characters, whereas in *Magnolia* the central idea of chance has no anchor and rather plays out equally amongst each character on its own accord. With the narrative appearing to lack a specific causality, chance replaces it and is the key to many events in the film, thus driving the story forward. With the presence of the prologue at the beginning of the film, Anderson is setting up this idea of chance as its own, separate entity. Chance is then played out in each character arc so the audience can recognize the distinct nature of each of the stories, without having that one character to fall back on when events may get muddled or confusing. At times some of the characters' stories even blend together, connecting through certain ideas such as childhood, love, and insecurity. Even without a central protagonist, the multiple or no protagonist ensemble film is still able to tell an overarching story that a protagonist would normally provide. The effect on the audience is similar to a typical Hollywood narrative, but the way *Magnolia* goes about achieving this effect is very different.

The Ensemble Tool: Crosscutting

When discussing the differences between the protagonist-centered ensemble film, *Boogie Nights*, and the multiple/no protagonist ensemble film, *Magnolia*, one of the more intriguing issues is the function and exploitation of space and time. In *Film Art*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson discuss the issue of time in regards to three separate types of duration: plot duration, story duration, and screen duration. The plot duration of a film is the duration of all the events that are directly presented to an audience within a narrative film, whereas story duration is the duration of all the events that the audience sees and hears as well as those events that the audience assumes to have occurred. The screen duration is simply how long it takes for these events to play out onscreen (81). With *Boogie Nights*, the story duration is two decades (that of the 70s and 80s), the plot duration is several days within those decades, and the screen duration is 155 minutes. In *Magnolia*, the story duration appears to be a significant portion of the lives of many of the characters up until the film's ending point, while the plot duration is simply one day in their lives and the screen duration is 189 minutes. Space in both films is relatively restricted, both *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* occurring in the San Fernando Valley section of Los Angeles, California, with *Magnolia* even being restricted to a specific street.

With respect to *Magnolia*, by restricting the action of the plot to one day and one specific location, Anderson is able to tell the various stories of his ensemble cast in a seemingly simpler fashion. Throughout the film, he uses crosscutting as a tool to dramatically relocate from one character's storyline to another, and then back again.

Choosing to limit the space of the narrative to this one section of the San Fernando Valley allows Anderson to jump back and forth between all these characters. Whereas in films such as *Babel* (2006) the filmmaker is jumping back and forth between very different locations because the characters are connected in some way, Anderson is able to relocate from one character to another because they are located geographically close to each other. The characters of *Magnolia* may be connected, but one of the main points of the film seems to be that this idea of chance can run people's lives, and in a limited space this is emphasized even more so.

The span of *Boogie Nights*' plot is several years in the adult film industry, rather than simply one day, so at first it looks as though the narrative of *Boogie Nights* would be much more complicated than *Magnolia*. But it is not, because of the protagonist. Dirk Diggler is always the focus of *Boogie Nights*' narrative, whether he appears onscreen or not. Despite the dramatic shifts from year to year, Anderson uses multiple montages to show the progression of Dirk's character, and as he progresses and becomes more deeply invested in the adult film industry, we see the effects this has on the rest of the ensemble cast as well. Yes, *Magnolia*'s multiple story threads share a singular theme about chance, but because the narrative focus in *Boogie Nights* hinges specifically on Dirk's character development, Anderson almost never dramatically relocates from one space to another within the film, and time occurs in a simple, linear fashion. If Anderson decided to relocate from a scene with Dirk to a scene with another character in an entirely different space, there would have to be a good reason for it. There is a scene in the third act of the film where Dirk, Reed, and Todd (Thomas Jane) go to the house of a drug dealer, Rahad

Jackson (Alfred Molina), with a plan to sell him fake cocaine in exchange for a substantial amount of money. The plan is Todd's but Reed and Dirk seem to be all for it until the situation escalates when they learn that Rahad's bodyguard has a gun in his jacket. As they listen to "Jessie's Girl" playing on Rahad's stereo, Anderson keeps the camera on Dirk for an extended long take, no movement, just focused on Dirk's face. This is his epiphany, his realization that this has gone too far and this is not what he wants to be doing with his time, and this occurs without a word spoken by Dirk. There is no relocation in this entire scene at Rahad's place to another place in the story world, because Dirk is the narrative focus and this extended long take on his face is telling the audience more than what Jack could literally be telling them about Dirk. The drama and tension are heightened by Anderson without having to crosscut between two sequences, but by just staying with the main focus of the narrative, the protagonist Dirk.

Although time within *Magnolia* occurs in a linear fashion as the events of the day play out, Anderson's use of space and crosscutting really brings home the idea that this ensemble film is doing something different than the typical Hollywood narrative. For the majority of the second act of *Magnolia*, one storyline of the film involving Stanley, a young boy genius with an overbearing father, plays out on a game show called "What Do Kids Know?" Stanley is a contestant on a team of three children, and the other two children clearly take advantage of his genius by making him answer all the questions. Rather than staying at the game show and observing Stanley being taken advantage of for an extended period of time, Anderson crosscuts between this storyline and the threads of various other characters. In between Stanley answering a couple of questions, the

audience is moved to an interview room where Frank Mackey, a sex seminar leader, is being interviewed by Gwenovier (April Grace) about his past and troubled childhood. We go back to “What Do Kids Know?” for a few moments, and then move once again to another thread, this time to Donnie, a middle-aged former quiz kid who long ago appeared on the same game show as Stanley, who is now at a bar professing, in a drunken stupor, that he has lots of love to give.

Anderson’s use of crosscutting is not just a device to provide audiences with the varying stories of an ensemble cast, but it also brings about the idea of parallel action in regards to tonal contrast. In his article “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today,” Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein discusses the writing of Charles Dickens in comparison to the filmmaking of the great American director D.W. Griffith. In one excerpt, Eisenstein reveals a section of a recording made between Griffith and his employers when he was trying to make his film *Enoch Arden* (1915):

When Mr. Griffith suggested a scene showing Annie Lee waiting for her husband’s return to be followed by a scene of Enoch cast away on a desert island, it was altogether too distracting. “How can you tell a story jumping about like that? The people won’t know what it’s about.”

“Well,” said Mr. Griffith, “doesn’t Dickens write that way?”

“Yes, but that’s Dickens; that’s novel writing; that’s different.”

“Oh, not so much, these are picture stories; not so different.” (200-01)

This idea of parallel action, or the idea of “a ‘break’ in the narrative, a shifting of the story from one group of characters to another group,” (205) is prevalent in Anderson’s

Boogie Nights and *Magnolia* and that is where his usage of crosscutting becomes very important.

The question of Griffith's employers, "How can you tell a story jumping about like that?" is obviously not unique to "new" Hollywood, though this very question reveals the assumed stability of the typical narrative format. Nowadays, as seen in Anderson's films, "jumping about" from one group of characters to another is not uncommon, not in the sense that every Hollywood film does it, but in the sense that many filmmakers use the technique as an engaging means of storytelling. With *Boogie Nights*, although Anderson does use crosscutting, he does so in a limited fashion. In contrast, *Magnolia* is essentially one extremely large segment in which crosscutting consistently occurs. The question is why Anderson chooses to do very different things with crosscutting in these films, and the answer appears to revolve around the presence and function of the protagonist.

Boogie Nights plays out as a protagonist-centered ensemble film in a fairly straightforward manner, mostly due to Anderson's stylistic choices. Although he is known for his sweeping extended tracking shots, these shots work to emphasize the preservation of space and time. Cuts are minimized while we are observing these characters at a specific moment in a specific space with nothing else drawing our attention away. Dirk Diggler's presence as protagonist seems to keep Anderson from using crosscutting for any extended period of time, mostly due to Dirk's story arc being the most important. There is simply no other principal character to cut to. Whereas in *Magnolia* Anderson uses crosscutting to provide at least somewhat equal time for each member of the ensemble cast, it functions differently in *Boogie Nights* because of Dirk.

The only instances in *Boogie Nights* where Anderson chooses to use crosscutting for extended periods of time occur specifically in order to advance the protagonist's journey.

The first extended sequence in which cross-cutting is used occurs in the third act of *Boogie Nights*, after Dirk is fired from his job as Jack Horner's go-to adult film star. Anderson uses crosscutting to show how the rest of the ensemble cast is living life without Dirk. First, we see Jack on a shoot with Dirk's replacement Johnny Doe, and then move to Amber and Rollergirl in an entirely different space where they snort cocaine and talk about how Rollergirl wants Amber to be her mom. We see cowboy Buck getting rejected for a loan to start his stereo store when the bank finds out he is involved with pornography. Finally we see our protagonist Dirk, but he is snorting cocaine with friends Reed and Todd (Thomas Jane), who then proceed to go to a recording studio and demand the Demo Tapes for the awful songs they have recorded. The sequence ends when Anderson moves back to Jack who walks into the editing room where Kurt (Ricky Jay) is putting together a film starring Johnny Doe. In contrast to earlier in the film when Jack states that one of Dirk's movies is "the film I want them to remember me by," he says about Doe's film, "It is what it is." Anderson uses these cuts and dramatic relocations to other characters all under the guise that this is life without Dirk, without the protagonist. Even without Dirk present in the specific space occupied by the other characters, it is still entirely about Dirk's journey and how his absence is having an effect on the others. When he is present in his adult film star family, there is no need to move from space to space because Dirk is in the very location where they seem to all function.

Another sequence of crosscutting in *Boogie Nights* occurs soon after the one above,

in a segment in which Anderson is clearly drawing a parallel between Dirk and Jack. The use of crosscutting in this sequence is simpler than the other, as Anderson only rotates between two locations and two groups of characters. One group is Jack and Rollergirl, who are driving around in a limousine creating an on-the-fly film where they find someone off the street to have sex with Rollergirl on camera. The other group is our protagonist Dirk with another man, who is giving Dirk money to watch him masturbate in his truck in an abandoned parking lot. The sequence plays out with Dirk being attacked by that man and another group of men who show up, while Jack beats up on another kid very much Dirk's age who does not perform on camera the way Jack directs him to. Moreover, the kid insults Jack by saying, "Your films suck now anyway." This sequence is very much a product of something Sergei Eisenstein discussed in his article on Dickens and Griffith, when he states in regards to parallel action that there are often "two storylines, where one emotionally heightens the tension and drama of the other" (223). If Anderson chose to play these separate storylines out one after the other rather than interspersing them, the emotional effect would probably be less intense. Through crosscutting, and by seeing two individuals being beaten and bloodied, the tension is heightened. Our protagonist Dirk puts himself in a bad situation, as does Jack, doubly bringing us back to the idea of personal responsibility. Although Dirk is getting beaten while Jack is giving a beating, the audience can surmise that the parallel to be drawn is that both lives have spun out of control. The parallel actions in different spaces unify them and emphasize their need for each other, propelling the final reunion between the two.

Both of these sequences in *Boogie Nights* function as Eisenstein states, to heighten the drama and tension of one another, and Anderson seems to understand this. These segments are not just his way of distributing story time to each of the characters, but they are his way of playing out the themes of *Boogie Nights* and advancing the protagonist's journey. A typical Hollywood narrative does these things as well, with a protagonist who has goals and advances through a cause and effect chain in a linear fashion. *Boogie Nights* is like the typical Hollywood narrative format in that it gives us the protagonist's journey even when he is not even onscreen. The narrative constantly focuses the audience on Dirk as various ensemble cast members throughout the film are primarily understood through their interactions with Dirk. *Magnolia*, however, does something else entirely.

When it comes to crosscutting, *Magnolia* basically seems as though it is just one gigantic segment in which Anderson shows off how parallel actions work. Indeed it is, but that is not all there is to it. Whereas in *Boogie Nights* crosscutting seems to function as a tool for Anderson to tell Dirk's story, crosscutting is more essential and basic to *Magnolia* in every aspect. The narrative of the film needs to be able to support all the stories of the ensemble cast, and the use of crosscutting not only is what allows Anderson to this, but it is also what keeps each character's story distinct and allows audiences to recognize them as distinct units that are interrelated thematically more than causally. *Magnolia* is a difficult film in the sense that without a protagonist, the central idea of the story must be what the audience is relating to, the idea of chance. This idea is played out in each character's storyline, and through crosscutting audiences are able to understand

this and come to conclusions as to the differences in how chance plays out with each character. Crosscutting allows for both parallel action and tonal contrast, but in *Magnolia* it seems to allow for an entirely different narrative structure which does not at all seem to be based on the same typical format as *Boogie Nights*, and therefore might possibly be a “new” Hollywood narrative.

One segment of crosscutting in *Magnolia* that almost all movie-goers seem taken aback by the first time they see the film is the sequence of shots in which each member of the ensemble cast sings the Aimee Mann song “Wise Up.” It is a unifying event for the characters, one that does not work for some film critics, like Janet Maslin. She writes:

A song bursts out: it is heard first from one character, then from another, until all the film’s assorted lost souls are brought together by a single anxiety-ridden refrain. “It’s not...going to stop,” each one sings resignedly, signaling the approach of an impending group meltdown. But the effect is less that of a collective shiver than of directorial desperation. (Maslin)

But it appears that Maslin may not understand exactly what Anderson is going for, or if she does, she does not simply appreciate it. The sequence begins on Claudia, who, while snorting cocaine at home, begins to sing as Mann’s song plays over the film nondiegetically. Anderson then moves to Officer Jim, Claudia’s bumbling love interest, who sings as well at home sitting on the end of his bed. “What Do Kids Know?” game show host Jimmy Gator is then shown wallowing in self pity at home in a chair singing, and then former quiz kid Donnie Smith does the same. The sequence continues on, moving to a singing Phil and Earl, Linda singing in her car, Frank singing in his car, and

then finally to Stanley who broke into his school library and who sits there singing, “So just, give up.” Anderson tracks out and then initiates the final cut of the sequence. What is going on is a blending of the diegetic story world with nondiegetic music, which ends up unexpectedly being diegetic at the same time.

The significance of this sequence is unparalleled, as it not only represents everything the narrative of *Magnolia* is trying to tell, but it also represents what many consider to be “new” about Anderson’s filmmaking. For the entire narrative of the film up until this point, *Magnolia* had not exactly played out typically, but it had not taken further risks at alienating or dumbfounding the audience. Aimee Mann’s songs are used nondiegetically throughout the film, but this is the point when her voice truly becomes part of the story world and one with the characters’ voices. The American film industry does not oppose characters singing in movies, but such singing is motivated and usually is only present when the film either is a musical or features a particular character who is a singer. This singing in Anderson’s *Magnolia* is neither of those, but rather serves as Anderson’s way of unifying his characters, drawing parallels, and providing the audience with a singular event to have multiple reactions to. By bringing these different characters together from varying parts of the story world, Anderson wants the audience to look at all of them in a similar light. He wants the audience to see Donnie as a broken down shell of a man who may have been something as quiz kid, but now is just a childish middle-aged man. A clear parallel is being drawn between him and Stanley, the current quiz kid who really doesn’t want to do this quiz show and just wants his dad “to be nicer” to him. Donnie is Stanley’s possible future path if he does not do something about his place in

the world right now, when he is seemingly too young and powerless to affect any kind of change. By seeing the unification of each character's story within a single song, the audience recognizes each storyline as thematically resonant to each other. Anderson's *Magnolia* is doing things differently in the narrative sense in that the ensemble cast is not only lacking a protagonist but the real cause and effect chain of events is veiled, but at the film's close a typical Hollywood effect is still generated.

Narrative Endings

The conclusions to both *Magnolia* and *Boogie Nights* appear similar at face value but serve entirely different purposes when it comes to Anderson's narrative intentions. Both films end with crosscutting montages that attempt to wrap up each thread of the ensemble cast. The ending montage to *Boogie Nights* is accompanied by The Beach Boys' song "God Only Knows" and begins with cowboy Buck filming a commercial for the new stereo store he is opening. Then there is Rollergirl sitting in a school classroom, the Colonel in his prison cell, and Maurice observing a misspelled sign being lit for his new club "Rodriquez Brothers Night Club." We then see Reed performing at a magic show, and then there is Jessie in labor which Scotty is filming. As a seeming nod to his own opening shot, Anderson then begins tracking behind Jack who interacts with many of the ensemble cast members at his home, eventually coming to Amber who sits staring into a mirror. Jack tells her, "I'm staring at the foxiest bitch in the whole world." Anderson then cuts to the final shot of the segment, Dirk staring into a mirror preparing for his next film shoot. As Dirk leaves he shuts the door and there is a cut to black. The

film is over and everything seems to have come to its necessary conclusion. Our protagonist Dirk is back where he belongs, with his adult film family, and most of the other members seem to be going about realizing their own dreams. The cause and effect chain for Dirk has led somewhere, and although he has been at this place before in the film, he now knows that this is exactly where he needs to be.

Magnolia's concluding montage begins on Phil, who is letting hospice care into the house to attend to Earl Partridge who has passed away. Frank is there and gets a phone call from a hospital that Linda is there, so Frank leaves. The film is drawing to a close, and part of this closure is the relationships being revealed between each of the ensemble's characters, such as Frank being Earl's son and him having a strained relationship with Linda because of her presence in his life. We then move to Stanley at home, who stands over his father trying to sleep in his bed and tells him, "Dad, you need to be nicer to me." Stanley's connection to everyone is that he is a contestant on the game show produced by Earl Partridge, but what is important about this connection and each of the characters' connections to each other is that the audience never is asking about these connections. They do not wonder what Stanley has to do with the dying Earl, but Anderson gives us this information nonetheless. We are then shown Officer Jim and Donnie at a gas station as Donnie explains to Jim his whole plan to steal money in order to get braces. Jim takes Donnie to return the money, not arresting him as we hear a voiceover from Jim. We then cut to Jim sitting in his police cruiser where he continues the voiceover talking about forgiveness. Aimee Mann's "Save Me" kicks in as we see Claudia sitting up in bed. Jim shows up and begins to talk to Claudia but we do not hear much of what is said. Claudia

looks up at the camera and smiles and Anderson cuts to black as the song continues over the end credits.

What this sequence is doing differently from *Boogie Nights* is that it is not necessarily concluding all the threads of the ensemble cast. There is no protagonist in *Magnolia* so there is obviously no main arc to be concluded, but Anderson, instead of just making up for it by giving the audience all the answers they could ever want, decides to leave some threads dangling. Despite Claudia's final smile, her relationship status with Jim is still left ambiguous. Frank goes to find Linda at the hospital and we get a glimpse of her, but Anderson does not tell us if she is going to be all right. Whereas in *Boogie Nights* Dirk has found a place in his life where he is comfortable, the characters in *Magnolia* have not yet found comfort. Yes, they all seem to have come to a realization about their places in the world, but they just experienced one day out of many, while Dirk has experienced two very different decades in the course of his film. *Magnolia* ends not so typically in Hollywood terms, however, by revealing the connections between each character some form of closure is still present, it is just beneath the surface just as the cause and effect chain.

As discussed earlier, Bordwell defines causality as the "prime unifying principle" of story construction, in which the characters of the narrative experience a series of causes and effects which move the story forward (*NFF* 157). *Magnolia* does not exactly have characters who achieve goals solely by themselves, or who go through a typical Hollywood chain of events. Rather, *Magnolia* presents a unifying concept encompassing all characters, the idea of chance or coincidence that seems to achieve their goals for

them. Jim's goals of love and finding his gun, Stanley's goal of standing up for himself, even Frank's goal of finding resolution with his father that comes about merely by Phil calling him, is achieved. Officer Jim has met Claudia by chance and has fallen in love with her, achieving his goal, but it appears the audience is not given a consummation of their relationship at film's end. All the audience apparently needs is the hope that the relationship will be consummated, a hope given by Claudia's final smile on which the film ends. But isn't this smile closure in itself? The Hollywood ending characterized by a wedding or a kiss between two lovers is not here for Jim and Claudia, but the smile does represent this love or happiness that those events do. It appears that Anderson is giving audiences the benefit of the doubt, letting them interpret *Magnolia's* ending in a way they see fit, but this idea of chance may be an end in and of itself. By asking the audience to think and feel for these characters after the film is over, Anderson is generating a quintessentially Hollywood emotional reaction, whether each storyline is neatly wrapped up or not. This actually ties into a question raised earlier regarding Bordwell and the classic film segment.

Bordwell's belief that a film segment is spatially and temporally closed but causally "open" ties into the endings of both *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia*. By providing audiences with a not-so-definitive conclusion in *Magnolia*, Anderson is leaving the film "open" in more ways than one. It is "open" in the sense that audiences are able to interpret the film how they see fit, but it is "open" more specifically in regards to the narrative. *Magnolia* may not have the explicit and sustained causality a film like *Boogie Nights* has, but Bordwell's belief in a certain "openness" within a segment still applies.

Magnolia is essentially one large segment in which crosscutting consistently occurs, and by leaving the film at least partially open at the end Anderson is asking the audience to draw their own conclusions. This “openness” is specifically affecting the narrative in that due to *Magnolia*’s characters’ veiled causality, the ending’s lack of complete closure by Anderson actually lets him off the hook. Whereas the individual segments of *Boogie Nights* are left causally open in order to lead to a fitting conclusion for Dirk Diggler, the one big segment that is *Magnolia* is itself left causally open. It would be unfair to not acknowledge that *Magnolia* could certainly be broken down into smaller segments, but each of these segments is not necessarily playing out as they do in typical Hollywood films. *Magnolia*’s segments blend into each other and the style of each is a style consistent throughout the film, not just in certain units. It clearly plays out as one large unit as with crosscutting Anderson is able to draw thematic parallels between storylines that otherwise might be lost in the fold. This large segment is causally open. At the end of *Magnolia*, now that Officer Jim, Claudia, Frank, and the others have experienced a series of causes with their dangling threads, they can finally experience the effects. It is just that the audience will not see these effects, as the film is over.

When *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* are over, where does Anderson leave the audience? He leaves them, in the case of *Boogie Nights*, with a strong sense of closure that is found in most typical Hollywood narratives. The protagonist Dirk has found his place in life and his journey to achieve success on his own accord seems somewhat stabilized again with his return to his job as an adult film star. It is possible that history could repeat itself for Dirk and he could end up in a downward spiral once again, as he

has been here before, but the audience still feels a strong sense of closure in that they have followed a narrative arc to a logical endpoint. The emotional reaction that arises could be one of satisfaction that Dirk has found his place, or perhaps one of disbelief that he has decided to go back to his old ways, but the fact is that audiences react with a sense of finality. *Magnolia* ends with a certain “openness,” being left open to interpretation, but an emotional response is still generated from the audience. There is hope that Officer Jim and Claudia may continue their relationship, that Frank will be able to set aside his differences with Linda and help her through a troubled time, and that maybe Stanley will be able to overcome his domineering father, and audiences react to these loose ends, whether they truly appreciate them or not. Some of these threads that appear to be left open, however, are logical endpoints for the story Anderson is trying to tell. The audience does not know specifically what former quiz kid Donnie Smith is going to do now that his plan to steal money to get braces has failed, but we do know that Donnie broke his teeth during the attempted robbery. He now has an actual need for braces, and this is a logical endpoint for his storyline because this is where he began, in the dentist office. We do not know if Stanley will actually overcome his father and be able to stand up for himself continuously, but the fact that he does so once when stating “Dad, you need to be nicer to me,” is another logical endpoint for his story. *Magnolia* is causally open in the sense that at the end of the film these characters have yet to experience the effects to these final causes, Stanley’s standing up for himself and Donnie’s broken teeth, but this does not mean the stories do not end logically within the narrative. But, if an effect is generated at the end of the ensemble films of Paul Thomas Anderson that is much like

those generated at the end of typical Hollywood narratives, then what is the point of varying from the format in the first place?

The “New” Payoff

The payoff of varying from the typical Hollywood narrative is Anderson’s ability to tell a story that may not otherwise be possible if limited to the norms of the typical Hollywood narrative. By leaving *Magnolia* open he is allowing himself to tell a more complex and intriguing story without having to worry about tying up everything neatly. He is perhaps reflecting upon the idea that a day in the life of everyday people does not necessarily in and of itself end in absolute closure. Even films with definitive closure, like *Boogie Nights*, ask the audience to think about what may happen to these characters once they are no longer being filmed, but Dirk’s journey is clearly over and he has appeared to achieve exactly what he set out to do at the film’s opening. *Magnolia* does not pretend, with its central theme of chance and coincidence, to know exactly where the characters will end up, but their storylines still have logical endpoints. When audiences are presented with the end of the film, they are able to think about it in these terms. When Howard Hawks’s *The Big Sleep* is over, audiences are not pleading that they must know what happens to Phillip Marlowe next because the narrative has reached its satisfying conclusion, and it has answered the questions it set out in the murder mystery. In *Magnolia*, Anderson does not specifically set out to answer all the questions that may come up in the narrative, so when the film comes to its close audiences are not necessarily demanding that it continue, but rather are reacting to it. *Boogie Nights* is an

ensemble film, but one that mostly adheres to the typical Hollywood narrative format.

Magnolia is an ensemble film that has a narrative that often differs from what has come to be accepted as the norm, but still ends up relying heavily upon Hollywood narrative norms in order to elicit the same emotional responses to the closure provided by a quintessential Hollywood ending like that of *Boogie Nights*.

From our comparison, the “new” Hollywood narrative is certainly more strongly associated with *Magnolia* than *Boogie Nights*, but is it “new?” No, it is not. The narrative of *Magnolia* is different, in terms of some aspects of causality, character, and crosscutting but this does not make it “new” in terms of the stories Hollywood is trying to tell. For years filmmakers have been altering audience perceptions by throwing a wrench into the typical Hollywood narrative, as evidenced with films such as Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, a narrative told in sections that are completely out of order. The characters present in *Magnolia*’s narrative are not typical Hollywood characters, but they are not “new” because they still end up achieving goals and are part of cause and effect chains, albeit underemphasized ones. It is just that this idea of chance ends up doing a lot of the characters’ work for them. Officer Jim’s storyline is a clear example of this, because in the end he gets his gun back, he ends up forgiving a criminal in Donnie and lets him go, and also appears to get the girl. These effects, although not all were Jim’s doing, are still typical Hollywood endpoints. Whether these endings are completely closed and every little thread is tied up really does not matter. Anderson’s ensemble films are not “new” Hollywood narratives because what is generated at film’s end is what has been generated since the industry’s inception in Hollywood: a logical, not

necessarily closed, end to each important storyline.

The ensemble film, with its large casts of characters and interweaving narratives, appears to be a mainstay in the film industry, but in most instances such films are not characterized as mainstream. Paul Thomas Anderson, although having had much success in terms of his work being recognized by Hollywood, continues to make “personal” films, just as Robert Altman did before him. What is interesting to note about this, however, is that with Anderson’s emergence as recognized filmmaker came Altman’s resurgence to the Hollywood forefront as well. Kristin Thompson’s statement that he had been cast aside by the industry due to his unusual film projects is spot on. Therefore it is ironic that the emergence of Anderson seemingly brought about Altman’s relevance again. Altman’s last ensemble films such as *Gosford Park* (2001) and *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006) were greeted with critical acclaim the likes of which Altman hadn’t seen since the early 1990s, when he had succeeded with *The Player* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993). Altman ended up passing away in late 2006 after the release of *A Prairie Home Companion*, but not before he got a chance to work with the filmmaker who owed him so much. Anderson served as standby director for *A Prairie Home Companion* in case Altman would not be able to finish filming the project himself. Altman would probably be the first to admit that the stories he was trying to tell on film were not necessarily “new” but rather just different and unusual compared to the other films being made in Hollywood. Anderson appears to have a long career ahead of him, one that so far has not fully deviated into mainstream Hollywood; but as Altman before him, the possibilities are endless. Anderson claims, as Bruns notes, “I love classic structure, and I

always sit down with the intention of writing a classically structured screenplay, because what I prize above all else is good storytelling ... But then I tend to go off, to follow the characters, and let them lead me to what usually seems to be the right place” (200).

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