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There's a Problem with the Connection: American Eccentricity and Existential Anxiety

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

University of Sydney.

I hereby declare that, except where indicated in the notes, this thesis contains only my own original work.

As I have stated throughout this work, some sections of this thesis have been published previously. A version of Chapter Two features in Peter Kunze's collection *The Films of Wes Anderson: Critical Essays on an Indiewood Icon*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014, and Chapter Three was published under the title 'The sounds of silence: hyper-dialogue and American Eccentricity' as an article in *New Review of Film and Television Studies* no. 11 (4):403-423 in 2013. Some comments on Sherry B. Ortner's book *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream* were previously published as a review in *Media International Australia* no. No 146, in February 2013.

Abstract

David Foster Wallace's essay 'E unibus pluram: Television and U.S Fiction' (1993) describes ironic self-consciousness as the default tone of American cultural expression in the early nineties. For Wallace, this self-conscious mode of address incorporates a paralysing problem in regard to conveying meaning in texts—irony has become an end in itself. The pervasiveness of irony and cynicism in films of the 1980s and early 1990s led to concerns that sincere expression would be taken as naïve or lacking sophistication. I argue that the cinematic mode I am investigating, American Eccentricity, negotiates a different relationship to sincerity—it is not a rejection of irony, but a mode of cinematic expression that incorporates irony *with* sincerity. The balance of emphasis may shift between the two positions, however, ironic articulation co-exists with sincere meaning.

Films in the American Eccentric mode, such as those by Wes Anderson or Charlie Kaufman, take the cultural and ideological imprints of the New Hollywood (1967-1979). The New Hollywood filmmakers who emerged in the late 1960s with films like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate* (Nichols 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969), demonstrated in their films an American cultural uneasiness, isolation, and disconnection with their contemporary society, in the light of the Vietnam War and the contemporary questioning of institutional authority. Where the New Hollywood presented existential anxieties as cultural manifestations through actual events and reactions to real-life concerns, American Eccentricity does not bind anxiety to external sources—in the absence of the cultural and national tumult that presented external and legitimate sites for existential concern in the 1960s and 1970s, anxiety in the American Eccentric mode is essentially objectless. While both American Eccentric and New Hollywood films centre on a yearning for human connection, I argue that American Eccentric films portray a genuine hope for human connection from an ironic position in which they predict and anticipate failure before the first frame.

American Eccentric films portray four notable textual characteristics: transgressions, subversions, and ironic play with genre; the use of 'hyper-dialogue' as a dramatic device that functions to mediate sincere underlying thematic concerns for the viewer through ironic, reflexive speech; the shift toward pure cinematic characterisation; and the formulation of Eccentric cinematic worlds. These four textual characteristics – which provide the analytical foci for my thesis – facilitate a cinematic engagement with the spectator that promotes access and connection with genuine existential anxieties, while simultaneously positioning her at a safe distance.

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Figure 1 Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012)

Figure 2 Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)

i. Locating the Eccentric in Film

In 1967 Arthur Penn cast Faye Dunaway in her first leading film role in *Bonnie and Clyde* alongside Warren Beatty. The two were the image of an ideal American couple. Indeed, the on-screen duo of Beatty and Dunaway has become an iconic symbol of American culture—but unlike classical Hollywood couples such as 'that man Bogart and that woman Bacall',[1] Bonnie and Clyde were not only gorgeous and stylish, but angry. The film bore the tagline: 'They're young, they're in love. They kill people.' Moments prior to their first bank job, Clyde (Beatty) introduces himself to a family whose farm has been repossessed by the bank by stating, 'This here is Miss Bonnie Parker. I'm Clyde Barrow. We rob banks.' Clyde, framed in a mid-shot with Bonnie (Dunaway) shielded behind him, makes this declaration not only to the Okie family within the film's diegesis, but also to the audience and, through them, takes aim at the conservative institutions and authorities that were out of touch with the emergent sensibility of the growing counterculture.

The New Hollywood filmmakers, who appeared in the late 1960s with films like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate* (Nichols 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969), demonstrated in their films an American cultural uneasiness, isolation, and disconnection with their contemporary society. The New Hollywood era is frequently cited as a time when filmmakers were producing cinema that examined their own cultural and political milieux.[2] These films quoted real life with hitherto

[1] 'With that man Bogart! and that woman Bacall!' was run in the trailer for Bogart and Bacall in *The Big Sleep* (Hawks 1946).

[2] Although the New Hollywood era has been largely celebrated as a time of artistic freedom that afforded representations of cultural change and ideological focuses in cinema, it is important to note that many accounts of this era (particularly those by Peter Biskind, Mark Harris, Jonathan Demme and Richard LaGravenese) are invested perpetuating a 1970s mythology of rebellion and revolution. Thomas Schatz' work provides a notable and vital economic and industrial account of the era. However, he reserves the term 'New Hollywood' to refer to the post-1975 blockbuster era, and describes the earlier period as an '"American film renaissance" of sorts' that had been 'induced by a succession of big-budget flops and successful imports' (Schatz 1993, 14).
While 1967 is the most frequently cited year for the birth of the New Hollywood, it is important to recognise that John Cassavetes made *Shadows* in 1959. *Shadows* is an independent film of the Beat

'unaccustomed candour' (Thomson 2004, 82) through a transformation in traditional cinematic language, aesthetics, and narrative. Through the influence of European cinema (particularly Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave) and advances in film technology, the films of the New Hollywood attempted to make sense of the social confusion with which they were confronted both formally and thematically. However, by the end of the 1970s, the New Hollywood era was over. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Howarth, and Noel King's collection *The Last Great American Picture Show*: *New Hollywood in the 1970s* (2004) is at once an exploration of the New Hollywood as a pivotal moment in cinema and, as the title suggests, an examination of its perceived end. Noel King posits that '[the] New Hollywood period might be the last good predominantly *American* time American cinema had' (emphasis in original) as these films 'touch on deeply American themes and visions' (King 2004, 32). Indeed, these films approach narrative from a significantly American perspective—the portrayals of alienated and violent masculinity in Martin Scorsese's work, for instance, are intrinsically fixed to *American* configurations of class, place, and ideological alignment (Kolker 1988, 162-163). King thus proposes that, in comparison to the more global narratives and internationally financed productions of post-millennial cinema, the New Hollywood was a distinctly national entity. King's proposition is certainly an apt response to the consequent blockbuster era ushered in by *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) and *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977), but are the films of the New Hollywood truly a record of 'the last time American cinema was a distinctive, national entity' (King, 33)?

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generation, portraying many in-camera techniques that were later to be employed by the New Hollywood, along with the depiction of social issues such as interracial and gender relations. Details, including the largely arbitrary 'start' and 'end' dates of the period, the parameters of authorial inclusion, and the impact of the era on later filmmaking, are contentious. Noel King acknowledges that all configurations of the 'New Hollywood' will necessarily be a discursive construction, and that 'New Hollywood' 'does not remain the same object across different critical descriptions' (20). I use the term 'New Hollywood' to refer to a selection of films released post-1967 in America that critically reflect on their contemporary socio-cultural issues, often incorporating aesthetic and stylistic elements from European new wave cinema in conjunction with more conventional Hollywood traditions.

In a review of David O. Russell's *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), Armond White identified a group of contemporary filmmakers whom he regarded as 'tweaking the system' (2004). Along with Russell, this group is comprised of P.T. Anderson, Spike Jonze, Wes Anderson, Alexander Payne, and Sofia Coppola. White named this group the 'American Eccentrics' (2004, par 5).[3] He saw these filmmakers as creating films that investigate personal struggles of internal (rather than social) divisions through an insistence on 'braininess rather than connection with popular sentiment'.[4] White writes,

> popular feeling is distrusted; that's what the Eccentrics intuit about modern film culture. These post-hipsters are too smart to go for the empty, stylish attitudes of Todd Haynes or Guy Maddin. Rather than submit to the common emotion of *Spider-Man 2* (with its attendant juvenilia), or Spielberg and Demme's humbling universality, these clever Dicks show their estrangement from the collective experience in preference for private feeling. (2004, par 6)

For White the term 'Eccentric' is fitting as, unlike 'that last significant grouping of 70s filmmakers [the New Hollywood] who were drawn to exploring American experience and pop tradition in order to understand their place in the world' the American Eccentrics have been shaped by the 'solipsism and fragmentation' present in the postmodern films of the 1980s and 1990s indie movement (2004, par 5). These filmmakers are more interested in personal idiosyncrasies, rather than analysing the broader socio-cultural status quo. According to White, the American Eccentrics do not express the yearning to reconnect with a world lost to their generation[5] but instead refuse to connect with life outside their own individual existences. This refusal manifests as investigations into the *nature* of their inability to connect with the external world, rather than the solipsistic and fragmented worlds of postmodern

[3] The term 'American Eccentrics' was first used in this review; however, White attributes it to an anonymous friend.
[4] The concept of 'braininess' will later be explored in relation to Jeffrey Sconce's and Claire Perkins' smart cinema.
[5] As explored by Thomas Elsaesser through the concept of the 'pathos of failure' in the New Hollywood.

filmmakers like Maddin. White's American Eccentrics do not centre their work on a generational yearning to reconnect with society, but take the cultural phenomenon of existential yearning itself as their focus. In White's conceptualisation, by displaying 'their estrangement from the collective experience in preference for private feeling' (White 2004, par 6), the American Eccentrics demonstrate an aversion to what they perceive as a distrust of sincere feeling exhibited in contemporary cinema with the cynical, metacinematic, and ironic early *Scream* films (Craven 1996, 1997), Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and those modelled on this cool distance and ironic expression like *The Opposite of Sex* (Roos 1998). Their emphasis is on idiosyncrasy and a view of the outside world as absurd and different.

Jesse Fox Mayshark has further developed the recognition of the American Eccentrics as group of filmmakers in his book *Post-Pop Cinema: The Search for Meaning in New American Film* (2007). In addition to those filmmakers named by White (but with the exclusion of Payne and only a minor inclusion of Coppola) Mayshark names Richard Linklater, and notably Todd Haynes in his grouping of the 'American Eccentrics'. Mayshark, like White, writes that these filmmakers reacted to the pervading sense of detachment associated with the cultural standard of postmodern pastiche and choreographed irony present in the literature, art, music, fashion, and film of the 1980s and 1990s.[6] Mayshark's American Eccentrics responded to the notions of the end of human history at the hand of the universal

[6] Mayshark aligns this view with the observations made by David Foster Wallace in his essay 'E Unibus Pluram' and a statement from Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* that reads 'It is of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool. It's maybe the vestiges of Romantic glorification of *Weltschmerz*, which means world-weariness or hip ennui…We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it's stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté. Sentiment equals naïveté on this continent…' (Wallace 2009, 694). Mayshark connects this statement with 1990s postmodern pop, which he sees in the cultural arts from Nirvana's disaffected grunge to the films of Quentin Tarantino. Mayshark notes that the cultural tide of reflexive self-awareness that was aided by technological developments (such as the Internet) that made replication and recollection more immediate than they had been previously (2007,1-2).

ideological triumph of Western liberalism, the role of art as an aesthetic prosthesis due to the depressing, repetitive simulation of forms and referents, and the stultifying effect of the pervading tone of ironic self-awareness in the cultural languages of American society that had been explored in Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History?' (1989), Jean Baudrillard's 'Beyond the Vanishing Point of Art' (1989), and David Foster Wallace's E unibus pluram: Television and U.S Fiction (1993) respectively.[7] According to Mayshark, the American Eccentric filmmakers meet the challenges of postmodernism's cyclical endgames of self-awareness in the place of sincerity that had been analysed by Fukuyama, Baudrillard, and Wallace, not with a return to traditional forms of sincere cinema, but rather through a shared 'love of pop culture, an immersion in film history, and a freewheeling approach to plot structure' (5). Unlike other films employing these techniques,[8] the films of the American Eccentrics are

> for the most part free of chic cynicism and glib mockery. For all their hip references and technological and narrative trickery, their movies [are] deeply concerned with ethics and morality, the obligations of the individual, the effects of family breakdown, and social alienation. (Mayshark 2007, 5)

The American Eccentric filmmakers exhibit a shift in cinematic expression away from dark, socially concerned indies, such as Soderbergh's depiction of perceived sexual deviancy and cultural morality in *sex, lies and videotape* (1989), urban racial tensions and misused authority in Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989), Gregg

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[7] The term 'Post Pop Cinema', which is used only in the title of Mayshark's book, may well be a reference to Paul Taylor's collection *Post-Pop Art* in which Baudrillard's 'Beyond the Vanishing Point of Art' features. In his introduction, Taylor refers to 'post-Pop' as a form of 'second career' of Pop Art that involves the repetitious artistic quotation of distant, second-hand sources to represent what he sees as the 'present utopia of inauthenticity' (1989, 18).

[8] In particular (and as noted by White) the popular postmodern indie films of the late 1980s and 90s, beginning with Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape* (1989) and culminating with Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (Holt 2007, 222-227; Hanson 2002, 1-3; Wilkins 2013b, 405-408).
Mayshark makes specific note of Quentin Tarantino's first two films, and the early films in the *Scream* series as examples of films employing reflexive self-awareness as the favoured millenial despair, and world-weariness of the time.

Araki's depictions of homosexuality and homophobia in his representations of a doomed AIDS generation (*The Long Weekend [O' Despair]*[1989], *The Living End* [1992], *Totally Fucked Up* [1993], *The Doom Generation* [1995], and *Nowhere* [1997]), and Larry Clark's depiction of the HIV epidemic, sexual manipulation, and rape in *Kids* (1995).[9] Rather than directly confronting broader social and political concerns, Mayshark sees the American Eccentrics as consistently producing films that share

> a sort of yearning for connection, but one that is colored by an awareness of all the things that get in its way—the misunderstandings and deliberate or indeliberate injuries that mark human relationships; the barriers of sex, race, class, and culture; and, most of all, the simple and ceaseless inability to transcend the boundaries of body and consciousness. (8)[10]

This yearning for connection between the self and the world is depicted as a reflection of individual conflicts and existential crises, rather than a malady to be diagnosed and treated as a social problem. These films are 'expressions of American uncertainty' that emerge from a 'certain restlessness and insecurity…of a culture mired in self-doubt' (Mayshark, 12). However, despite the serious anxieties evident, Mayshark sees the works of American Eccentrics not as presenting anxiety as grim solemnity, nor are their works solely preoccupied with postmodern cinematic reflexivity; rather he notes that the dry humour and nimble witticism of these filmmakers combine with their thematic concerns in a manner that demonstrates how seriousness and sincerity can now be expressed after the indifference and ironic detachment that had been associated with the 'cultural tide of pop postmodernism' (1). Mayshark uses the term 'postmodernism' to refer to the 'free sampling from the

[9] I do not intend to suggest that this form of dark indie filmmaking ended in the mid or late 1990s, but rather that American Eccentricity (here discussed in auteurist terms in accordance with Mayshark, but also in modal terms) differs from those films while retaining some of their thematic characteristics. Many indie filmmakers continued to make darkly themed films. Larry Clark went on to make *Bully* (2001) and *Ken Park* (Clark and Lachman 2002), and Kimberley Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), and Alan Ball's *Towelhead* (2007) are but a few films that have continued in this vein.

[10] The form of transcendence referred to by Mayshark is not spiritual (although the many of the films demonstrate awareness of religion) but rather a form of redemptive transcendence that results from human connections within everyday lives (Mayshark, 9).

whole historical range of styles, genres, and schools of art and philosophy,' but he contends that American Eccentric films are 'more than postmodern' (13). Mayshark writes that these films take a position that assumes the audience's knowledge of references, cinematic convention and style, and the interactions between audience and artist. The audience's understanding of the relationship of each of these elements to each other (and the whole) is expected (and taken for granted) by the filmmakers—and therefore they aim to move beyond 'self-awareness to some kind of transcendent connection' (13).

According to Mayshark, American Eccentric films represent American liberalism in a state of some confusion. Mayshark sees the dominant, inward-looking politics of their generation as reflected in their emphasis on these individual crises and existential anxieties. David Foster Wallace's 'E unibus pluram: Television and U.S Fiction' (1993) details his position that in the early 1990s, ironic self-consciousness had become the default tone of American cultural expression.[11] For Wallace, this self-conscious mode of address incorporates a paralysing problem in regard to conveying meaning in texts. Wallace writes:

> irony tyrannizes us. The reason why our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is *impossible to pin down*. All U.S. irony is based on an implicit "I don't really mean what I'm saying." So, what does irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That it's impossible to mean what you say? That maybe it's too bad it's impossible, but wake up and smell the coffee already? Most likely, I think, today's irony ends up saying: "How totally *banal* of you to ask what I really mean". (67-68, emphasis in original)

Using Wallace's approach to irony, Mayshark describes the shift from 1980s and early 1990s film to the American Eccentrics as a reinstatement of sincerity. Mayshark notes that these films were more concerned with drawing attention to the cinematic form than thematic content derived from character plights and story arcs.

[11] Wallace uses the phrase *E unibus pluram* (From one, many) as a Latin pun on the U.S motto *E pluribus unum* ('From many, one'), which appears on the Seal of the United States.

Achronological plot structures, reflexivity, and popular culture itself were presented if not *as* content, then certainly in the place of content. He states that although the American Eccentrics show clear stylistic similarities to the 1980s and 1990s postmodern films, they produce narratives that are essentially more concerned with the characters' plights than the deployment of knowing pastiche and choreographed irony as postmodern techniques. The American Eccentrics, in Mayshark's conception, were responding to the call from Wallace for a new form of text that does not shy away from sincere expression. The employment of postmodern techniques affords the American Eccentrics a form of self-conscious meaningfulness in the place of an oppositional attitude between sentiment and irony.

In this thesis I investigate the divergent modalities of two categories in American cinema—the historical moment of the 'New Hollywood', and the American Eccentric mode. Throughout my analysis I compare and contrast the inherent 'Americanness' of each modality, and explore its relationship to existential anxiety within their respective historical contexts. I build on the formal and aesthetic observations made by White and Mayshark, however I argue that American Eccentricity is a mode of cinematic expression rather than an auteurist occurrence or a 'new wave' of filmmaking.[12] To account for American Eccentricity in auteurist terms, a filmmaker would necessarily need to exhibit Eccentricity as a recognisable thematic and stylistic attribute throughout their *oeuvre* as an authorial point of distinction. Although American Eccentricity can be traced through some of the works of the filmmakers identified by White and Mayshark, very few filmmakers have consistently produced Eccentric films. I therefore consider American Eccentricity in terms of modality, using the term 'mode' in an adjectival sense, as suggested by John Frow, in which modes are understood 'as a thematic and tonal qualification or "colouring" of genre' (2006, 67). American Eccentricity speaks

[12] As Derek Hill writes in his book *Charlie Kaufman and Hollywood's Merry Band of Pranksters, Fabulists and Dreamers* (2008).

through and acts on existing film genres by deploying a sincere-ironic tone to express existential thematic concerns; however, this anxiety is presented with unease in regard to its own authenticity, and is therefore expressed through concealed and ironically layered cinematic articulation. Authenticity, in many of the New Hollywood films, manifests objective realist stances toward heroes that embody 'an almost physical sense of inconsequential action, of pointlessness and uselessness: stances which are not only interpretable psychologically, but speak of a radical scepticism about American virtues of ambition, vision, drive: themselves the unacknowledged' (Elsaesser 2004b, 282).

In the American Eccentric mode the radical scepticism and the acknowledgement of the enactment of uselessness that had been prevalent in the New Hollywood is repositioned as an awkward and socially unacceptable reality. The backdrop of the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s in America provided a set of characters, scenarios, and locations through which New Hollywood films could offer a reflection of American identity and purpose at a time when socio-political perspectives were increasingly divided. In this circumstance the existential crises presented in these films could be read as reactions to actual events and manifestations of attendant anxieties. While American Eccentricity shares existential anxiety as a thematic drive throughout the mode, this anxiety is no longer located in external sites of cultural and national unrest. American Eccentric protagonists can no longer refuse the orthodox ideology of 'progress, of forging in the shape of plot the outlines of a cultural message, understood and endorsed by Hollywood's audiences as the lineaments of a pragmatism in matters moral as well as metaphysical' (Elsaesser 2004b, 280-281) in favour of an authentic lived experience. In the American Eccentric mode anxieties are perceived as no longer bound to legitimate, external sites of existential concern. Instead these anxieties are presented as anchored phenomena—ephemeral and generalised—that occur as isolated, idiosyncratic manifestations rather than as reflecting larger cultural occurrences.

Through this shift, the rejection of an ideological push in favour of personal authenticity that was present in the New Hollywood is reformulated in American Eccentric films, which negotiate existential concerns less overtly through an uneasy deployment of classical narrative strategies and ironic engagement.

In this thesis, then, I make the case that American Eccentricity is a cinematic mode that bears a strong thematic relationship to the New Hollywood in terms of its preoccupation with 'Americanness' and existential anxiety. I argue that the American Eccentric mode is comprised of four notable textual characteristics: transgressions, subversions, and ironic play with genre; the use of hyper-dialogue as a dramatic device that functions to mediate sincere underlying thematic concerns for the viewer through ironic, reflexive speech; the shift toward pure cinematic characterisation; and the formulation of Eccentric spatio-temporal cinematic worlds. I explore these textual characteristics through close analysis of specific films in order to show the manner in which they work to construct a complex relationship between ironic and sincere expression, which has the effect of engaging spectators in a contemporary mode of existential anxiety that is distinct from, but nevertheless evokes resonances of, that present in the New Hollywood.

ii Eccentric Articulations of Existential Anxiety Through Irony

For the purpose of this thesis, existential anxiety refers broadly to angst and despair felt in relation to issues and confrontations of one's being in the world, specifically in relation to concerns of personal freedom, responsibility, and feelings of individual inauthenticity in everyday life. It is the anxiety articulated in the yearning of Jean-Paul Sartre's Antoine Roquentin:

> And I too wanted to *be*. Indeed I have never wanted anything else; that's what lay at the bottom of my life: behind all these attempts which seemed unconnected, I find the same desire: to drive existence out of me, to empty

> the moments of their fat, to wring them, to dry them, to purify myself, to harden myself, to produce in short the sharp, precise sound of a saxophone note. That could serve as a fable: there was a poor fellow who had got into the wrong world…But behind the existence which falls from one present to the next, without a past, without a future, behind these sounds which decompose from day to day, peels away and slips towards death, the melody stays the same, young and firm, like a pitiless witness. (Sartre 1964, 248-249 emphasis in original)

Roquetin's anxiety (referred to throughout the novel as 'Nausea') manifests as the feeling of being acutely removed and dislocated from any concrete meaningful existence. Existence, for Roquetin, is a state of absurdity in which everything is, and has been, present within the external world without any inherent reason or explanation—that is, 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre 1945, 20).[13] The lack of explanation for existence generates an unfulfillable desire for the conscious individual to become a concrete thing within the external world. Roquetin's anxiety, or Nausea, is that he yearns 'to be' despite knowing that this state of being is impossible.

Investigations of being in the world have manifested specifically in American Eccentric films as subject matter, Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) depicts an unnamed protagonist (Wiley Wiggins) in a series of conversations that occur while he is trapped in a continuous string of lucid dreams. These characters discuss the nature of human existence from the perspective of academics, insane activists, criminals, and actors through a number of theoretical positions put forward by David Hume, Sartre, Benedict Anderson, Søren Kierkegaard, and Plato. As the protagonist experiences these conversations from a position of an inescapable

[13] Sartre states that this formulation is the first principle of existentialism. He writes 'What do we mean here by "existence precedes essence"? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself' (1945, 22).

dream-state, at no point is an overall philosophical position taken; rather, the film slides between perspectives on free will, identity, social obligation, the nature of reality, and consciousness that cannot be implemented into reality or fully explored during screen-time. David O. Russell's *I Heart Huckabees* similarly takes existential anxiety as its subject. In this film the characters attempt to make meaning of their lives through the employment of existential detectives. While not all American Eccentric films take existential anxiety as their direct narrative subject, many embody anxiety through thematic narrative events. Wes Anderson's films feature characters dealing with existential malaise and concerns regarding individual purpose that often result in suicide attempts, Mike Lee expresses issues around the nature of self through the themes of biological parentage and genetic traits in *Jesus Henry Christ* (Lee 2012), and Charlie Kaufman deals with the yearning for a meaningful existence through a theatre director's compulsive, cyclical recreation of theatrical worlds that replace real life in *Synecdoche, New York* (Kaufman 2008).

In her book, *Ugly Feelings* (2007), Sianne Ngai uses Ernst Bloch's term, 'expectant emotion' (as opposed to 'filled emotion')[14] to configure anxiety as an emotion whose drive-object is less a specific object of desire available in the world 'than the configuration of the world itself (or what amounts to the same thing) at the future disposition of the self' (210). That is, rather than being directed at any identifiable object of desire, anxiety as an ugly feeling is 'objectless' and relates more to the nature of 'being in the world' articulated in Sartre's work and other European existentialists such as Albert Camus. Anxiety is therefore not locatable in the fear of not acquiring a specific object, or extractable from that object of desire, but the experience of existing in a world devoid of meaning; the absurd in Camus' 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (1942) or Roquetin's search for the cause of and cure to his Nausea. This form of anxiety, according to Ngai, has evolved with specific status

[14] Ngai writes, 'For Bloch, "expectant" feelings are… distinguished from "filled" ones by their "incomparably greater anticipatory character," which in turn puts them into a closer relationship to time in general' (210).

within the human condition as an intellectual trait that is attributable, in particular, to the emotional space of males (213-47).[15]

Just as Ngai chooses to focus on unprestigious negative emotions—'irritation *instead of* anger, envy *rather than* jealousy, and "stuplimity" *as opposed to* the transcendent feeling of the sublime'[16] (11, emphasis in original)— anxiety, as an 'ugly feeling,' is a canonically 'minor' emotion. Yet 'ugly feelings' share the same negativity of more 'classic emotions' (anger, jealousy, the sublime) in both a semantic sense (in that 'they are saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values') and a syntactic sense (in that 'they are organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction') (11). Nevertheless, Ngai makes a distinction between the 'strongly intentional or object-directed emotions in the philosophical canon' and 'minor affects that are far less intentional or object-directed [ugly feelings]' (20) by discriminating ugly feelings as being diagnostic rather than strategic (in that, unlike fear or jealousy these emotions do not provoke action) and therefore are 'diagnostically concerned with states of *inaction*' (22, emphasis in original). The covert, ironised representation of existential anxiety depicted in the American

[15] While Ngai uses the terms 'emotion' and 'feeling' she explains that 'ugly feelings' are 'less narratively structured, in the sense of being less object-or goal-orientated.' Therefore, ugly feelings are more like 'affects' in line with the definitions offered by Massumi and Grossberg that suggest that an emotion is a feeling with 'function and meaning' and therefore requires a subject while an affect is 'unformed and unstructured' and therefore does not. Ngai quotes Grossberg's assertion that 'unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations' and Massumi's argument that emotion is 'a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point outwardly defined as personal' while affect is a feeling or 'intensity' that is disconnected from 'meaningful sequencing, from narration' (Massumi and Grossberg, quoted in Ngai, 25-26). Ngai, while using the terms 'emotion' and 'affect' almost interchangeably writes that her 'assumption is that affects are *less* formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; *less* "sociolinguistically fixed," but by no means code-free or meaningless; *less* "organized in response to our interpretations of situations," but by no means devoid of organization or diagnostic powers' (emphasis in original, 27).

[16] Ngai writes that stuplimity emerges from 'the dysphoria of shock and boredom…[and may be said to culminate in] an indeterminate affective state that lacks the punctuating "point" of an individuated emotion' (284).

Eccentric mode may be seen as an expression of illegitimate or unwilling anxiety of this kind.

Nicholas Rombes writes that the combination of irony and sincerity in the New Hollywood films—epitomised most fully in Terence Malick's *Badlands* (1973)[17]—enabled audiences to be drawn to unconventional (and often violent) protagonists because they are treated with genuine affection and warmth. Rombes describes the use of irony in the New Hollywood as a treacherous balance of irony and sincerity in which there is 'a level of ironic detachment buried within a larger story that really and genuinely asked audiences to care about its characters' (2003, par 2).[18] The audience could genuinely care about these protagonists not only because the films treated characterisation with sincerity and genuine affection, but also because their plights related to the socio-cultural climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the absence of the cultural and national tumult that presented external and legitimate sites for the existential anxiety for the New Hollywood,[19] the American Eccentric mode depicts internally generated crises of identity and purpose that cannot be immediately mapped on to socio-cultural events or openly expressed cultural conflicts. The existential anxiety exhibited by American Eccentricity is essentially objectless, and thus conforms to Sianne Ngai's notion of anxiety as a weak, or 'ugly', feeling that results from situations in which action is blocked or unfulfilled. The objectless nature of this form of anxiety compounds and intensifies the emotion. Anxiety 'tend[s] to produce an unpleasurable feeling *about* the feeling', (10, emphasis in original) which leaves the individual emotionally disempowered. As anxiety often flattens or interferes with the release of other emotions, it remains

[17] Rombes makes specific note of Martin Sheen's first line 'Give you a dollar to eat that collie' as being both absurd and spoken with absolute sincerity (2003, par 5).

[18] He distinguished this from the cynical, bleak nihilism, and ironic-detachment that characterised mid-1960s cinema such as Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964)

[19] By this I refer to events such as the Watergate scandal, the Vietnam War, and counter-cultural politics to do with (but not limited to) the sexual revolution, women's rights, and civil rights.

within a person for longer than any of the dynamic emotions[20] which subside after a cathartic release (Ngai 2007, 6-7). Ngai thus writes that ugly feelings share a very specific relationship with irony in which the seemingly unjustifiable nature of these feelings produce reflexive responses—that is, anxiety is often confounded with the feeling of being anxious or ashamed of experiencing the original emotion.[21] The unpleasurable reaction to the perception of an ungrounded 'ugly feeling,' such as the feeling of anxiety, is 'more conducive to producing ironic distance in a way that the grander and more prestigious passions…do not' (10). The linkage between irony and sincerity that Rombes identifies in the New Hollywood is intensified in the American Eccentric mode. In American Eccentric films it is no longer the case that 'ironic detachment is buried' beneath larger stories of sincere social or political unrest, but rather that the ironic detachment is brought to the film's surface. As the emotion of anxiety is associated with the notion that one should not be feeling anxiety, American Eccentric films do not address anxiety directly through naturalistic depictions of meaninglessness as portrayed in New Hollywood films—as in the final shot of Alice in her wedding dress standing alone outside a deconsecrated church in Arthur Penn's *Alice's Restaurant* (Penn 1969), or the flames enveloping Wyatt's motorcycle beside the two murdered protagonists at the end of Hopper's *Easy Rider*. In the American Eccentric mode, irony and sarcasm are often employed as means of expressing anxiety, rather than functioning as satirical modes of observation. Sincere anxieties in the American Eccentric mode are presented through ironic articulation and parodic quotation in a manner that allows the spectator to both engage with the gravity of existential angst and to distance herself from it.

[20] Dynamic emotions are powerful emotions like anger.
[21] Because when one experiences anxiety it is often inseparable from the feeling that one *should not* be feeling anxiety.

Figure 3 Alice's isolation. The final shot of *Alice's Restaurant*

Figure 4 The quest for 'America' killed in the final shot of *Easy Rider*

As an expectant emotion, anxiety features complex and intricate spatial dimensions in addition to a particular association with temporality and futurity due to its close relationship with anticipation and deferral. Incorporating the psychological concept of 'projection,' Ngai writes:

> anxiety is invoked not only as an affective response to an anticipated or projected event, but also as something "projected" onto others in the sense of an outward propulsion or displacement—that is, as a quality or feeling the subject refuses to recognize in himself and attempts to locate in another person or thing (usually as a form of naïve or unconscious defense). (210)

For Ngai, the notion of anxiety as being externally 'projected' not only acts as a displacement strategy, but as a vehicle for anxiety to assume a specific form (212) in which it emerges 'as a general effect of spatialization involving thrown, hurled, or forcibly displaced objects' (215). In terms of the shift from the manifestations of existential anxiety in the New Hollywood to the American Eccentric mode, the notion of projection is fundamental. Films in the New Hollywood demonstrate existential anxiety as embodied in socio-cultural crises through unequivocal criticism and open questioning of authority, institutions, national mythology, and assumed cultural norms and behaviours. Films like *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese 1976) portray

questions of personal freedom and obligation through violent anger, and frustrations directed toward vulnerable systems of government and easily compromised public protection authorities with a deeply unsettling lack of peaceful, satisfactory resolution. Both *Midnight Cowboy* (Schlesinger 1969) and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (Altman 1971) query the notion of national identity in the cultural milieu of 1960s and 1970s America through depictions of national frontier mythology and the figure of the cowboy as fundamentally entwined with unethical practice, prostitution, violent crime, capitalist greed, and ultimately failure. While these illustrations of existential anxiety are evident in the New Hollywood through cultural and socio-political concerns that were palpable in society at the time through popular discourse, political demonstrations, music, and art,[22] the depictions of existential

[22] In his article 'The Rise and Fall of an International Counterculture, 1960-1975' (2009) Jeremi Suri describes the emergence of an international counterculture (particularly in the United States and Western Europe) in the mid-1960s. He writes 'Existential angst was not unique to the period, but it became pervasive in a context of heightened promises about a better life and strong fears about the political implications of social deviance. Ideological competition in the Cold War encouraged citizens to look beyond material factors alone, and to seek a deeper meaning in their daily activities' (46). Suri writes that despite these promises of 'a better life', many citizens in the U.S. did not 'feel freer', and as a result an 'international counterculture developed in response to dissatisfaction with the dominant culture of the Cold War…it gave voice to criticisms of the basic social assumptions—about work, marriage, and family—connected to the politics of the era. The claims of the international counterculture were not unique. Many of the criticisms of patriarchy, racism, injustice, and imperialism that they voiced had long histories—histories that 1960s activists benefited from, whether they acknowledged them or not. Many of the strategies that they employed—community organizing, nonviolent demonstrations, public spectacle and humor, and selective terror—also had strong antecedents. The aims and techniques of the counterculture were radical, but also traditional' (46). Suri sees these antecedents as the bohemian subcultures of urban communities that had been fostering young artist groups that challenged the dominant cultural and societal norms since the early twentieth century. He writes 'Modern art, literature, and music emerged from these communities, as did new personal habits. Sexual liberation and the social uses of new drugs became identifying characteristics for these cultural groups. Their behavior embodied political dissent, but it centered more directly on cultural rebellion and experimentation' (46) Suri writes that in the decades following World War II that cultural rebellion again became common with urbanised industrialised societies where groups of 'young citizens articulated feelings of "alienation." Rock music, beat poetry, and abstract expressionist art voiced common criticisms of how the pressures of social conformity destroyed individualism. Through these media, and others, many European and American youth sought to reassert their individuality and their connection to something they viewed as "nature," as opposed to the "unnatural" industrial world advertised around them. Similarly, advocates of free living, free love, and free drugs claimed that they were returning human beings to the pursuit of pleasure, rather than state-manipulated wealth and power. By the early 1960s, these cultural critiques had attained widespread public recognition on both sides of the Atlantic' (47). Suri writes that

anxiety in the American Eccentric mode are projected in an ironised manner through deflective language, amusing portrayals of neuroses, allusion, parody, and are isolated in individual instances. For example, Hal Hartley presents issues of romantic connection, artistic authenticity, and emotional isolation in *Henry Fool* (1997) through the usual plight of a socially isolated, awkward garbage-man who is considered by his family and co-workers to be 'a retard,' Simon Grim (James Urbaniak), and the influence of a maladroit, reprobate poet, Henry Fool (Thomas Jay Ryan). The mysterious, verbose, epicurean Henry carries the evidence of his criminal past in volumes of notebooks labelled 'My Confession'. Henry describes his 'Confession' as:

> a pretext for a far more expansive consideration of general truths. It's a philosophy. A poetics. A politics, if you will. A literature of protest. A novel of ideas. A pornographic magazine of truly comic-book proportions. It is, in the end, whatever the hell I want it to be. And when I'm through with it, it's gonna blow a hole this wide...straight through the world's idea of itself.

Henry's opus is uniformly rejected by all who read it. Nevertheless, when he discovers that Simon naturally writes in iambic pentameter, Henry successfully initiates him into the world of poetry and literature, and Simon's controversial pornographic poetry eventually is awarded a Nobel Prize. Henry Fool, on the other hand, is forced by his criminal past to swiftly escape from the country by assuming Simon's identity, leaving behind his unhappy and deeply troubled marriage and child. Hartley's Henry demonstrates the objectless anxiety explored by Ngai. Early

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although this international counterculture occupied all areas of society (unlike their bohemian predecessors), and were avidly self-critical, the movement eventually amounted more to an attitude than a political revolution—a 'spirit' that transformed behaviours and interpersonal relations. It was largely a generational divide that saw 'The "wise men" [the generation of older political leaders] focused on military power, not social change. Most of all, the "wise men" were part of a conservative old culture of suits and big band dances, not a new culture of jeans and rock'n'roll. The "wise men" sought to preserve their way of life against challenges from within; the new men and women sought to transform basic assumptions about politics, foreign policy, and daily life. The new men and women also sought to consume a popular culture of personal freedom more fully, without the traditional restrictions imposed by an inherited culture of self-control and public discipline. Dissent was ideological, and it was fun' (53)

in the film, Henry responds to Simon's assertion 'it hurts to breathe' with a deadpan, and broad affirmation, 'of course it does.' Where Simon's complaint refers to his physical condition (the pain he feels due to the broken ribs he has sustained from a brutal attack), Henry's response is a non-specific statement on the crisis of human existence.

Figure 5 Simon 'It hurts to breathe'

The concept of projection, and the noticeable shift from the New Hollywood cultural manifestations and naturalistic depictions to the individual, ironic, reflexive articulations in the American Eccentric, maps Ngai's notion that 'the question of timing that one normally associates with anxiety's affective grammar (When?) can also become a question of location (Where?)' (212)—that is, throughout both the cinema of the New Hollywood and the American Eccentric mode the problem of 'When' remains constant, while the iteration of 'Where' is dispersedly relocated through postmodern cinematic techniques.

American Eccentricity employs irony in conjunction (and simultaneously) with sincerity in order to reveal and conceal genuine existential concerns. The complex balances of ironic/sincere expression vary greatly within a single film, which creates a cinematic texture that is at once entertaining and engaging, and

serious and contemplative. I use the term irony to refer to a 'discursive strategy operating at the level of language (verbal) or form (musical, visual, textual)' (Hutcheon 1994, 10). For Linda Hutcheon, irony is not a 'static rhetorical tool to be deployed' but something that 'happens' (in contrast to something that simply exists) as a constituent of a practice of communication that emerges out of 'the relations between meanings, but also between people and utterances and, sometimes, between intentions and interpretations' (13). Irony is not simply a process by which the ironic meaning of a statement equates to the 'unsaid' in opposition to the 'said'. Rather irony 'happens'—it relies on the space between (and including) the said and the (plural) unsaid. In this space meanings interact in an inclusive and relational manner with a critical edge that is created by contextual framing, which in turn creates the 'ironic' meaning (12). This critical edge 'is an affective "charge" to irony that cannot be ignored and that cannot be separated from its political use if it is to account for the range of emotional response (from anger to delight) and the various degrees of motivation and proximity (from distanced detachment to passionate engagement)' (15).

Hutcheon is careful to note the importance of interpretation in making irony happen; that is, it is the interpreter (rather than the ironist) who assigns irony to an utterance, and thereafter ascertains what specific ironic meaning the utterance offers (11). Irony is interpretative and intentional from the position of the interpreter, 'it is the making or inferring of *meaning* in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an *attitude* toward both the said and the unsaid…however [from the point of view of the ironist], irony is the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented' (11, emphasis in original). Thus, both the interpreter and the ironist are assigned agency and intention. Irony is asymmetrical in that the balance between the said and the unsaid is uneven, privileging the unsaid. What (in part) tips the balance toward the unsaid is irony's edge, the implications attributed to the utterance by the ironist or

interpreter. These implications inherently involve an attitude of judgement, or axiology, and thus usher in the affective dimension of ironic discourse as a communicative process (37). Ironic meaning incorporates three major semantic characteristics: it is relational (in that it operates not only between the meaning of utterances—the said and unsaid, but also between the social elements—the ironist, interpreter, and the target of the utterance); inclusive (the occurrence of double, or multiple meanings simultaneously without the need to reject that which is 'literal'); and differential (58-60). Irony is politically transideological and multivalent, and thus has an affective dimension by which it acts as a contextualising force that brings various discourses into conflict.

The impact of irony in the American Eccentric mode is evident in the sequence in Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* (2006) in which Private Pilot Abilene (Justin Timberlake) injects the fictional drug 'Fluid Karma' into his neck and collapses to the ground in a drug-affected stupor. In the film, 'Fluid Karma' is a psychedelic drug that (in one of its many forms)[23] allows its users to 'travel or "bleed" through time' (Shaviro 2010, 86). In this sequence the spectator is privy to Abilene's subjective hallucinatory experience as a lip-synched music video to The Killers' song 'All These Things That I've Done' (2004). Abilene, wearing a blood stained white t-shirt and dog tag necklace, emerges from a visually distorted background to face the camera as he 'performs' the musical number while a chorus of back-up dancers, dressed in identical pornographic nurse uniforms, execute a highly sexualised routine. The distinct irony of this sequence is Abilene's performance of the song's refrain 'I got soul, but I'm not a soldier' as he looks straight toward the camera with a wry smile. In order for the interpreter to recognise the irony of this utterance, she must read this refrain not simply as a musical number placed into the film text, but rather as a subversive disconnect between action and

[23] We are told that 'Fluid Karma' is available in a range of colours, Abilene describes them to his customer by saying—'Green–you dream, blue–in an hour you feel new. You can forget about Mellow Yellow and Agent Orange, because I'm giving you Blood Red.'

lyrics. Throughout the film it emerges that Abilene is both the film's narrator and an Iraq War veteran who has been shot during 'friendly fire'. Thus, he most certainly is a 'soldier.' Furthermore, the importance of the repeated assertion of 'having soul' is ironised in Abilene's reflexive smile, as well as in the disconnect between this celebrated line emphasised by the backing vocals provided in the song by the gospel choir 'The Sweet Inspirations', and the sexual, debauched, intoxicated gestures performed by Abilene and the back-up dancers.[24]

Kelly complicates the critical edge of this ironic sequence by rendering Abilene's hallucination in with a flattened aesthetic. His depraved behaviour and knowing smile not only reflexively demonstrates the incongruity of the assertion 'I've got soul, but I'm not a soldier' with the presented narrative, but the hallucinatory sequence appears largely disaffected—the psychedelic drug dampens affect rather than providing euphoria or illumination. The intensity of experience present in Peter Fonda's New Hollywood LSD trips (*The Trip* [Corman 1967], *Easy Rider*) is reimagined by Kelly with a compression, or dulling, of affect. The experience is presented as an ironic music video simulation, which allows the deviations from naturalism and narrative consistency to be attributed to the music video genre's form and style, rather than as intense (affected) experience. The lyrics (although undoubtedly serving a reflexive narrative purpose) and music are appropriated as pastiche. Abilene does not parody, or referentially recite the song's lyrics in song or speech, rather he mouths the words sung by Brandon Flowers[25] on the existing recording with an amused, but slightly bored expression. This fusion of boredom and amusement perpetuates the 'coolness' of the sequence, and indeed Abilene's character. Fantasy is thus presented as something to retreat into, and Abilene's 'cool' performance in this sequence ironises his description of the drug as a

[24] Abilene gulps down cans of Budweiser and pours the beer over his head in a display reminiscent of a fraternity party fantasy akin to those present in *Old School* (Phillips 2003), or *National Lampoon's Animal House* (Landis 1978).

[25] Brandon Flowers is the lead singer of The Killers.

tool for existential enlightenment—'when you take the blood train, you talk to God without even seeing him. You hear his voice and you see his disciples, they appear like angels under a sea of black umbrellas. Angels that can see through time.'

Figure 6 Pilot Abilene's dance sequence

Like all communication acts, irony is culture-specific in that it rests on common memories and understanding, and the shared ideologies of the addresser and the addressee (Hutcheon, 98). As noted above, the irony present in Pilot Abilene's hallucination sequence relies on the audience recognising the flatness of Timberlake's performance and the disconnection between the lyrics and action. If the interpreter further recognises the name of band 'The Killers', and song's title 'All These Things I have Done' another ironic layer evolves in reference to Abilene's role as a Iraq War veteran. If the interpreter considers the notion of Fluid Karma enabling the user to 'bleed through time' and recognises the textual allusions within this sequence, the present irony is deepened and pluralised. Abilene's question to his drug-seeking customer 'Do you bleed?' (delivered in the manner of a military order) at the commencement of this sequence positions it in dialogue with Shakespeare's Shylock's complex plea for equality 'if you prick us, do we not bleed?' in *The Merchant of Venice*. This intertextual linkage connects the sequence with universal notions of humanism (and, perhaps more problematically, the human capacity for vengeance) and a high-culture literary canon, however, the interpreter may complicate this connection by recognising the appearance of the scantily clad nurses as recalling the low-culture pornography genre. Yet, these women may also be recognised as a contemporary incarnation of Busby Berkeley's intricately choreographed musical-dance sequences, or, a playful allusion to the drug-infused dream sequence 'Gutterballs' in the Coen brothers' *The Big Lebowski* (1998). The kaleidoscopic imagery and movement of Berkeley's 'By a Waterfall' sequence in Lloyd Bacon's *Footlight Parade* (1933), and the manipulated spatiality of the 'Gutterballs' sequence here is reproduced as a depthless simulation. Unlike the effects of hallucination for *The Big Lebowski*'s The Dude—whose fears and desires are melded into a densely saturated dreamscape—Abilene's hallucination is not presented as a revelatory insight into his anxieties through the 'trippy' lens of a psychedelic drug, but rather a numb testosterone driven fantasy.

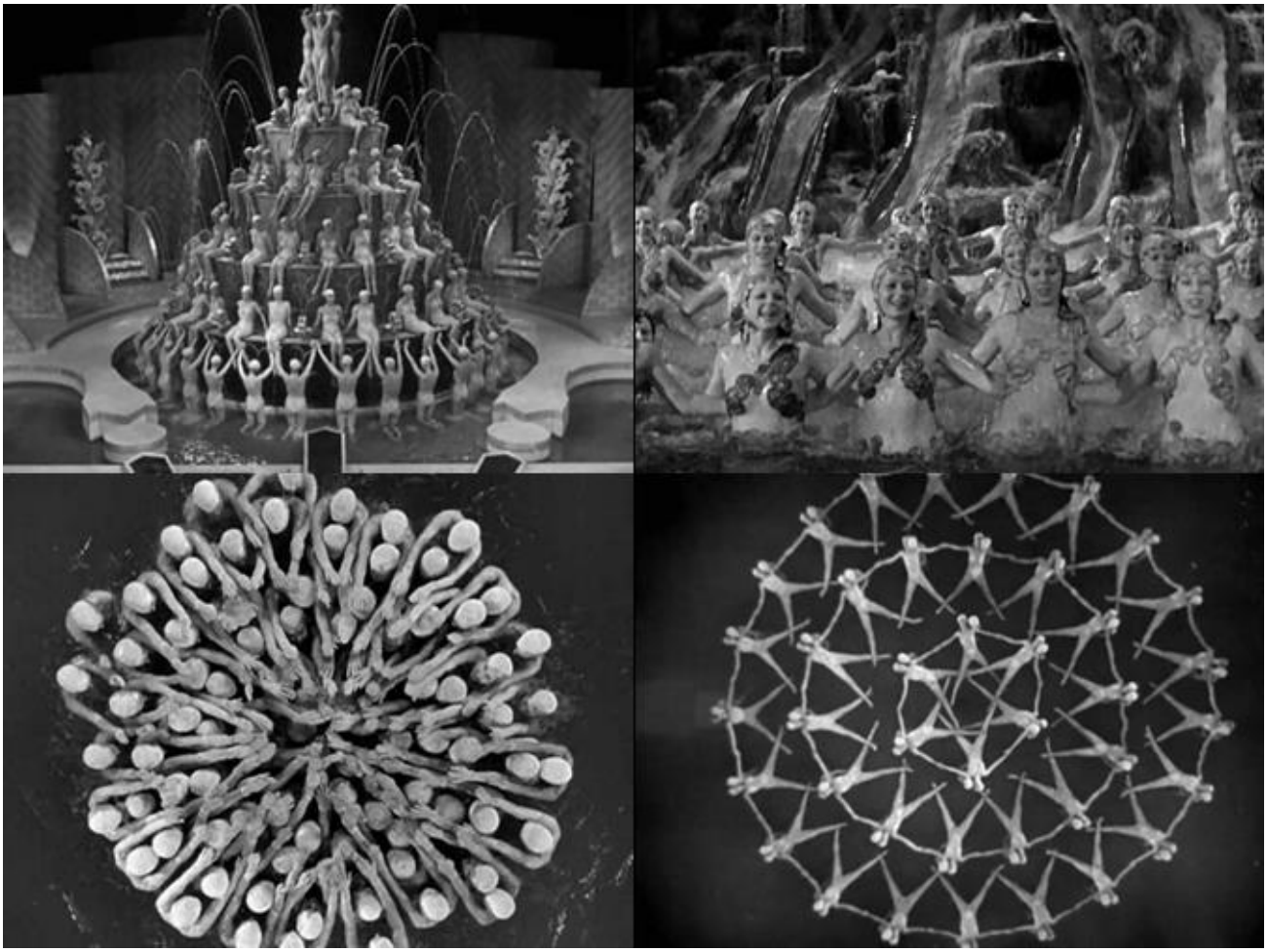

Figure 7 Busby Berkeley's 'By a Waterfall' sequence

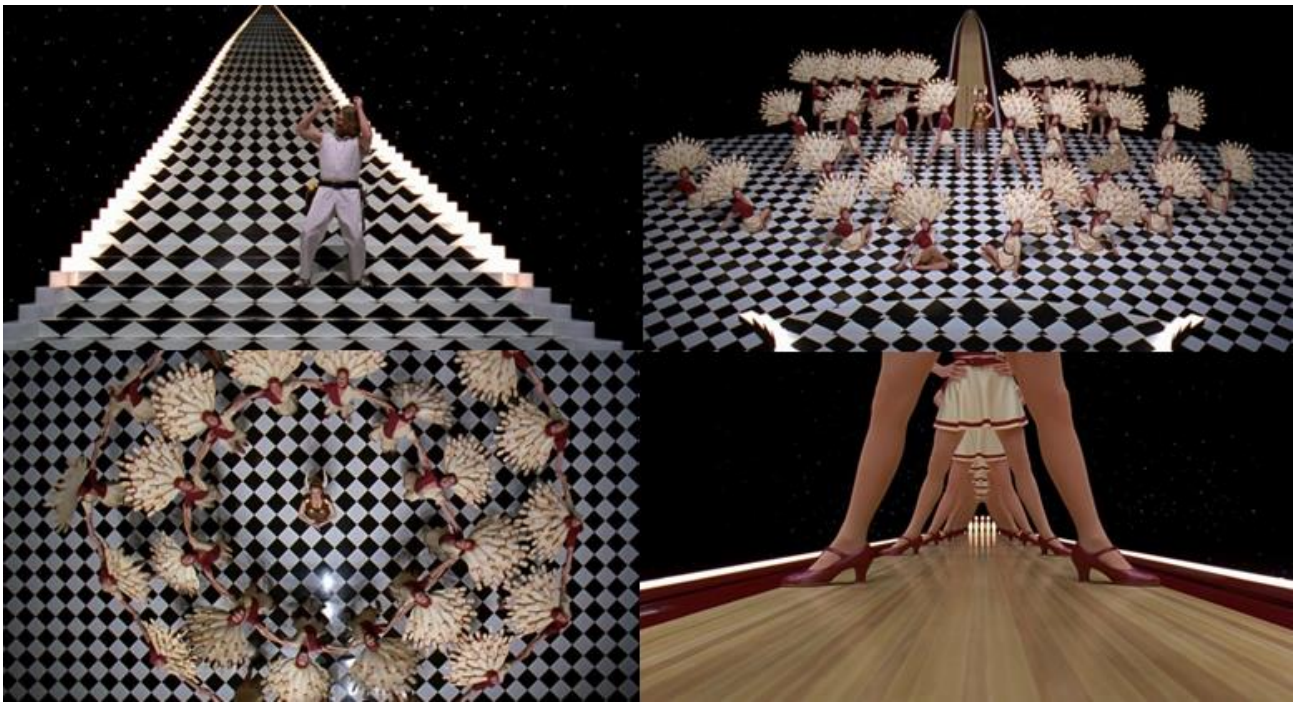

Figure 8 The Big Lebowski 'Gutterballs' sequence

Figure 9 Pilot Abilene's hallucination

Additionally, the casting of Justin Timberlake as Pilot Abilene can be read as ironic within this sequence. Timberlake is a popstar whose masculine physicality (and lyrics) in his own music videos have established a philanderer persona; the fact that here Timberlake does not sing with his own voice, but rather lip-synchs while presenting an anaesthetised version of his usual eroticism highlights the performative nature of this sequence and the existentialist claim to 'have soul' is further ironised. Each layer of recognition creates multidirectional ironic meaning for the interpreter. The sequence becomes simultaneously concerned with existential and humanist issues, literary allusion and parody, high and low cultures, and its own position within film history.

In her book, *American Smart Cinema*, Claire Perkins builds on Jeffrey Sconce's original formulation of 'smart' cinema[26] to define a film cycle that employs as its signature a 'blank' ironic tone. Smart cinema, according to Sconce and Perkins emerged in the 1990s with filmmakers including (but not limited to) Todd Solondz, Wes Anderson, Whit Stillman, Charlie Kaufman, and Noah Baumbach. While American Eccentricity shares with smart film the use of irony as a defining feature

[26] A concept which is addressed in Chapter Two.

(among other similar aesthetic and dramatic techniques), irony functions to vastly different ends between the categories. Perkins writes that films in the smart tendency use popular cultural references, irony, and intertextual quotation in order to create an apathetic, blank tone, and ironic detachment while maintaining the traditional values of human connection and optimism present in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Perkins discusses the role and formulation of irony in smart cinema through Hutcheon's work, but deviates from it because she sees Hutcheon as primarily interested in the negative force of irony's power of repetition, while she aims to analyse the positive, aesthetic consequences that might arise in the process of quotation. Where, in the American Eccentric mode, irony works to mediate sincere anxieties, Perkins states that the role of irony in the smart cinema works to create a tone of detachment, but also acts as a 'strategic positioning in relation to the history of cinema and popular culture' (13). The tonal detachment that is created through irony affords smart cinema a means of 'demonstrating their recognition of their own contingency. Beyond this, though, they also demonstrate their awareness of this recognition as their own utterance, and therefore the contradiction at the heart of an ironic position' (15). That is, like American Eccentricity, smart cinema does not withdraw from what it states by means of irony—however, where American Eccentricity uses ironic articulation as in a multidirectional sense to negotiate anxiety, smart cinema always acknowledges the double-edged nature of ironic expression in order to achieve, and maintain, tonal detachment.

Importantly for my work on irony and the American Eccentric mode, Hutcheon notes that not all irony is humorous (just as not all humour is ironic), but also that irony that is humorous may also be absolutely serious. Hutcheon has created a continuum of the functions of irony that demonstrate its multivalent, plural uses and mechanics: reinforcing, complicating, ludic, distancing, self-protective, provisional, oppositional, assailing, and aggregative. These functions are seen as tensions, with a range of affective charges between positive and negative

interpretations along a scale (Hutcheon, 46-8). Within her continuum of functions, Hutcheon includes the use of irony as a distancing mechanism. This, for Hutcheon, does not connote an unaffected response, but rather suggests variations on the function of 'distance' that may include non-commitment (the refusal of engagement) or indifference, 'Olympian disdain and superiority' (49), or may be seen as a vehicle for ascertaining a new perspective for consideration. The notion of irony as a distancing mechanism in order to attain new perspectives incorporates the view that irony evades the tyranny of expectant explicit judgment ('especially at a time when such judgements might not be either appropriate or desirable' [Hutcheon, 50]). The distancing effect of irony is not employed in American Eccentric films simply in order to remove affective meaning from articulation—although this does regularly occur; it also is incorporated in the contemplative sense of the 'new perspective.' As illustrated in the example of Abilene's drug-induced dream sequence, the challenge, and indeed textual implication of the multifaceted nature of irony's use in the American Eccentric mode is enriched by the recognition, interpretation, and differentiation between variations in deployment. 'Irony (as distinct from deception) [is] where a spoken meaning is played off against implied but unspoken meanings – with some evaluative edge; …this sort of irony can be deliberate, but need not be; …there will likely be some sort of culturally agreed upon markers in the utterance and/or in the enunciative context to signal both that irony is in play and how it is to be interpreted' (96). In this way irony in the American Eccentric mode functions as a mechanism for distancing and for the pluralisation of meaning, in order to reveal an overall sense of anxiety akin to that expressed by New Hollywood filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s, with the significant difference that this produces a sense of anxiety that no longer has external elements on which to hang for legitimisation.

iii Existing Classifications and the American Eccentric Mode

In recent years numerous works have emerged that identify the shift in tone and ideology of American cinema in the late 1990s, including Jeffrey Sconce's and Claire Perkins' work on smart cinema, Michael Newman's 'indie', James MacDowell's 'quirky', and Derek Hill's '(New) American New Wave'. Other works have sought to broadly categorise large sections of cinematic (and broader cultural) discourse, or formulate new cultural movements, such as Jim Collins's 'New Sincerity', and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's 'metamodernism'. American Eccentricity should be considered in relation to these concepts and categories, both in terms of similarity and difference. I do not mean to state that categorising a film as an American Eccentric work is a classification to the exclusion of all others, as at times it does intersect with aspects of these broader terms; however, as a mode of cinematic articulation, American Eccentricity refers to a specific set of consistent traits employed in several configurations and concentrations. These traits are textual, and thus are intrinsic to the films rather than reliant on broader audience recognition for categorisation. In order to situate American Eccentricity within the larger contemporary cinematic discourse, and differentiate the mode from other forms of cinematic articulation, each chapter of this thesis will address a prominent component of the mode, and analyse the implications of these components in relation to existing theoretical positions.

Chapter One examines the role of genre subversion and transgression in the American Eccentric mode through close analysis of the road movie genre. This chapter investigates the New Hollywood road film as a genre in dialogue with the Western, Western frontier mythology, the failed American Dream, and the countercultural zeitgeist. Through close readings of *Easy Rider* and *Two Lane Blacktop* (Hellman 1971) the tropes and on-screen manifestation of core existential anxieties as depicted in the New Hollywood are established. I then develop and examine how

the key elements of the New Hollywood road film have been subverted in the American Eccentric mode through analysis of Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) and Charlie Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze 1999). In this chapter, I argue that in the American Eccentric mode the road occupies a liminal space—both in literal and figural terms. The dual liminality of the road space causes a sense of unease and anxiety for the travellers. American Eccentric protagonists are caught between the optimism of the liberating road experience and the simultaneous awareness of its failure in the tradition of the New Hollywood cinema. The subversions of genre, and the texture (that is, their distinctive structural and aesthetic compositions) of the American Eccentric road films, are examined through Fredric Jameson's and Linda Hutcheon's theories of postmodernism (Jameson 1984; Hutcheon 2002), and in relation to Jim Collins' New Sincerity (1993). Through Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (2000), I explore how American Eccentricity aligns with Collins' notion of a genericity grounded in eclectic and ironic juxtaposition.

Chapter Two investigates a shift in the creation of on-screen characters and audience alignment from the New Hollywood to the American Eccentric mode. I configure the construction of characters in the New Hollywood as the portrayal of the 'idealised' or 'cinematised' peer—figures like *The Graduate*'s Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) or *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*'s (Scorsese 1974) Alice Hyatt (Ellen Burstyn). The cinematised peer mode of characterisation promotes an alignment with a figure that is able to be imagined, and identified with, outside the confines of the cinema. I argue that throughout American Eccentric films a contrasting mode of characterisation takes place. I call this form of characterisation the 'pure cinematic character'. Pure cinematic characterisation is the creation of characters that are always viewed from a distanced position, facilitated by, and confined to, a particular film's diegesis. Unlike the cinematised peer, these characters do not promote audience alignment beyond the distinct parameters of each

individual film, rather their empathetic connection with the audience is consciously limited to each film's screen-time. Through analysis of Wes Anderson's films, I contend that these pure cinematic characters are distinctive, yet unidentifiable as representations of real people. I read the textual construction of pure cinematic characters as a characteristic of the American Eccentric mode in relation to the concept of American smart film proposed by Jeffrey Sconce's article 'Irony, nihilism and the new American "smart" film' (2002), and Claire Perkins' book *American Smart Cinema* (2012). Smart cinema, in both Sconce's and Perkins' terms, takes irony as its mark of distinction as a sensibility separate from other cinematic traditions. Irony and reflexivity 'on the basis of the films' awareness of film history and their own place as cultural objects' (Perkins 14) is the hallmark of the smart sensibility, and bifurcates audiences into groups that recognise and understand the ironic positions taken by the text and those who do not. In contrast to this exclusory form of ironic positioning, the American Eccentric mode employs irony *with* sincerity to perform dramatic and thematic functions. American Eccentricity explores the tension between irony and sincerity through fluctuations between the two modes of expression. These films incorporate this tension as a textual mediation in order to conceal and reveal underlying existential anxiety.

Chapter Three further develops an aspect of pure cinematic characterisation through the aesthetic and dramatic function of hyper-dialogue. Hyper-dialogue is the intensified, unevenly fluctuating, and often ironically inflected use of dialogue in the place of action that stems from the presence of a deep, unspoken anxiety in hyperbolically articulate characters. Through a close comparative reading of David O. Russell's *I Heart Huckabees*, and Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), I examine hyper-dialogue as a key stylistic and dramatic technique that depicts the transition from the identifiable character anxiety present in the New Hollywood through the dramatic use of silences and naturalistic dialogue, to the continually deferred anxiety present in the American Eccentric mode through incessant talking. The textures of

both hyper-dialogue, and the plain speaking naturalism often presented in the New Hollywood are examined through Jill Nelmes' (2010a) analyses of the screenplay, as well as Sarah Kozloff's (2000) writing on film sound and dialogue. The chapter distinguishes hyper-dialogue as dialogue in the place of action from the concepts outlined in speech-act theory, first introduced by John L. Austin. The employment of fluctuating yet mutually operating irony/sincerity in the American Eccentric mode is analysed in this chapter in relation to Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's metamodernism (2010): the phenomenon of interwoven irony and sincerity as an emerging structure of feeling .

Chapter Four discusses how American Eccentric films configure cinematic worlds that (unlike those inhabited by the New Hollywood's cinematised peers) highlight their constructed nature. Where many New Hollywood films place their naturalistic characters (idealised peers) within cinematic diegeses that reflect either an objective or subjective reality (or both), American Eccentric films create cinematic worlds that are recognisable, yet impossible realities. This chapter investigates the construction of the American Eccentric world as an atemporal, achronological, porous cinematic space that remains congruous with pure cinematic characters and their use of hyper-dialogue. I propose that, despite the nature of these worlds as distinctly un-real and un-naturalistic spaces, the audience can (at least partially) be immersed in these uniquely assembled worlds, and affected by their narratives.

The aesthetic and textual construction of these worlds is analysed in concert with James MacDowell's concept of the quirky (2010), which he aligns with a new structure of feeling that builds on Jim Collins' New Sincerity and Vermeulen and van den Akker's metamodernism. This chapter investigates similarities and differences in the function of ironic humour as a distancing mechanism in the American Eccentric mode and the 'quirky' through the creation of cinematic worlds. Humour, in the quirky, often results from an awkward, dual affective reaction in the

spectator in response to characters being rendered as simultaneously pathetic and poignant (MacDowell 2010, 3). While there is a clear and informative relationship with the quirky in the American Eccentric mode, humour and ironic distance do not place the spectator in an evaluative position in relation to characters such that they are viewed as pathetic or awkward. Rather, the use of irony and reflexivity function in order to create, in MacDowell's terms, an elasticised relationship with the poignancy of the character's anxiety. Through close analysis of Charlie Kaufman's depictions of New York, Todd Haynes' cross-temporal *I'm Not There* (2007), and P.T. Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999), this chapter conceptualises these cinematic spaces as knowingly fictional yet deeply affecting spaces.

This thesis concludes by delineating American Eccentricity's parameters as a mode, rather than a genre cycle (as suggested by Perkins [2012] in relation to smart cinema), an auteurist phenomenon (as advocated by Mayshark [2007] and White [2004]), or a film movement (as proposed by Derek Hill [2008]). This chapter outlines the shortcomings of these previous categorisations and suggests that analysing these films collectively as a mode is a more productive means for cinematic, and cultural analysis. This chapter takes into account that at the time of writing my own works on American Eccentricity are the only published pieces that define this form of filmmaking in terms of modality.[27] Many writers on the filmmakers that I identify as having produced films within the American Eccentric mode have been referenced in relation to Sconce's smart cinema, thereby forming a large catch-all category for any contemporary film with an ironic bent that falls beyond the parameters of the mainstream. While American Eccentricity certainly shares some stylistic and aesthetic practices (and in Perkins' formulation, some thematic concerns) with smart cinema the terms are not synonymous or interchangeable. While there are virtues to Sconce's and Perkins' formulations, the terms 'sensibility' and 'tendency' are

[27] See 'The sounds of silence: hyper-dialogue and American Eccentricity' (2013) and 'Cast of Characters: Wes Anderson and Pure Cinematic Characterization' (2014).

'admittedly vague' (Sconce 351) and deliberately 'nebulous' (Perkins 4)—therefore, these formulations lack the specificity required to analyse American Eccentricity. I do not discount, however, the possibility of American Eccentricity operating within the metamodern structure of feeling (to use Raymond Williams' [1977] term), alongside other forms of expression[28] because, as James MacDowell writes, (as opposed to 'movement', 'era', or 'period')'the term 'structure of feeling' is modest and accounts for the possibility of there being multiples structures of feeling 'at play in a society and culture at any one time' (2011). However, as a mode, American Eccentricity utilises clear and distinct formal aspects that can be traced. In order for a film to be considered within the American Eccentric mode it must:

1) interact with allusion, parody, and intertextuality formally (in terms of genre and metacinematic depiction) and playfully/cinephilically;
2) distance its sincere thematic underpinnings through a cinematic surface that at times appears 'quirky', amusing, or absurd;
3) employ a form of ironic expression that is both reflexive and sincere;
4) enable audience identification with characters and within cinematic worlds that are clearly constructed;

and, above all

5) affectively and intellectually engage an experience of existential anxiety.

iv. American Eccentricity Beyond 'Indie' Categorisation

Since the 1990s, there has been a scholarly focus on the rise of 'indiewood' filmmaking. Geoff King's expansive and comprehensive work on indie film has offered the most complete examination of the indiewood mode of production and aesthetic. King writes that indiewood is most clearly defined on an institutional/

[28] Alongside other forms of expression such as Vermeulen and van den Akker note Raoul Eschelmann's performatism, MacDowell's quirky, the New Sincerity, The New Weird Generation, Remodernism, Reconstructivism, Freak Folk, Stuckism, and Renewalism.

industrial level, but that these production contingencies have a specific relationship to the textual elements of the films (2009, 4). In general terms indiewood has been used to refer to an aesthetic and economic model of unconventional, alternative (indie) films made in partnership with the Hollywood studios, predominantly (though notably not exclusively) through specialty divisions, such as Fox Searchlight or Miramax (or, more currently, the Weinstein Company). While the existing American Eccentric films have largely inhabited this industrial, institutional, and commercial sphere (although there is no necessary criterion to do so), to discuss American Eccentricity purely in its relationship to Hollywood is limiting. Contrary to a model of categorisation based on films that are conceived of as inhabiting a space between the 'blurred economic and aesthetic intersection of Hollywood and "independent" American cinema' (MacDowell 2012, 8), American Eccentricity is a mode that is defined by textual characteristics and strategies. While immediate differences can be established between King's indiewood and American Eccentricity (King's useful formulation is delineated on industrial, institutional, and textual grounds), there is some need to differentiate American Eccentricity from less defined 'indie' labels, such as that developed by Michael Newman in his book *Indie: An American Film Culture* (2011).

Indie, as used by Newman, does not refer specifically to an economic model of production (as the term 'independent' may previously have done),[29] but rather to a classification of feature films of the Sundance-Miramax era[30] produced outside the large popular, commercial Hollywood studios, and exhibited away from the

[29] As Newman notes, the term 'independent' has been applied to American film since the early days of film, and although the term has undergone numerous shifts in terms of specificity, it has always referred to a mode of production, distribution, and exhibition outside of the dominant forms (3).
[30] 'Sundance' is an annual film festival held in Utah, USA, that commonly attracts and showcases independent films. 'Miramax' is a company that was founded and owned by the Weinstein brothers until the early 1990s (when it was sold to The Walt Disney Company) renowned for the production and distribution of many commercially successful independent films. See Peter Biskind's *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (2005) for an in depth industry culture account of this era.

megaplexes. Due to the formation of mini-major studios and specialty divisions of Hollywood studios (which are part of larger media conglomerates) in the Sundance-Miramax era, Newman argues that an industrial definition of indie (and in turn, mainstream) has become less illustrative and germane than it had previously been (5). He makes the point that if the category of indie were to be purely assigned to those films made outside of Hollywood studios, big budget mainstream films such as *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (Cameron 1991), the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy (Lucas 1999, 2002, 2005), the *Saw* franchise (Wan 2004; Bousman 2005, 2006, 2007; Hackl 2008; Greutert 2009, 2010), the first two films in the *Hostel* series (Roth 2005, 2007), and *The Twilight Saga* (Hardwicke 2008; Weitz 2009; Slade 2010; Condon 2011, 2012) films would be considered as indie as films like *sex, lies, and videotape*, *Clerks* (Smith 1994), and *Frances Ha* (Baumbach 2012). In response to this, Newman posits that indie cinema is a cultural category that functions 'through repeated use in multiple discursive sites, and [is] best understood as [it is] implemented by communities invested in their meanings' (8). Newman writes:

> Films find their way into the category [indie film] through discursive positioning, which is partly a matter of locating a film's similarity to established central instances of indie film—whether by textual or contextual (including industrial) criteria. Thus some films might be stronger or weaker examples of indie cinema; some are more central, and some are peripheral or problematic. There is no formula for inclusion, no fixed set or contextual conditions we can apply. Films like Lionsgate's genre releases might be weaker examples, while those films of indie auteurs like Richard Linklater or Hal Hartley might be stronger ones. Textual and economic criteria factor into these judgements but they will not function as necessary and sufficient conditions for inclusion. (8-9)

Indie, in Newman's definition, places the cinematic object in a quasi- or perceived oppositional relationship to Hollywood in terms of economic model, modes of production, the onscreen presentation of storytelling and audio-visual aesthetics, and of distribution, exhibition, and audience reception. He writes that this relationship to Hollywood in turn creates and perpetuates an indie film culture that

sees itself as more culturally legitimate and sophisticated than mainstream cinema in that it has the potential for counter-hegemonic representation and political change. However, as the audience for indie cinema is demographically narrower than that of mainstream cinema, and is considered to be generally urban, well-educated, and affluent, indie culture functions as an outlet for high-middlebrow culture by offering indie film as an elite alternative to mainstream cinema (1-2).[31] Newman correctly refutes any suggestion that indie functions as a genre (such claims have recently been made by Sherry B. Ortner's ethnographic account in *Not Hollywood: Independent Cinema at the Twilight of the American Dream* [2013]); for Newman, the genre argument lacks textual specificity. Nor can indie be described as a 'group style' (in the vein of the Soviet Montage school of the 1920s and 1930s) with distinct visual elements and supporting ideologies (Newman, 22).[32] Rather than creating a category that includes and excludes films on the basis of textual attributes and industrial factors, Newman argues that the only means of determination of films into this category is to analyse whether or not the audience regards a film as 'indie' (12). Newman writes,

> Indies are those films considered within the institutions of American film culture to be indies, regardless of their budget, producer, distributor, director, and cast, and regardless of their genre, theme, style, and tone. The category exists only as it is useful to the whole circuit of producers and consumers that makes independent cinema what it is. (23)

[31] Newman writes that this high-middlebrow culture surrounding indie cinema inherits some of the social functions that had previously been performed by foreign art films (2).

[32] Ortner claims that American independent filmmakers, as members of 'Gen X', depict anger, frustration, and depression in response to their problematic social condition in their films. Due to the frequency of these recurrent themes, Ortner categorises independent cinema is an artistic genre. In support of this assertion Ortner notes the prevalence of 'moral ambiguity', a number of films centred on themes of paedophilia, and the general 'darkness' or 'edginess' of the mood and look of the films. For full review see: Kim Wilkins "Ortner, Sherry B., Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream." *Media International Australia* no. No 146, February 2013 (Investigating Public Service Media as Hybrid Arrangements):198-199.

Many, if not all, existing American Eccentric films can be seen to function within these inclusive and loose parameters of the 'indie' film. This is in part because films within Newman's indie category range dramatically in style, approach, subject matter and industrial method. The idea that a film is indie if is considered as such by the authorising 'American film culture' is problematic given the significant number of crossover productions between the U.S. and other countries, such as David Lynch's French-American film *Lost Highway* (1997), or Walter Salles' international co-production *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), as it does not account for the influences of other national cinemas or film cultures. Indie categorisation, in Newman's sense, is more reliant on audience perception in a specifically American context, than textual aspects, or production realities. Further to a form of film object, and film reception, Newman describes indie as:

> a film culture…insisting that we think of it not just as a collection of cinematic works with similar textual features but also as a set of practices and body of knowledge with certain privileged meanings. (17)

As such, Newman outlines indie viewing strategies to distinguish indie cinema from classical cinema and art house films in a set of three summarised, overlapping 'indie cinema expectations' slogans:

1- Characters are emblems.

2- Form is a game.

3- When in doubt, read as anti-Hollywood (29).

These slogans, however, can only be applied obliquely to the American Eccentric mode, marking divergences between the broader cultural category of Newman's indie and the specific cinematic modality of American Eccentricity.

Indie films are often charged with incorporating a detailed and nuanced approach to character study, as Newman notes:

> many things make for interesting characters, and it would be foolish to accept the naïve assertion that indie characters are superior to those of Hollywood, but one aspect of this special emphasis on character is that in indie films, a certain rhetorical weight is placed on the specificity of the representation of characters as social beings. (30)

The conjecture that on-screen characters are social beings to be clearly identified by the audience assumes the form of realism prevalent in 1980s and 1990s independent cinema (as in the New Hollywood),[33] however, in the American Eccentric mode this form of characterisation is almost completely eschewed. While American Eccentric characters are distinctive, they rarely perform an emblematic function within the narrative. Newman writes that the conventions of

> setting and human behaviour [in indie films] are typically naturalistic. Characters have no magical powers, no exaggerated bravery or intellect or sexual attractiveness, and the world they live in follows the same rules as the world we know from human experience. A significant objective if the narrative representation seems to be capturing recognizable, typical lived experience (87-88).

As discussed in Chapter Two, the characters created in the American Eccentric mode function within their constructed worlds as 'pure cinematic characters'. That is, characters such as Steve Zissou (*The Life Aquatic* [Anderson, 2004]) and Violet Whistler (*Damsels in Distress* [Stillman, 2011]) function as performed constructions within uniquely assembled, self-referential Eccentric cinematic worlds. Under the slogan 'Form Is A Game,' Newman does note that characterisation may also function in relation to form. The 'solving' of identity in *Lone Star* (Sayles 1996), and the contextual and allusionary readings of Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* (2002) in relation to Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) illustrate, for Newman, a formal approach to character as a way of highlighting and punctuating their significance, which in return affords 'a greater appreciation of them in their social

[33] This is true of many forms of contemporary indie cinema, including the work of filmmakers often affiliated in critical discourse with an auteurist form of American Eccentricity discussed by White, Mayshark, and Hill, like Noah Baumbach, and Alexander Payne.

specificity' (41-2). While films like *Far From Heaven* certainly have social implications that are rooted in the cinematic allusions at play within characterisation, this sociological approach to formal characterisation does not accurately account for the complex approach present within the American Eccentric mode. Newman's 'characters are emblems' formula in indie films refers to his understanding that characters stand in

> for their social identities, and within a larger cultural and artistic discourse of multiculturalism, indie cinema's representations of the specificity of character experiences illuminate the distinctiveness of these identities…to say that narratives make characters emblematic of their social identities is simply to identify how characters are made to stand for who they are within a narrative representation: working-class postadolescent white men in *Clerks* (1994); bohemian Austin oddballs in *Slacker* (1991); a bourgeois East Coast family in *Rachel Getting Married* (2008); a suburban middle-school girl in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*; sexually precocious, lower middle class young teen girls in *Thirteen* (2003); upper-crust Manhattan trust fund kids in *Metropolitan* (1990); a rich Southern Californian housewife in *Safe* (1995); middle-class heterosexual men in the films of Neil LaBute. (91-92)[34]

Pure cinematic characters do not stand in for any one social reality. Steve Zissou demonstrates recognisable traits of megalomania, anxieties of paternal responsibility, and a crisis of masculinity—however, his reflexive and idiosyncratic construction consciously exclude him from representing any particular social identity. Rather, Steve Zissou, as a pure cinematic character, is created to embody sincere concerns *and* confine these concerns to their manifestation on-screen. Therefore, if pure cinematic characters within the American Eccentric cinema are taken as emblems, they are emblematic of a knowing, performed distanciation in expressing existential anxieties rather than a sociologically defined group of society, or presenting in-depth character studies. Pure cinematic characterisation could be conceived of in a synecdochic relationship to the American Eccentric mode in that

[34] Newman defines 'social identities' as 'those identities shared among significant and well-recognized groups of persons, such as sexual and gender identities; racial; ethnic; national, and regional identities; and identities of age or generation' (92).

these characters at times actively and reflexively acknowledge their construction as formal elements of the film text in order to perform a distanciation that approximates (but is not entirely in line with) Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekte*, reminding the spectator of the parameters of the film's diegesis.

Brecht's *V-effekt* aims to cognitively interrupt the spectator—to intellectually challenge and estrange her from the reality presented by the theatre. Brecht discourages audience character alignment as it would prevent spectator detachment—in order to promote distancing, the director should employ means of lighting, staging, music, and acting that disrupt the illusion of naturalism. Brecht explains that 'the actor has to discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays' (Brecht in Willett 1964, 193). By estranging the spectator from total immersion in the play, the *V-effekt* imposes a critical distance that enables the spectator to attain an intellectual understanding of the work, which could encourage and provoke rational socio-political analysis. For Brecht, the *V-effekt* is a tool to make the spectator feel unease at their presented reality—not just within the play, but politically and socially—to question, rather than passively accept, the established status quo established by the dominant ruling classes and authorities (184-187). Reflexive, metacinematic moments and techniques in the American Eccentric mode interact with the spectator in a similar manner, but to different ends. These moments and techniques are employed in the American Eccentric mode to reinforce the spectator's awareness of the cinematic diegesis as a construct, but this awareness does not deny the possibility of an emotional investment in the film's narrative, but rather stimulates it. The spectator is encouraged to align herself with the film's protagonists and affective elements precisely because the boundaries of the cinematic worlds delineate a safe space in which she can access and respond to the existential anxieties presented in the films without the fear of them infiltrating her lived experiences. Therefore, while American Eccentric films do convey the anxieties of a particular social ethos, and to

an extent, a generation, these concerns are not embodied in characters that reflect these anxieties directly but as part of the American Eccentric cinematic construction.

Figure 10 The introduction of Steve Zissou

Newman's second slogan, 'Form is a Game', signals less the cultural and political aspects of indie cinema than its aesthetic and narrative deviation and transformation, in that 'the formal features of independent cinema are figured as elements of play, in which the spectator is encouraged to conceive the film-viewing experience as game-like' (34). Films in the American Eccentric mode operate as the style of loose, improvisatory (as opposed to rigidly rule bound) games in that the viewer is required to identify the shifting tones, references, and subverted (or overplayed and ironised) cinematic norms and tropes in order to grasp their seriousness. Without this engaged play with the viewer, films in the American Eccentric mode may appear whimsical, or quirky.[35] This is not to suggest that audience recognition is required in order to situate a film within the American Eccentric mode in the manner described by Newman in relation to indie film. As I

[35] I mean this in the broad sense of the word, rather than referring to James MacDowell's specific formulation of the quirky.

define American Eccentricity textually rather than through audience reception, these formal aspects facilitate audience recognition of the mode, and with it, the seriousness of the films' thematic underpinnings in relation to their formal structures and surfaces.

P.T. Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Magnolia* (1999), and *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) illustrate the American Eccentric mode's game-like approach to form and its cinematic function. In his cinephilic approach to filmmaking, Anderson creates films that demonstrate clear knowledge of film discourse and history through allusion and quotation, as well as a playful engagement with postmodern techniques and pop-culture through varying degrees of pastiche and parody. These P.T. Anderson films are layered in their use of these techniques, referencing real world material, as well as parodying readily recognisable film sources—creating jocund, reflexive stylistic surfaces. The stratified surfaces enable Anderson to create cinematic worlds that are at once relatable and captivating to the audience, and yet simultaneously recognisable as hermetic cinematic imaginaries. This form of internal and external play is present, for example, in Anderson's establishment of narrative through manipulated representations of romantic comedy genre conventions in *Punch-Drunk Love*. *Punch-Drunk Love* follows Barry Egan (Adam Sandler), a lonely, and psychologically troubled man whose attempts at repressing his rage result in physical damage to himself and property, until he meets and falls in love with, Lena (Emily Watson). From this basic plot outline, Anderson's film initially appears to follow a basic 'boy meets girl' romantic comedy formula—however, Anderson does not situate Barry's desire to 'get the girl' as his character's goal. Lena is introduced to Barry by his sisters and is instantly interested in him. Barry does not need to 'get the girl' as she is 'got' from their first interaction. Anderson's film plays with the familiarity of the romantic comedy genre in order to highlight the loneliness and psychological damage of the film's protagonist—which is visually represented through oversaturated colouration, costuming, the film's dramatic score, and

expressionistic framing. The disturbing nature of Lena and Barry's relationship, and the focus on alienating, repressed rage is most clearly evident in a pre-coital exchange between the two, which slides between tender expressions of adoration to the articulation of violent frustration.

> **Barry:** I'm sorry I forgot to shave.
>
> **Lena:** Your face is so adorable. Your skin…and your cheeks… I want to bite it. I want to bite your cheek and chew on it, it's so fucking cute.
>
> **Barry:** I'm looking at your face and I just want to smash it. I just want to smash it with a fucking sledgehammer and squeeze it, you're so pretty.
>
> **Lena:** I wanna chew your face and I wanna scoop out your eyes and I want to eat them, and chew on them, and suck on them
>
> **Barry:** Okay, this is funny.
>
> **Lena:** Yeah.
>
> **Barry:** This is nice.

By prefacing Lena and Barry's sexual union with this odd and troubling exchange, Anderson signals the game-like nature of the film's construction. As the sequence preceding this exchange overtly conforms to romantic comedy genre conventions and visually quotes Hollywood musicals—a montage of Barry's decision to pursue Lena to Hawaii, a silhouetted reunion shot, an iris-shot of the couple's hands—this moment subverts the audience's expectations. Lena does not 'cure' Barry of his rage; she plays with it. This playfulness is built into the film's structure at the level of casting, and intertextual allusion.

Figure 11 Romance genre conventions in *Punch-Drunk Love*

While Barry and Lena are characters that demonstrate emotional isolation and the obstacles of human interpersonal connection, the audience is encouraged to recognise that they are constructions. As Barry is played by Adam Sandler, Anderson encourages the spectator to referentially read Sandler's previous roles in *Billy Madison* (Davis 1995) and *Happy Gilmore* (Dugan 1996) into his character. In these films Sandler plays an immature adult who is prone to bursts of rage despite his overall well-meaning demeanour. Barry, thus, can be read as a recontextualisation of these roles in a less obviously comedic manner. Lena's character, on the other hand, is not a product of the actor's antecedent roles but rather a quotation of François Truffaut's *Tirez sur le pianist* (*Shoot The Piano Player*)

(1960),[36] where a mysterious woman also named Léna (Marie Dubois) is romantically devoted to the protagonist (Charlie/Edouard) without narrative explanation. Anderson further references the French New Wave visual experimentation through Barry's costuming, which is a direct quotation of Jean-Luc Godard's *Une femme est une femme (A Woman is a Woman)* (1961). These intertexual and extra-textual references encourage a game-like play within the film's construction, while signalling that the deeply affecting narrative has been assembled for the screen.

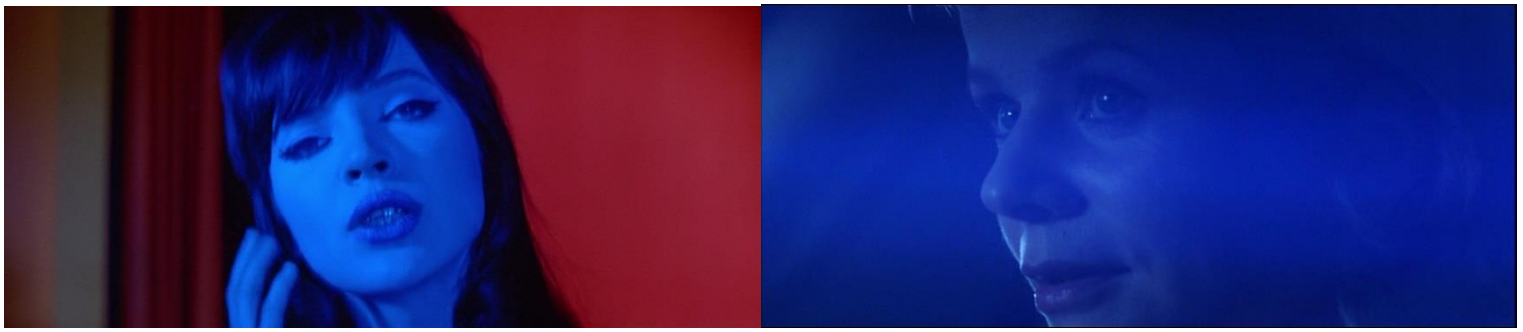

Figure 12 Godard's use of lighting re-emerges in Anderson's work

Figure 13 Émile and Angéla in *Une femme est une femme*

[36] *Punch-Drunk Love* also borrows numerous plot developments from Truffaut's film.

Figure 14 Lena and Barry in *Punch-Drunk Love*

The fluctuating connection between realism presented through naturalistic performances and representations of time and space, and reflexive, contrived, and altered cinematic spatio-temporality encourages the audience, in accordance with Newman's concept of formal play, to navigate the film's form as an improvisatory game of recognition and alteration. Certainly, Anderson and, more broadly, American Eccentric films, 'encourage play by engaging unconventional genre elements and by presenting unconventional narrative structures' (Newman, 36). Anderson's play is not limited to the extra-textual, and intertextual relationship of recurrent casting, casting against type, and his use of parody, allusion, pop culture, and quotation, but also the formal elements of temporal and spatial representation. The role of temporal and spatial assemblage connections in the construction of cinematic worlds will be examined in Chapter Four; however in relation to Newman's assertions, it is here sufficient to state that Anderson references, parodies and pastiches from various sources within each film for thematic, formal, or cinephilic purposes. Many of Anderson's allusions (in particular to the work of Martin Scorsese and Robert Altman) serve thematic and aesthetic functions, but only to the most knowing audience. Without these references, the films still make narrative sense; however, the recognition of these allusions allows thematic connections to be drawn across film history, providing a deep intertextual dialogue.

Anderson's films are layered in their use of these postmodernist techniques, and vary in their thematic weighting. The game-like aspect in regard to form is that these films engage the audience to recognise the function of each allusion, parody or pastiche.

Certainly, the rewarding complexities and subtleties of the American Eccentric mode require audience recognition of specific intertextualities, metacinematic functions, allusion, parody, and fluctuations in ironic representation and expression. However, such aspects are intrinsic to the texts themselves, rather than at the point of audience reception or what Newman refers to as consuming communities (18).It is not that a spectator identifies elements of American Eccentricity, and thereby a film is designated 'American Eccentric' by audience recognition alone. American Eccentric films are defined by distinct formal, aesthetic, and thematic traits. The presence of intertextual allusion, parody, and metacinematic articulations within the film text function to create an interdependent, elasticised relationship between sincerity and ironic expression. Thus, the (inter/extra) textual references and linkages, as well as the formal playfulness, are sutured into the films in a manner that enables the viewer to unpick and connect surface rendering and filmic structures, rather than relying on assigned meanings from interpretive communities.

The third viewing strategy Newman outlines, 'When in Doubt, Read as Anti-Hollywood', is both general and, as a viewing practice, expansive beyond even Newman's inclusive category of indie. Unlike the shock of the avant-garde (which can also be read as 'anti-Hollywood' within this conceptualisation), indie film can be seen as exposing audiences to alternate possibilities within the framework of the feature film, and problematizing assumptions and conventional practice in mainstream cinema (43). At first glance, Newman's explanation appears to be congruent with American Eccentric cinema in that it does complicate, subvert, and

alternate mainstream Hollywood conventions in order to convey complex meaning. However, Newman asserts that this third viewing strategy acts as a warrant for the other two viewing strategies in that both the social engagement incorporated into the notion of characters as emblems and formal play may also be considered as anti-Hollywood, as representations and film structures that resist those of the mainstream. Although Newman notes (through Emanuel Levy's view of independent cinema as that which is outside of Hollywood)[37] that independent cinema is an alternative to the dominant mode in terms of audience reception, he also maintains that indie cinema is in oppositional (rather than alternate) relationship with Hollywood. This claim is later diluted by the inclusive rationale that 'reading as anti-Hollywood can function on a level of much greater or lesser specificity' (44). For Newman, there are degrees of indie, and the greater the extent to which a film is able to be read as anti-Hollywood (textually, but also in terms of production, distribution, and exhibition) the stronger its claim to the title (45). A significant issue with Newman's formulation is that he uses the term 'Hollywood' in an uncomplicated manner to refer only to the Hollywood studio system at the level of production. In doing so, he does not account for the vast amount of material distributed by (but not produced within) the Hollywood studio system—such as *Napoleon Dynamite* (Hess 2004b), or *Ghost World* (Zwigoff 2001) (both of which Newman cites as 'indie' films). Therefore, the notion of reading a film as 'anti-Hollywood' is compromised. It appears that by 'Hollywood' Newman means 'conventional' or 'mainstream' American cinema. Here the American Eccentric mode can be seen to diverge significantly from Newman's formulation in that the mainstream is not dealt with in opposition, but rather as a point of contrast and recognition. While the term 'eccentric' describes a deviation from the mainstream cinematic norm, this deviation is not, and indeed cannot be, completely oppositional. The inclusion or exclusion of a particular film from the American Eccentric corpus is

[37] See Emanuel Levy's *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of Independent Film* (1999).

contingent on the interaction between the formal aspects of both artifice and filmic structure, and their relationship with the film's thematic infrastructure.

The lack of a 'formula for inclusion' or 'fixed set of contextual conditions' for 'indie' categorisation calls into question the potential value of Newman's classification. American Eccentricity is a mode of cinematic expression that is intrinsic to the films, and therefore has more delineated criteria for categorisation. American Eccentricity is not an aesthetic, nor is it bound to any particular production model, cultural category, or distribution mode. While to date the vast majority of American Eccentric films have been marketed as niche releases, there are no definitional criteria that would exclude the possibility of a mainstream, big budget Hollywood film utilising the American Eccentric mode. The disparity between Hal Hartley's film *Meanwhile* (2011) and P. T. Anderson's recent 2014 release *Inherent Vice* (2014) signals that the American Eccentric mode does not adhere to the criteria that designates production to be within an indie framework or model of cultural reception (to use Newman's terms). Hartley's film was crowdfunded through the website Kickstarter. Donations of $25 USD entitled individuals to a limited edition DVD version of the film, while those who donated $1000 USD (or more) were to be credited as co-producers (O'Neal 2011). Anderson's film, on the other hand, has an estimated budget of $20 million USD, is produced and distributed by Warner Bros studios in conjunction with IAC Films and Ghoulardi Film Company (IMDb 2015). Significantly, recent American Eccentric releases have emerged and been consumed through increasingly mainstream channels. In 2013 Spike Jonze released his film *Her*, which was produced by Annapurna, and distributed by Warner Bros. *Her* had a budget that was only slightly higher than Jonze's previous films (an estimated $23 million), however, the film has received widespread critical acclaim and more mainstream recognition than his previous

films (Riley 2013; Hornaday 2013; James 2014).[38] In its year of release *Her* collected numerous industry award nominations (including five Academy Awards and three Golden Globes).[39] Wes Anderson's 2014 film, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, a German-British-American production with a budget of approximately $30 million USD, has also received widespread industry recognition. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* has been nominated for four Golden Globe awards, received the highest number of Bafta nominations (BBCNews 2015), and, together with *Birdman* (Iñárritu 2014), garnered the equal highest number of Academy Award nominations (Ford 2015). Anderson's film has also been, importantly, a financial success, which denotes the film's popularity with a wide audience. At February, 2015 the film has made $174.6 million worldwide in box-office revenue (Mojo 2015).

While there are obvious industrial and commercial factors at play in the production of the vast majority of feature films, including those within the American Eccentric mode, these elements are not the focus of this thesis. American Eccentricity, in the films released to date, has demonstrated many similarities with 'indie' and 'independent cinema' in Newman's terminology. However, in ascertaining the textual complexities and thematic concerns that underpin American Eccentricity as a cinematic mode of expression, my focus is on defining and outlining specific common textual practices (and their thematic, and formal functions) in the films currently released within this mode. I do not claim that the films discussed in this thesis are not 'indie' in use of the term outlined above, but rather that characteristics of American Eccentricity are precise, and can be discussed in reference to representations of existential anxiety and a mutated genealogical relationship to the New Hollywood.

[38] Jonze was nominated for a number of awards for *Being John Malkovich*, however, the recognition received for *Her* is notably from more mainstream Hollywood institutions.
[39] At both awards ceremonies, *Her* won 'Best Screenplay'.

v. New Hollywood and Eccentric Connections

The primary link between films in the American Eccentric mode is their narrative focus on a yearning for human connection that is immediately conscious of the many obstacles and boundaries that ensure its lack of fulfilment (Mayshark, 1-14). In this thematic connection, American Eccentric films build upon the cultural and ideological imprints of the New Hollywood filmmakers, who express an uneasiness toward the social alienation, isolation, and dislocation from American society of the individual—as in Benjamin's (Dustin Hoffman) dislocation from the social and cultural norms and expectations of his parents' generation in *The Graduate*. However, in addition to the thematic emphasis on social alienation, the New Hollywood often visually conceptualised the generational isolation and dislocation from American society through their aesthetic practices—as in Hopper's employment of fragmented temporality and the jump cut in *Easy Rider*.

Films in the American Eccentric mode express similar thematic concerns regarding familial breakdown, moral and ethical uncertainty, the threat of individual obligation, an anxiety associated with dislocation from society, and above all, the experience of existing in a world devoid of meaning. However, where the New Hollywood tradition was creating films for a distinctive audience (largely) united by common social, political, and ideological concerns (Biskind 1999; King 2002; Harris 2008)[40] American Eccentricity displays similar existential anxieties but without clearly indicated, historically grounded catalysts, and without a clearly identifiable, united audience. The New Hollywood created characters that appeared to live out the anxieties and unrealised desires of their audience on-screen in a 'naturalistic' manner to which the audience could relate. Such characters provided

[40] Peter Biskind writes in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* that these films said 'fuck you' not only to a generation of Americans who were on the wrong side of the generation gap, the wrong side of the war in Vietnam, but also a generation of Motion Picture Academy members that had hoped to go quietly, with dignity' (49). See also, Thomas Schatz' chapter 'Film Industry Studies and Hollywood History' in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* ed. Holt and Perren (2009).

an outlet for social, cultural and political action—leaving mainstream society behind and taking to the counter-cultural openness of the road (Wyatt [Peter Fonda] and Billy [Dennis Hopper] in *Easy Rider*), or refusing to commit to a planned future (Benjamin in *The Graduate*). The American Eccentric mode negotiates a contemporary, uncomfortable articulation of ungrounded existential anxiety that manifests as an ironic distancing and a distinctive postmodern sensibility that revises the sincere thematic underpinnings consistent with the anomie of modernism. The characters and narratives of American Eccentric films are not depicted to accurately reflect or approximate any relatable lived experience. The audience is presented with overtly constructed diegetic worlds, characters, and situations with which they cannot identify as shared actualities.

The link between American Eccentricity and the New Hollywood has been noted (albeit in other terms) by Peter Biskind in *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (2004), James Mottram's *The Sundance Kids: How the Mavericks Took Back Hollywood* (2006), Sharon Waxman's *Rebels on the backlot: six maverick directors and how they conquered the Hollywood studio system* (2005), Jim Hillier's *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader* (2001), and Geoff King's *American Independent Cinema* (2005) and his collection co-edited with Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond* (2013). These books, and others like them, such as Geoff King's *Indiewood, USA* (2009), Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt's *Contemporary American Independent Film: From Margins to the Mainstream* (2005), and Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Sneider's *Underground USA: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon* (2013), offer valuable insights through their focus on the cultural emergence of filmmaking practices outside mainstream Hollywood. The link of American Eccentricity (or the area of film analysed by others that approximates American Eccentricity) to the New Hollywood is largely accounted for in terms of stylistic inspiration for the contemporary filmmakers, and describes the New Hollywood as an idealistic

moment in film history in which an unprecedented amount of control and success was afforded young directors. Aside from passages of textual film analysis within these books (particularly by King, Biskind, Mottram, Waxman, and Hillier), they are largely dedicated to the social and cultural history of independent cinema in America, the implications of institutions like the Sundance film festival and labs, and the emergence of indie distribution and production companies like Miramax at a time in film history where the blockbuster dominated mainstream Hollywood. These accounts, when analysed in concert with similar accounts of the New Hollywood (Peter Biskind's *Easy Rider, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and Rock 'N Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* [1998], but also Michael Pye and Lynda Myles' *The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took over Hollywood* [1979], Mark Harris' *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood* [2008] and Geoff King's *The New Hollywood: An Introduction* [2002]) provide social, cultural, stylistic, and industry contextualisation from which comparison has often been drawn in order to align the two moments in film history.

The frequency with which the New Hollywood has been mentioned in scholarship seeking to define and theorise the area of American Eccentric cinema indicates the importance of one tradition to the other (even if this connection has not been fully accounted for). Beyond mere 'influence', the connection between the New Hollywood and American Eccentricity is at the level of unarticulated existential thematic concerns. While it should be noted that existential anxiety has been a focus of American film throughout its history,[41] existential concerns in both the New Hollywood and American Eccentric mode manifest in the films' characters through everyday reflections of popular culture. Thomas Elsaesser's article 'The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 1970s' (1975) identifies two key elements of the New Hollywood: the unmotivated hero and the pathos of failure. For Elsaesser the

[41] For example, in the gangster films of the 1930s, film noir, and the form of broken masculinity and the struggle within society in post-WWII Westerns, such as *Shane* (Stevens 1953) and *The Man from Laramie* (Mann 1955).

pervasive pessimism evident throughout the New Hollywood (particularly post-1970) is more a condition of what he names the new realism, rather than personal statements being made by individual filmmakers. In this new realism, Elsaesser comments that protagonists lack purpose or goals. Characters that, in the classical Hollywood form would have been considered goal-oriented heroes, in the New Hollywood exhibited no central motivation for action. Elsaesser writes that the 'dramaturgy and film-language developed by classical Hollywood within a can-do culture' was rendered problematic by these 1970s films because their liberal outlook, and an 'unsentimental approach to American society makes them reject personal initiative and purposive affirmation on the level of ideology' (281). For Elsaesser the 'crisis of motivation' is a key narrative and thematic element for the diagnosis of 'the pathos of failure' in the New Hollywood—as 'in the absence of positive motivation of either hero or plot, the fabric of narrative shows through, and the pathos of failure because the zero-degree of the moralised emotions, which the dynamics of affect, eros and violence once supplied to the classical narrative' (290). In the place of motivation, Elsaesser writes that these films, and their protagonists, exhibit a 'mood of indifference…a post-rebellious lassitude' (282). The lack of purpose in the narrative trajectories and direction in character arcs resulted in the stylisation of thematic pointlessness and aimlessness into the pathos of failure. The pathos of failure afforded the spectator affective contact with narratives that lacked conventional cathartic resolutions (287). Elsaesser goes on to state that

> clearly in a period of historical stasis, these movies reflect a significant ideological moment in American culture. One might call them films that dramatise the end of history, for what is a story, a motivated narrative (which such movies refuse to employ) other than an implicit recognition of the existence of history, at least in its formal dimension - of driving forces and determinants, of causes, conflicts, consequences, and interactions. (291)

American Eccentricity embodies filmic representation beyond the pathos of failure: the protagonists of these films are aware of these earlier failures, yet they pursue

their existential journeys with genuine desire for a resolution that they are aware is ultimately unattainable. The unmotivated hero has become the mis-motivated hero who buries uncertainty and purpose in the pursuit of peculiar (and often amusing) goals that result in largely ineffectual action. Rather than clear and literal failure, American Eccentricity provides the illusion during screen-time that failure is perhaps avoidable, while simultaneously mapping a trajectory that will inevitably end without satisfactory, or positive, resolution. Thus, the connection between the New Hollywood and the American Eccentric mode is conceptualised in this thesis through the representation of existential anxiety as a contemporary reimagining of Elsaesser's pathos of failure.

The New Hollywood used a cinematic language deeply invested in popular culture to depict the disconnection between the growing counter culture and contemporary conservative American society. Like the New Hollywood, films in the American Eccentric mode express similar thematic concerns regarding familial breakdown (*Magnolia* [Anderson 1999], *The Royal Tenenbaums* [Anderson 2001]), moral and ethical uncertainty (*Election* [Payne 1999], *A Scanner Darkly* [Linklater, 2006]), individual obligation and authenticity (*Adaptation* [Jonze, 2002], *I'm Not There* [Haynes 2007]), societal alienation and dislocation (*Marie Antoinette* [Coppola 2006], *Moonrise Kingdom* [Anderson 2012]), and above all, a pervading sense of existential anxiety. American Eccentricity incorporates postmodern aesthetics, formal techniques, and irony to indirectly address sincere issues of social alienation and dislocation. The pathos of failure in the New Hollywood is reconstructed in the American Eccentric mode as a tension between the yearning for meaningful human connection and the self-conscious awareness of the unattainability of such connections (Mayshark 2007). The transformations of genre, characterisation, dialogue, and cinematic worlds between the New Hollywood and American Eccentricity signal shifts in the mode of address to the spectator. The accessible and relatable onscreen worlds and trajectories of the New Hollywood are reconfigured as

pure cinematic characters and reflexive cinematic worlds, conscious of genre conventions and creative construction. The set of behaviours and beliefs of the pure cinematic character, who interacts with the spectator in a complex manner that promotes alignment and identification while simultaneously noting their confinement to a reflexive cinematic world that no longer maps any actual experience but rather reflects something more simulacral. It is for the audience to read through and infiltrate the simulacral layering of American Eccentricity to penetrate its sincerity—but at a mediated distance.

Chapter One: Transgressing Genre

'…road movies have always been songs of the doomed, warnings that once you enter the open hinterlands between cities, you're on your own' (Atkinson 1994, 16)

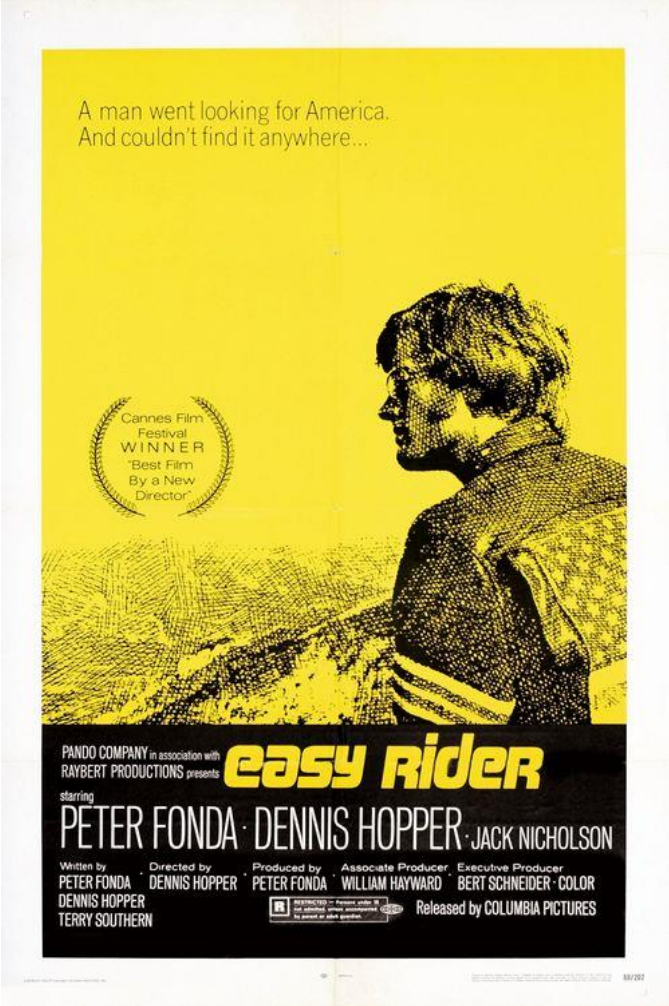

Figure 15 Poster for *Easy Rider*

1.1 From East to West (and back): The Road and the Western

'A man went looking for America. And couldn't find it anywhere…' read the tagline for Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* in 1969. As *Easy Rider*'s opening credits roll, Steppenwolf's 'Born to be Wild' (1968) bursts over the soundtrack as a countercultural call to arms. The camera jumps from introductory close-ups of Wyatt (Peter Fonda), in an American flag-adorned leather jacket, and Billy (Dennis Hopper), in a Native American style buckskin suit, to long shots of the two men

speeding east on the iconic Route 66. The sequence intercuts point-of-view and tracking two-shots, while the upbeat rhythm of 'Born to Be Wild', and lyrics 'Get your motor runnin.' Head out on the highway', encourage the audience to view themselves as fellow road travellers.

Easy Rider presented the road, and mobility, as not only a means of expressing political, cultural, and existential concerns associated with the countercultural New Hollywood filmmakers, but also as an essential element of the narrative structure of its films. Hopper, along with his fellow New Hollywood (1967-1979)[42] filmmakers created films that defined, and became synonymous with, the imagery and themes of the road film genre. Films like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces* (Rafelson 1970), *Two-Lane Blacktop* (Hellman 1971), *Badlands* (Terrence Malick 1973), and *Thieves Like Us* (Altman 1974) created a visual language in which wide-open landscapes carved with seemingly endless roads became associated with the road film genre. At a time when the perception of American identity was increasingly contentious, the act of taking to the road was connected to national and individual exploration.[43] The road, for the New Hollywood, was depicted as a site

[42] I noted in the Introduction that 'start' and 'end' dates are somewhat arbitrary delineations for the New Hollywood tradition, especially considering the importance of filmmakers like Cassavetes. I thus use the dates 1967-1979 in an indicative rather than prescriptive manner—roughly outlined by the release of *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 and *Apocalypse Now* (Scorsese) in 1979. Importantly, I suggest that not all films released through the Hollywood systems within these years can be categorised as part of this tradition—but that at this time within Hollywood systems, films that challenged conventions (both formally and thematically) and reflected the ideological positions of the younger generation were produced.

[43] By this I mean that by the late 1960s the nature of what it meant 'to be American' was less unified. For good analyses of 1960s cinema and culture see Barry Keith Grant's edited collection *American Cinema of the 1960s: Themes and Variations* (2008). In the introduction to that collection, Grant writes, if the 1960s 'began with the unfurling of the new fifty-star American flag, it came to a close with flags and draft cards being publicly burned in protest of Vietnam War. Jimi Hendrix's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the Woodstock music festival in August 1969, its melodic beauty alternating with screaming electronic distortion, perfectly captured the political and social tensions of the era…American society fragmented during the decade as various challenges to state power were met with increasing and violent resistance' (1-3). Grant goes on to note that during the 1960s many socio-cultural divisions, such as between the wealthy and less privileged sections of society and between the counterculture movement and the conservative institutions, became more pronounced, but that battles were being 'fought on a number of front simultaneously' (3). These other fronts included the

for potential liberation and existential interrogation.[44] New Hollywood road films not only embraced the thematic and ideological concerns that had been voiced by the Beat Generation a decade prior, but also cinematically expressed the cohesion of physical mobility, meandering temporality, and an experiential approach to the road narrative that had been conveyed in Jack Kerouac's novel *On The Road* (1957).

Figure 16 The title sequence of *Easy Rider*

The opening sequence of *Easy Rider* has informed other 'taking to the road' sequences, and has become an icon of road film mythology.[45] It symbolises the

civil right movement, the sexual revolution, the feminist movement, environmentalism, and were also evident in arenas of pop culture (3-10). Grant notes there was significant involved anger over America's violent, and oppressive history, particularly in terms of racial inequality (4). I argue that in light of these conflicts, the idea of an 'American identity' was itself a site of fragmentation with many aspects of what may be deemed 'American' in contention with others.

[44] Noel King writes that the New Hollywood was '…a brief window of opportunity running from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, when an adventurous new cinema emerged, linking the traditions of classical Hollywood genre filmmaking with the stylistic innovations of European art cinema. This concept of "the new" is predicated on a new audience demographic making its aesthetic preferences felt by opting for a new kind of cinema, alliteratively described by Andrew Sarris as a cinema of "alienation, anomie, anarchy and aburdism"' (2004, 20).

[45] Cohan and Hark write that although *Easy Rider* is fundamental to the road movie genre, it has obscured its history as, prior to the 1960s, the vast majority of road movies depicted the road traveller successfully reintegrating with the dominant culture (1997,5).

promise of liberation in 'lookin' for adventure' on the road—with the hipness of the road trip exemplified on the soundtrack.[46] This promise, however, is a seduction. As Wyatt and Billy blithely ride east, away from Los Angeles—the end of the traditional American frontier—it is not with the pioneering hope of discovering a place within America, but with the desperate need to recover something lost from the foundational concept of the American nation. By taking to the road in a rambling pursuit of Mardi Gras, Wyatt and Billy not only embody the generational zeitgeist of late 1960s America, but they enact on screen the complex unrealised desires of their audience. George Hanson's (Jack Nicholson) lamentation, 'You know, this used to be a helluva good country. I can't understand what's gone wrong with it,' epitomised the national and individual anxieties of both the hippies and those within the establishment that served as the impetus for the New Hollywood road trips. George Hanson, a troubled alcoholic and American Civil Liberties Union lawyer, personifies a bridge between the conservative South (where Wyatt and Billy are detained for partaking in a patriotic parade 'without a permit') and the countercultural hippie movement. Hanson's intoxicated lament demonstrates that the institutions charged with the task of defending Constitutional rights had become internally compromised. His decision to join Wyatt and Billy (fuelled by the promise of reaching a renowned New Orleans brothel) reflects the resigned failure of institutionalised democracy in favour of the promise of liberty offered by the road. However, for Wyatt and Billy, reaching Mardi Gras does not equate to the fulfilment of purpose—rather, they (and the audience) experience New Orleans as a collage of synthetic, psychedelic, temporally altered moments facilitated by the consumption of LSD. *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, and *Badlands* all lack clear destinations, rendering their protagonists, in Thomas Elsaesser's formulation, 'unmotivated heroes' (2004b). Despite their interrogatory nature, the core anxieties that served as the impetus for the New Hollywood road films were unresolvable.

[46] *Easy Rider* was the first film to utilise a popular soundtrack in the place of a traditional score. The music selected creates a musical narration for the film that aids the film's aesthetic and narrative.

While the origins of the road film genre can be traced back through various literary and cinematic traditions, the genre 'forg[ed] its own distinct generic identity…through the critical and commercial success of…*Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969)' (Laderman 2002, 43). As a genre that was consecrated (and thereafter frequently employed) within the New Hollywood, the road film ethos encapsulates the existential longing, drive, and ultimate failure to find a meaningful way of living beyond the compromised boundaries of society prevalent within that tradition. *Easy Rider* centres on national and personal identity, obligation, and liberation as thematic concerns, and as such provides a significant reference point for contemporary existential road narratives. American Eccentricity invokes the thematic concerns of established film genres, while subverting and transgressing genre conventions by employing postmodern techniques of parody, pastiche, reflexivity, and ironic representation. As the American Eccentric mode subverts and incorporates generic traditions and conventions in a fluctuating manner to express existential anxiety, this chapter articulates the relationship of this mode to genericity through the consideration of Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) as an American Eccentric road film. American Eccentric road trips react to the cultural position articulated by Corey K. Creekmur—'born too late for the pioneer projects of blazing trails, extending natural frontiers, or just lighting out for the territory, modern Americans hit a road not only already taken, but paved, ramped, mapped, and marked by the commercial sites of mobile mass culture: the motel, the roadside diner, the filling station, and the drive-in movie theater' (1997, 90). With Creekmur's suggestion in mind, I also investigate the possibility of extending the concept of 'road trip' to Charlie Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze 1999).

1.2 Genre Transgression and Subversion

In Ted Demme and Richard LaGravenese's documentary on the New Hollywood period, *A Decade Under the Influence* (2003), Julie Christie asks, 'Could you have imagined a Western like *McCabe* before *McCabe*?' Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) begins with a black screen and aural track of howling wind and rain layered beneath Leonard Cohen's 'The Stranger Song' (1967). The uncapitalised sans-serif[47] yellow title credits appear as the camera pans across the autumnal palette of yellow ochre, auburn, and muted green pines against a grey, overcast sky,[48] positioning 'warren beatty' and 'julie christie' as being as central to the scene as the landscape itself. The camera tracks through the forest valleys before resting on a single figure cloaked in heavy furs, mounted on horseback. Cohen's melancholic, conversational lyrics sketch the character of a compromised gambling stranger:

> It's true that all the men you knew were dealers
> who said they were through with dealing
> Every time you gave them shelter
> I know that kind of man
> It's hard to hold the hand of anyone
> who is reaching for the sky just to surrender

John McCabe (Warren Beatty) is a 'charismatic bright-eyed entrepreneur' (Monaco 1984, 325) whose ambition is to become rich and powerful on the frontier. However, it emerges that McCabe is largely incompetent in business dealings, and equally unskilled with his gun. Altman's Western portrays the northwest wilderness as a site of capitalist greed, prostitution, racism, and corruption. It is Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie), an opium-addicted prostitute, who possesses the business skills necessary

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[47] In contrast to the conventional capitalised serif fonts of the Western genre.
[48] Cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond created the blurred, luminous aesthetic of the film by flashing the film. For accounts of this, see Peter Biskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (104).
McCabe & Mrs. Miller was shot outside Vancouver, Canada in 1970.

for growth and prosperity. *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* replaces the iconic dry open plains depicted in Westerns such as *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939) or *Red River* (Hawks 1948) with the wintry Northwestern frontier town of Presbyterian Church. In place of the Stetsons, spurs, and buckskins associated with Western figures such as those played by John Wayne, McCabe is presented as a bearded man in a waistcoat, necktie, cutaway jacket, and derby hat. On Altman's frontier, the strong, laconic libertarian masculinity associated with figures like Wayne is replaced with Warren Beatty's nervous mumbling and unfounded rumours of his character McCabe's gunslinging acumen.[49] Julie Christie follows up her earlier rhetorical question in *A Decade Under the Influence* by affirming '[Altman] paved the way for so many things, like the subversion of genre, which was his big thing' (Christie interviewed in LaGravenese 2003). Indeed, Robert Altman's approach to film genre, such as the Western in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and film noir in *The Long Goodbye* (1973), regularly subverts genre convention. These films, like others from the New Hollywood, acknowledged and reimagined the iconographic, typological, taxonomical, and systematic elements that contribute to the formation and recognition of a genre.

[49] The mumbling associated with the McCabe character is not simply a result of Altman's 'busy' audiotrack, but rather places his character in dialogue with Beatty's antecedent roles, particularly George Roundy in *Shampoo* (Ashby 1975) and Clyde Barrow in *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn 1967). The power of rumour and myth, combined with John McCabe's ineptitude as a marksman, recalls John Ford's Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962).

Figure 17 Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*

Robert Altman's subversions of genre conventions indicate both the malleability of genre forms and the power of generic forms to communicate (and question) national and ideological mythologies. Although *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* diverges significantly from those Westerns created by Howard Hawks, John Ford, or Raoul Walsh in terms of aesthetics, film form, and (largely) character archetypes, it nonetheless sits resolutely within the Western genre. *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* illustrates how film genres are not stationary entities, but rather encompass dialogic positions with cultural and socio-political climates, and influenced by popular culture,

technology, and innovation. Genre studies offer a wide, and varied, range of scholarly material on the concept, definitions, and cultural functions of genre. As I consider American Eccentricity a mode of cinematic expression in the terms offered by John Frow, it is necessary to dissect how the mode relates to genre in practice and theory. Therefore, I now turn briefly to consider the theories of genre offered by theorists Rick Altman, Stephen Neale, and Thomas Schatz. Altman, Neale, and Schatz have been selected in part due to their prominence in scholarly discussions of film genre, but also in order to critically assess their coalescences and divergences in conceptualising genericity. Through this critical assessment of genre theory, I establish the role and functions of film genre in the American Eccentric mode and trace its use in the road film.

While there are a variety of approaches to the classification and definition of genre among critics and theorists, most agree with Rick Altman's assertion that genre is a multifaceted term. The term 'genre' simultaneously refers to a blueprint or formula that precedes industry production, a structuring device or formal framework for films, a label or means of categorisation, and a contract between the audience and the film that acts as a way of positioning the audience in relation to the film (Altman 1999, 14). Neale focuses on genre as a complex triangular relationship between artist, film, and audience, and Schatz acknowledges the importance of the interrelationship between the audience and film text, stating that genre reflects the sensibilities of the audience as well as of the Hollywood filmmakers and system (Neale 1987; Schatz 1981).[50] Altman further emphasises the role of the film industry in the formation of genre. He emphatically states 'if it is not defined by the industry and recognised by the mass audience, then it cannot be a genre, because film genres are by definition not just scientifically derived or theoretically constructed categories, but are always industrially certified and publicly shared' (16). In all three

[50] Thomas Schatz writes that films are neither produced nor consumed in isolation, and thus it is important to understand the system and commercial benefits of genre filmmaking (vii).

positions, the symbiotic relationship between consuming audience and the producing industry (as the result of the material conditions of commercial filmmaking) is fundamental to genre theory (Altman, 16).

Genre is not a singular entity designated to fulfil a specific purpose but rather a contested site that fulfils a multitude of purposes for multiple groups. As Altman writes, it is a

> concatenated series of events regularly repeated according to a recognisable pattern. For a genre to exist, a large number of texts must be produced, broadly distributed, exhibited to an extensive audience and received in a rather homogenous manner…As the by-product of an extended series of events, a genre must be defined in a manner consistent with the complexity of an overall situation made up of three-dimensional events spread out over space and time. (84)

As studies of genre often attempt to locate a stable object of analysis, genre is often discussed as either a corpus of texts, or a textual structure.[51] Contrary to this position, I share Altman's view that genre is the contestation between producers, exhibitors, viewers, critics, politicians, moralists, and their diverse interests that keeps genres in ongoing process, constantly subject to reconfiguration, recombination, and reformulation (195). Genres are dynamic and fluid—they change over time, conventions shift, and new sub-genres emerge while others cease. As Neale states, genres are 'not systems: they are processes of systemisation' (2000, 51). The process-like nature of genre manifests itself as an interaction on the level of expectation, the generic corpus, and of the 'rules' or 'norms' that govern both expectation and the corpus. Although these processes are dominated by repetition, they are also fundamentally marked by variation and modification. Each new genre film constitutes an addition to an existing generic corpus and involves a selection from the repertoire of generic elements available at any one point in time. Through

[51] Altman states that because genre studies requires recognition of the textual structures of production, exhibition, and reception, critics tend to ignore or disregard films that do not exhibit all of the necessary traits and elements (14-15).

repeated viewings, spectators become able to recognise the repeated types of characters, locales, events and other generic traits, and through the consistencies within a new genre, they engage in the process of negotiating a new structure of value in a narrative system. The process of generic comprehension develops into a narrative-cinematic gestalt that is structured around an understanding of the genre's conventional activities and attitudes (Schatz 1981, 16).[52]

Schatz, importantly, delineates between the terms *film genre* and *genre film*. A *film genre* is a system that is simultaneously static (in that it presents familiar cinematic narrative formulas that re-examine core cultural conflicts) and dynamic (in that the film genre is constantly evolving in relation to cultural attitudes, industry economics, and the emergence of new influential genre films). Thus, *film genre* is a complex entity that forms a tacit 'contract' between the filmmaker and the audience, whereas the *genre film* is a specific and distinct event that honours that contract (1981, 16). The Western *film genre* holds contractual specificities—a thematic occupation with the battle between civilisation and wilderness, law and lawlessness on the American frontier—between the filmmaker and audience. *The Searchers* (Ford 1956) is a Western *genre film* because it honours these contractual specificities in its plot, setting, aesthetics, and themes.

Like all films, genre films are examined through the narrative components they present. However, in genre films these components are afforded a privileged status within the popular mindset as, due to the familiarity of the form, these components address and reaffirm socio-cultural attitudes. Unlike non-genre films, the narrative components of a genre film are imbued with a preordained thematic value. Each genre incorporates a specific cultural context that surpasses a simple locale. The audience's recognition of genre therefore depends less on a specific film's

[52] Schatz argues that genres act as part of a cultural ritual, in that there is immediate audience approval or disapproval for a style of film (although this is problematized by the commercial aspects of the industry). If a film within a certain genre is received favourably, this film style is likely to be reproduced, albeit with slight variations in order to maintain the audience's interest (1981, 11).

setting than it does the repeated conflicts associated with patterns of action and character relationships. Iconography evolves from the process of accumulative narrative, visual, and non-visual coding in elements like dialogue, music, and casting. At times iconography can also indicate thematic value; for instance in the Western, the costume choices between black and white Stetsons may be representative of inherent good or evil. Genre represents a range of expression for filmmakers, and a range of expectation for viewers, that is made apparent through the cumulative experience of both—these systems of convention represent the genre's narrative context and its meaningful cultural context (Schatz 1981, 21-24).

As genres repeatedly present the ideological conflicts within a society and resolve them through the action of the film, they can be regarded as specific problem solving operations.[53] Different genres necessarily present different social problems, yet all film genres treat some form of threat—violent or otherwise—to the social order. The various genres are distinguished from one another by the attitudes of the principal characters and the resolutions precipitated by their actions (Schatz, 24-26). Schatz states that distinctions can be drawn from the various generic settings and the conflicts in that some are indigenous to the locale (genres of *determinate space*), whereas others are not (genres of *indeterminate space*) (Schatz, 26). *Determinate space* genres represent an arena of action that is determined by specific socio-cultural conflicts enacted within a recognisable locale in accordance with prescribed systems of rules and behavioural codes, such as the Western. In these genres, an individual (or collective) enters an iconographic arena of action, acts upon that arena, but is eventually required to depart from it (1981, 27). Conflicts in these genres arise from the interaction between the individual and highly-coded location itself. For instance, in the Western genre, a lone cowboy, lawman, or stranger arrives in a frontier town

[53] Schatz notes that not all conflicts are applicable to all genres. 'The static vision of the generic hero—indeed of the entire constellation of familiar character types—helps to define the community and to animate its cultural conflicts.' This helps us differentiate between genres that deploy seemingly similar formulas (26).

that is under threat from a hostile element (for instance a gang of outlaws, or a 'savage' Indian tribe). These threats, or conflicts, arise out of (and are encoded by) the genre's frontier setting. The protagonist (cowboy, lawman, stranger) must act upon the location by restoring order to the frontier—however, as the role of the Western protagonist is to propagate and maintain law and order, he must then depart from the specific location to fulfil his purpose elsewhere on the frontier. In contrast, indeterminate space genres, such the romantic comedy or musical, feature conflicts that are generally attitudinal. These conflicts arise between characters or between characters and their community, and must be (temporarily) resolved in order for the protagonists to reintegrate into the social unit. For instance, conflict in a romantic comedy is not intrinsic to a generic location, but results from the initial inability for the characters to form romantic union during the film's 'set-up' phase (due to a disagreement, or other obstacle). This conflict must be overcome by the film's conclusion, in which the two lead characters are romantically united (proving that 'love conquers all'). Determinate space genres tend to uphold the values of social order, whereas indeterminate space genres tend to uphold the values of social integration (Schatz 1981, 29).

As shown in the example of the Western, determinate space protagonists are often denied the possibility of integrating with the society that they have (in some way) saved, and therefore are shown leaving the location again at the film's conclusion. Schatz writes that this strategy allows determinate space genres to construct resolutions that reaffirm dual (and sometimes contradictory) ideological positions. In the case of the Western, the industrious isolationism of the hero *and* social order are presented as victorious ideological resolutions (Schatz, 32). This concept is illustrated in the final sequence of John Ford's *The Searchers*. In this sequence, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), a rogue Confederate soldier, is unable to enter the family homestead at the film's conclusion after having returned the kidnapped Debbie (Natalie Woods) to her sister Martha (Dorothy Jordan). Ethan is

not only unable to assimilate with society due to his upholding of American ideals of individualism, but also because Ethan is a conflicted and compromised character whose conservatism, desire for racial purity, and values of democracy realised through violence place him at odds with the civility represented within the homestead. The image of Ethan framed within the doorway as he walks away, while the final lyric, 'ride away, ride away, ride away…', of the film's bookending song plays, demonstrates the dual resolution outlined by Schatz.

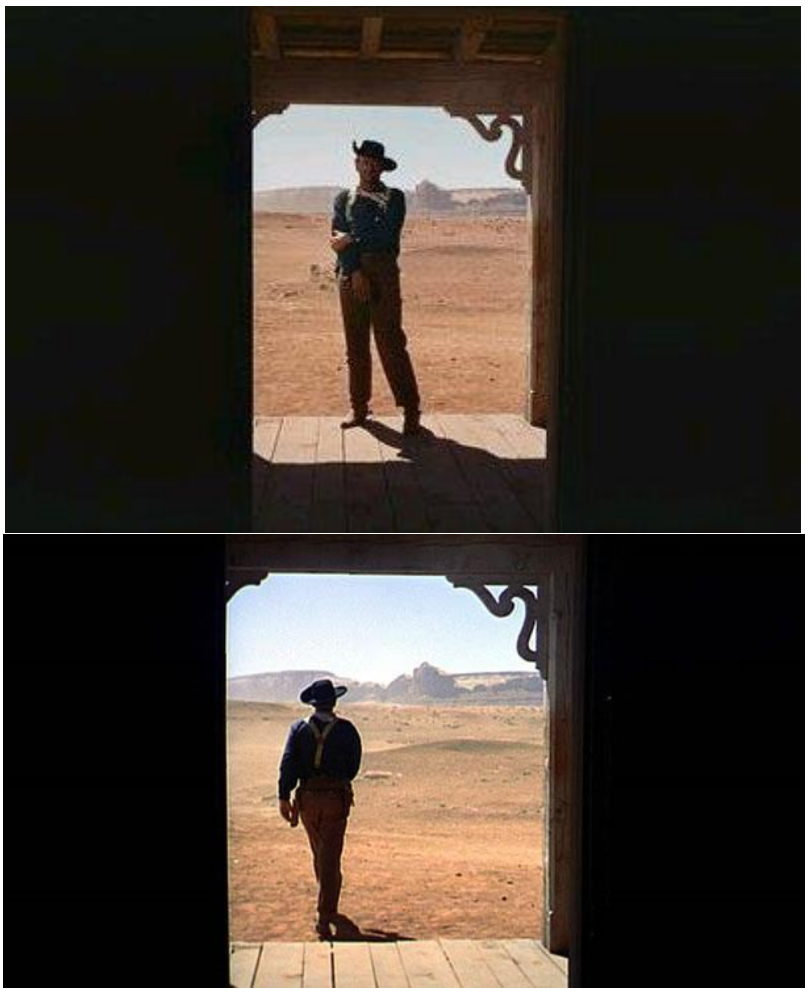

Figure 18 The final moments of *The Searchers*

Each genre, writes Schatz, 'has a static nucleus that manifests its thematic oppositions or recurring cultural conflicts' (1981, 31), and all genres are involved in a process of dynamic evolution evident in the remodelling of those oppositions and

conflicts in individual films. If genre is approached as 'a problem-solving strategy, then, the static nucleus could be conceived as the problem and the variety of solutions (narrative resolutions) as its dynamic surface structure' (Schatz, 31). Therefore, the conflicts presented within genres function as processes of determination and the source of their popularity, as these conceptual conflicts necessarily must remain unresolved (or must be intrinsically unresolvable) in order to maintain the interest of the audience. The ability to temporarily resolve these issues within the film provides an emotional resolution for the audience, rather than offering an active resolution to the cultural conflicts presented (Schatz 31-32). Resolution in genre is not definite, but rather a process of reduction by which the direct opposition between the two conflicting forces is lessened. In determinate space genres this reduction is achieved through the elimination of one of the opposing forces—in *Easy Rider*, Wyatt and Billy are shot, thereby eliminating the direct opposition between the countercultural travellers and the conservatism of American mainstream culture. In indeterminate space genres conflict is reduced through the integration of opposing forces, for instance, in *Reality Bites* (Stiller 1994) the conflict between Lelaina Pierce (Winona Ryder) and Troy Dyer (Ethan Hawke) is reduced by their romantic union despite the unresolved problems presented in the film. New Hollywood films demonstrate an inversion of traditional conflict reduction. As previously stated, Wyatt and Billy are the eliminated force in *Easy Rider*; similarly in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, the protagonist John McCabe is left dying in the snow after he un-admirably shoots his opponent in the back. New Hollywood films of indeterminate space similarly problematize Schatz' formulation of social integration. The integration of the conflicting forces represented by Elaine Robinson and Benjamin Braddock in *The Graduate* in a romantic union 'against all odds', or the apparent moment of attitudinal change in the face of senseless and innocent death in *The Last Picture Show* (Bogdanovich 1971), are depicted as unfitting, or inadequate resolutions. Rather than providing the audience with the emotional resolution

afforded by traditional genre films, these New Hollywood films provoke a sense of unease in the audience by denying satisfactory generic resolutions.

Schatz takes a semiological approach to genre that he identifies as originating with Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, in which film genre can be thought of as a specific grammar or system of rules of expression and construction, and individual (genre) films as manifestations of these rules. In this formulation, the grammatical system is contingent on an individual's exposure to specific genres, for 'whereas a verbal statement represents a speaker's organization of neutral components into a meaningful pattern, a genre represents an effort to *re*organize a familiar, meaningful system' (1981, 19).[54] Altman writes that before a genre is recognised, consecrated, and sanctified by industry wide recognition as a form with its own definable semantics and syntax, it remains a genre cycle (82). He explains that

> while genres are in this stage, they are still associated with multiple traditional genres – whether by producers or critics – nascent genres never appear to be pure. Because the new generic content is expressed as an adjective modifying several different nouns, its very existence seems dependent on and derivative of those nouns. (74)

This notion of genre follows a 'semantic/syntactic' approach, based on the recognition that generic labels are commonly attached to categories deriving their existence from two different sources. At times generic terminology is invoked because multiple texts are assembled from like semantic frameworks (recurring topics and plots, key scenes, common character types, recognisable props and settings, or notable visual and aural aesthetics) (89). At other times generic affiliation is recognised because a group of texts organises elemental frameworks in a similar manner '(shared *syntactic* aspects, such as plot structure, character

[54] Schatz states that a film genre may be altered by elements such as an individual film (which in this formulation can be equated to an utterance), or an adaptation to technological changes. Therefore, the contract of genre includes the audience, other films and filmmakers (19-20).

relationships, or image and sound montages)' (89). When the shared semantics of a genre are stressed, the impact is a recognisable and consecrated consensus of generic iconography, which in turn performs the social function of an applicable vocabulary that is able to be shared among filmmakers and consumers. A syntactic approach that addresses the multilayered patterns beyond iconography can highlight the shallowness of the semantic approach, in that it offers an understanding of the textual workings and deeper structural elements of generic affiliation. For example, if a purely semantic approach to the Western were to be taken it could be argued that the genre is concerned with stagecoaches and shotguns. However, in a syntactic approach to the Western, an examination of the tensions between wilderness and civilisation could be undertaken. Ultimately, as Altman states, 'genre is located neither in a common semantics nor in a common syntax, but in the intersection of a common semantics and a common syntax, in the combined power of a dual correspondence' (90).

In an appendage to his article 'A Semantic/syntactic approach to film genre' (1984), Altman emphasises the importance of a pragmatic approach which acknowledges the variations that different audiences bring to the film text and genre. In Altman's reconsidered approach to analysis, the semantic/syntactic elements are expanded to address the discursive nature of genre.[55] He stresses that disparate viewers may perceive different semantic and syntactic elements in the same film that are inconsistent with each other. This approach considers genres not only to be discursive but multi-discursive as:

> Instead of utilizing a single master language, as most previous genre theoreticians would have it, a genre may appropriately be considered multi-coded. Each genre is simultaneously defined by multiple codes, corresponding to the multiple groups who, by helping to define the genre, may be said to 'speak' the genre. When the diverse groups using the genre

[55] Altman states that genres are not only discursive, but 'because they are mechanisms for co-ordinating diverse users,' multi-discursive (208).

> are considered together, genres appear as regulatory schemes facilitating the integration of diverse factions into a single social fabric (208).

Genres serve diverse groups of people differently and as such the semantic and syntactic elements of a genre are charged with various specific meanings—generic terminology cannot be neutral. Therefore, Altman urges a process of analysis that acknowledges these differences and considers the causes of these various readings (207-208).[56] Altman's views on genre theory and the importance of multi-discursive analysis inform my reading of genre within American Eccentricity as a mode that transforms and subverts traditional genres, while simultaneously acknowledging and incorporating their conventions. While my analysis rests primarily on the interaction of Altman's work on semantic and syntactic approaches to genre as textual practice and subversion, I do not discount the importance of a pragmatic approach to genre; however, a thorough engagement with this form of generic analysis is beyond the scope of this work. For the purposes of my argument, in the remainder of this chapter I will analyse the American Eccentric approach to genre in relation to the textual elements presented in the example of the road film. By analysing Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) and Charlie Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich* (1999) as road films, I argue that genre operates in the American Eccentric mode to articulate a cultural phenomenon of deferred, or masked, existential anxiety.

As I define it, the American Eccentric mode combines reflexive, ironic, and allusory subversions of generic conventions and norms while simultaneously engaging with the fundamental syntactic elements of the genres with sincerity. Altman writes that

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[56] Altman concludes that rather than merely acknowledging that different spectators will deduce different meanings from the same text, a new approach to genre theory should be established that 'addresses the fact that every text has multiple users, considers why different users develop different readings, theorizes the relationship among those users, and actively considers the effect of multiple conflicting uses on the production, labelling, and display of films and genres alike' (214).

> the distinction between the semantic and the syntactic…corresponds to a distinction between the primary, linguistic elements of which all texts are made, and the secondary, textual meanings which are sometimes constructed by virtue of the syntactic bonds established between primary elements. (2000, 188)

In the shift in cinematic articulation from the New Hollywood to the American Eccentric road film, the essential existential journey remains constant. The three brothers in *The Darjeeling Limited*, Francis, Peter, and Jack Whitman are as concerned with 'finding themselves' on-the-road as were Wyatt and Billy. However, in the American Eccentric mode, the existential quest is established without the countercultural zeitgeist propelling the journey. Rather, these films are set against a societal backdrop concerned more with individualised pursuits than collective action. American Eccentric road films acknowledge the ultimate failure of the New Hollywood road trips (the deaths of Wyatt and Billy, Bonnie and Clyde, Bobby's inability to face society in *Five Easy Pieces*, the lack of narrative resolution of *Two Lane Blacktop*), and thus, while their impetus for the road trip remains underpinned by existential anxiety, their syntactic structures (that is the dialectic relationships drawn from the semantic elements) have shifted to a tension that includes a pre-existing self-conscious knowledge of their limitations before the first frame. In order to address this shift, the semantic elements (the films' generic vocabulary and grammar) of these films are modified to include elements of postmodern cinematic practice.

Altman writes that generic discrepancy and variation rest in part on the interaction between nouns and adjectives in the categorisation of genre. Indeed, my use of the term 'mode' follows John Frow's work on genre in which modality is used in an adjectival sense, as an extension or modifier to existing genres. Frow writes that modes 'specify thematic features and certain forms and modalities of speech, but not the formal structures or even the semiotic medium through which the text is to be realised' (2006, 65). Altman, however, problematizes this concept, stating that

over the historical process of a generic cycle the adjectival element of variation of genre can gain autonomy from the categorical noun, thereby freeing itself from its strictures. For instance, Altman cites the transition of Western chase films, Western scenics, Western melodramas, Western romances, Western adventure films, Western comedies, Western dramas, and Western epics into the Western genre. Thus, the removal of the adjective from its parent noun and its reinstatement in the position of the noun signals the formation of a new generic category with substantival status. In order for an adjectival element to progress to a genre, Altman states that three changes must occur:

> 1) the shift away from pre-existing substantive genres in favour of transgeneric adjective material through 'the standardization and automatization of the reading formational through which' previous successes are evaluated and imitated;
>
> 2) films [have] to display shared attributes stretching beyond the genre's eponymous material…but nevertheless remain sufficiently connected to that material to justify using the name for that material as the generic label;
>
> 3) the expectations that come with generic identification (character types and relations, plot outcome, production style, and the like) must become part and parcel of the process whereby meaning is attributed to films (53).

While this progression is relevant to the formation of genres such as the Western and the musical (as discussed by Altman), American Eccentricity is a mode of cinematic articulation that does not inherently possess the traits and tropes necessary to enable a shift from the adjectival sense in relation to genre, to genre itself. American Eccentricity exhibits a relationship to reflexive postmodern techniques to express existential anxiety through irony and sincerity, characterisation (including the deployment of hyper-dialogue) and the creation of cinematic worlds that inhabit specific spaces and facilitate complex yet limited

audience alignment. However, these elements are insufficient to establish a genre. American Eccentricity does not necessarily employ character archetypes (beyond pure cinematic characterisation), nor is there any specific form of narrative trajectory that is repeated. Furthermore, while the humour is often incorporated in the American Eccentric mode, it is not necessary for categorisation. Thus, just as *This Is The End* (Rogen and Goldberg 2013) is an *apocalyptic* (mode) comedy (genre), or *Sleepy Hollow* (Burton 1999) is a *gothic* horror film, *The Darjeeling Limited* (Anderson 2007) is an *American Eccentric* road film. Advancing the formulation of 'American Eccentricity' as a modal modifier to existing genres, I will explore the prospect of *Being John Malkovich* as a transition from the road trip into a cerebral trip that features the vehicle (and travelling at accelerated speed) as a means of temporarily exceeding the bodily limitations of identity.

1.3 Road Film: Genre and Generic Inheritance

The road film incorporates elements inherited from multiple genres, including screw-ball comedies (*It Happened One Night* [Capra 1934], *Sullivan's Travels* [Sturges 1941], Crosby and Hope's *Road to*…[1940-1962] series) and noir and crime films (*I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* [LeRoy 1932], *Detour* [Ulmer 1945], *They Live by Night* [Ray 1948]) as well as the Western. Cohan and Hark note that significant periods in road film history align with particularly tumultuous historical moments, such as the Great Depression (*Wild Boys of the Road* [Wellman 1933], *Our Daily Bread* [Vidor 1934], *The Grapes of Wrath* [Ford 1940]), or 'in periods whose dominant ideologies generate fantasies of escape and opposition, as in the late 1960s', which saw social unrest due to socio-political concerns such as (but not limited to) the Vietnam War, and the civil rights and feminist movements (1997, 2). The road film's connection to frontier mythology and America's perpetual quest for self-definition provides a site for the exploration of socio-political and cultural pressures and anxieties

contemporary to each film's historical moment. Shari Roberts claims that the road film can be seen largely as an updating of the Western, whereby 'it is not simply the case that the Western disguises itself in road clothing; instead, a distillation takes place in which certain elements from the Western help to inform the new genre of the road genre' (1997, 50). Wyatt and Billy's drive to go 'looking for America' evokes frontier mythology and foundational American national identity. This tagline openly recalls and questions John Winthrop's lay sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630). Winthrop's sermon outlines the American Puritan struggle against the wilderness as the unification of a Chosen People from disparate backgrounds for the predestined mission of expedition, settlement, and development of America with a lasting dedication to God's purpose in history. Only with dedication to God's will would the Puritan immigrants be ensured to avoid a shipwrecked fate. Winthrop states that as a unified whole working together toward the common goal of fulfilling God's purpose, the Puritans were to create an exceptional nation as a model to others. This model nation would be seen by all others, and held up to scrutiny in its actions: 'we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us'(14). Road film narrative ideology maps 'American Western mythology onto the landscape traversed and bound by the nation's highways' (Hark 1997, 1). With recurring plots centring on the notion of American manifest destiny, Westerns present (in order to both reaffirm and question) a fairly uniform myth of the nation: a solitary, stoic, masculine protagonist embodying fundamental principles of integrity and self-sufficiency, given the task of enforcing, maintaining or restoring order on the frontier, such as *The Big Trail* (Walsh 1930), *My Darling Clementine* (Ford 1946), and *High Noon* (Zinnemann 1952). The notion of American national identity as linked to masculinity and an imperialist ideology is evident in both the Western and the road film through the pervasive incorporation of violence as an act 'against the system' (Laderman 2002, 22). As Richard Slotkin states in his book *Gunfighter Nation* (1993):

> violence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation…the Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through as a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or "natural" state, and regeneration through violence (11-12).

The Western and the road film both inhabit spaces that are geographically beyond civilisation and the social mores—thus these genres present conflicts between the often brutal and violent laws of nature, and civilised law (Slotkin, 22-23).

Easy Rider interweaves foundational American mythology and an acknowledgement of its place in popular culture through the names and costumes of the protagonists. 'Wyatt' and 'Billy' refer to the 'Old West' figures Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid. However (in concert with the nickname 'Captain America'), Fonda's Wyatt is not the nineteenth-century controversial marshal, pimp and sheriff, Wyatt Earp (Gatto 2013), but the cinematic figure made legendary for contemporary audiences in Western films, like *My Darling Clementine*,[57] and *Gunfight at the O.K Corral* (Sturges 1957). Similarly, Hopper's Billy does not refer to the man born William H. McCarthy Jnr., but a figure who, like Wyatt Earp, has been mythologised in films such as King Vidor's *Billy the Kid* (1930) and Howard Hughes' *The Outlaw* (1943). *Easy Rider* is not simply a countercultural rejection of America as a nation state in the late 1960s, but rather a film that situates itself in the uneasy middle between an evolving critical nationalism and the American national project as a complete entity to be held sacred from critical attack. It is a film that embodies the tensions and conflicts over American nationhood as a concept in process, symbolised by the icons of the road, wilderness, and the city (Klinger 1997, 184). Barbara Klinger argues that *Easy Rider*'s presentation of the Southwestern landscape perpetuates rather than demystifies Western frontier mythology. Billy and Wyatt, as hippies, are (in part) aligned with Old Western 'promises of freedom, diversity and tolerance' (Klinger, 191) and a connection to the landscape. The fact that Billy and Wyatt are

[57] Wyatt Earp was played in this film by Peter Fonda's father, Henry.

gunned down as they attempt to leave the frontier and enter civilisation signals the more violent, apocalyptic view of the counterculture, and partly acknowledges the fiction of the frontier ideology to which it was aligned (191).

Road movies tend to employ travelling shots (as opposed to the tracking shot)[58] to present a sense of shared character-audience *Fahrvergnügen* (the pleasure of driving).[59] Travelling shots position the viewer beside the driver through a combination of point-of-view shots, providing a visceral experience of travelling at high (modernised) speeds (Laderman 2002, 15). The landscape is presented as experiential rhapsody in *Easy Rider* through the combination of panoramic point-of-view shots and objective shots of the riders within the landscape set to contemporary music. Positioning Wyatt and Billy—bathed in lens-flared light and framed by rainbow-effects[60]—within Monument Valley (made iconic by John Ford in films like *Stagecoach* and *The Searchers*) forms a complex dialogue with American ideology and its cinematic representation. Against this iconic backdrop the camera pans almost 360-degrees in order to emphasise both the overwhelming, monumental radiance of this location, the subjective 'trippiness' of this countercultural trip, and its enhanced subjectivity through the use of hallucinogens, marijuana and LSD (Klinger, 188-189).[61] The deliberate shifting of referents (from the real to the myth, to the reflexive use of myth) evident in *Easy Rider* aligns with Shari Roberts' assertion that although the road stands in for the frontier in the transition from Western to road movie, it does not symbolise 'a romanticized America in which the American Dream will

[58] Laderman states that the tracking shot is usually related to human movements, like running or walking, and are thus more 'grounded' and slower (15).
[59] German (translation mine).
[60] An effect that arose as an innovation of the New Hollywood, according to Barbara Klinger.
[61] Klinger writes that unlike other depictions of the road around the time of *Easy Rider*'s release (*Alice's Restaurant* [Penn 1969], *The Rain People* [Coppola 1969], *Midnight Cowboy* [Schlesinger 1969]) the landscape is seen in connection to the frontier and the freedom ideal. The insertion of countercultural figures, such as Wyatt and Billy, is not seen as a disruption to tradition via the derailment of national symbolism of the wilderness, but rather reflects hippie connections to that tradition through environmentalism, and a spiritual connection to the earth (190-191).

come true, it simply asks over and over, as each mile marker is passed, what does America mean today? Are dreams even possible?' (52).

Figure 19 Monument Valley in John Ford's *Stagecoach*

Figure 20 Monument Valley in John Ford's *The Searchers*

Figure 21 Monument Valley in Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*

A point of differentiation between the expeditions of Western protagonists and the road travellers is the technological advancement of modernity. In the road film, automotive travel embodies the ideologies of American individualism, a right to freedom, and confidence in the benefits of technological advancement. Yet, unlike the horse on the frontier in the Western, the automobile is limited in its potential

routes for exploration. The automobile is restricted to the road, and thus its path is always already partly paved (Roberts, 60). Throughout the course of a road film the relationship between driver and vehicle often becomes akin to a physical bond or prosthetic extension that enables the thrill of the road to be explored (Laderman 2002, 18). In an early scene in *Easy Rider* Wyatt and Billy arrive at a ranch to repair a flat tyre on Wyatt's motorcycle while a rancher is shown in the foreground of the shot shoeing his horse. In this scene, the contemporary countercultural figures of America with their high-powered motorcycles are identified with the more traditional rancher and his horse. This sequence demonstrates how technology, represented by cars, motorcycles, 'or some other self-descendant of the nineteenth century train' (Corrigan 1992, 144), in road movies depicts the historical achievements of modernity while simultaneously flagging and reiterating ongoing social problems, such as the (masculinist) desire for liberation (Cohan and Hark, 3).[62]

Figure 22 The juxtaposition of motorcycle and horse in *Easy Rider*

David Laderman states that modernity and modernism are important to the road film genre, not only as the broad cultural and industrial phenomenon of early-to-

[62] It has been argued that the road genre is the terrain of the white, heterosexual male, with women relegated 'to passive passengers and/or erotic distractions'. The emphasis on masculinity, and the associated patriarchal undercurrents, are openly challenged in the queer and feminist road films of the 1990s (Laderman, 20-21).

mid-twentieth century America and the exploration and liberation afforded by technological advancement, but also as the aesthetic practice in which art is both visionary and a site of social criticism (2002, 5). The New Hollywood road film is influenced by the French New Wave, Resnais, Fellini, and Bergman, in its deliberate incorporation and use of new film technologies (lightweight camera, fast film stock) and in the incorporation of 'elliptical narrative structure and self-reflexive devices; elusive development of alienated characters; bold traveling shots and montage sequences' that combined with the classical Hollywood structures to produce a distinctly Americanised genre, evident in *Easy Rider* (Laderman, 5).[63]

Although the success and popularity of *Easy Rider* (and *Bonnie and Clyde* two years prior) fused rebellion with the act of driving,[64] thereby integrating the road itself into the narrative of the road film, the genre spans both pre- and post-war film periods (Laderman, 4). Steven Cohan writes that in the 1940s, the road 'readily served the movies as a symbolic route for tracing a unified national identity in the face of the regional, racial, ethnic, and class differences that the war made apparent, and, even more pointedly, for showing how popular culture gave the United States its coherence as "America," everyone's "home"'(114). By the late 1960s the homogenous national image of 'America' was fractured and this was reflected in the depiction of national identity and nationhood in road films (Cohan, 113). The large-scale interstate highway projects of the 1950s and 1960s and the transition of the great migratory trails of the Depression era into patriotic touristic spaces meant that post-war road films were produced in a vastly different landscape to their predecessors. Despite the stated emphasis on departures and projected arrivals, post-war road films are essentially concerned with being *on the road*. These films are 'defined by [their] extended middle' (Creekmur 1997, 90). The road is a marginal

[63] See Mark Harris' account of the emergence and influences of the New Hollywood era in *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Films and the Birth of the New Hollywood* (2008, 8-34).
[64] The connection between rebellion and automobiles was already prevalent in Benedek's *The Wild One* (1953) and Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955); however, the position these films take to rebellion and the relationship between the protagonists and the road differs to those in the New Hollywood.

space, a site devoid of domestic spaces and with an absence of people—'a perpetual in-between' (Schaber 1997, 34). Laderman posits that the nature of the road journey affords the genre a fairly unrestricted narrative trajectory. Road films, for Laderman, have the capacity to carve out a more roaming, 'free-wheelin' path, rather than necessarily adhering to the beginning-middle-end structure of conventional mainstream cinema. New Hollywood films like Monte Hellman's *Two Lane Blacktop*, Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* and Hopper's *Easy Rider* experiment with narrative form and unresolved (non)endings; however, these films do not divorce themselves wholly from the narrative structure of mainstream cinema. Rather they engage with narrative expectation in order to deny the possibility of cathartic resolution or the clear fulfilment of set goals. Roberts states that although there are often stated goals within the road film, the internal journeys fuel and overshadow the physical journeys—thus, while Wyatt and Billy state that they are on their way to Mardi Gras, their journey is to gain something like enlightenment, or a liberated life (53).

The road journey is often set in motion in order to avoid an undesirable current lifestyle (*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* [Scorsese 1974]) or to escape the authorities or other external factor (*Bonnie and Clyde* [Penn 1967], *Badlands* [Malick 1973]) in pursuit of an alternate way of life, realisation, and fulfilment, whether or not these motivations are known to the protagonist (Roberts, 53). Alternatively the road journey may be propelled by a requirement to acquire something or arrive somewhere. Due to the frequent recurrence of these narrative trajectories, Julian Stringer states that the road film can be differentiated from other genres by

> defining distinct parameters of action and by aspiring to complete a particular emotional trajectory. The progression is toward a unified and fulfilling subjectivity. Road movie logic maintains that the further you drive from civilization the more easily you can shake off its constraints, the more people you leave behind the closer you can get to yourself. (1997, 165)

The journey beyond cultural familiarity is portrayed as a means of cultural critique, personal revelation, and an exhilarating experience as the road represents the

possibility of unplanned adventure through the both liberating and uneasy unknown (Laderman 2002, 1-2). The freedom to cross borders (afforded by the highway system) and leave the familiar behind is 'rediscovered as a movement across open space' (Laderman, 15). Yet, as Stringer suggests, although the road provides the illusion of the alleviation of the pressure of societal constraints, these generic aspirations are always placed in contention with contradictory impulses — 'the myth of escape and self-discovery are always chimerical, just two more mirages along the way' (165). The tension between rebellion and conformity at the generic core of the road film is frequently undermined or diluted by societal convention as, despite the act of departure, protagonists always travel with significant cultural baggage (Laderman, 20). For the New Hollywood, the road film was presented as a means by which the counterculture could examine their dissatisfaction with mainstream society, and attempt to defy the societal expectations from which they felt increasingly removed. This attempt, however, proved unsatisfactory and, ultimately, a failure. Despite their interrogatory nature, the core anxieties that served as the impetus for these road films were unresolvable.

In his article 'The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 1970s' (1975), Thomas Elsaesser identifies two key elements of the New Hollywood tradition: the unmotivated hero and the pathos of failure. Elsaesser reads *Easy Rider* as highlighting the lesson of total failure through Wyatt's 'resigned and melancholy admission', 'We blew it' (286) . Wyatt and Billy are unable to live among the new generation of hippies, and yet they are also unable to live in the violently conservative South.[65] Elsaesser notes that while this form of bitter and anxious social critique is evident within New Hollywood cinema, it is form of new realism that began in the 1950s with Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *The Wild One* (Benedek 1953). These new realist films present characters that would have been

[65] Elsaesser writes that *Easy Rider* is loosely structured and open-ended, but that the (importantly male) characters are still motivated to escape civilisation and women (in the tradition of Huck Finn) (286).

seen as heroes in the classical form, but lacking motivation. In the place of motivation, Elsaesser writes 'today's heroes are waiting for the end, convinced that it is too late for action, as if too many contradictions had cancelled the impulse toward meaning and purpose' (291).[66] He goes on to state that at this time, the American filmmakers, unlike their European counterparts, tend to

> literalise their cinematic language, de-dramatise their narratives, and strengthen the inner dynamism of their scenes: the momentum of action gives way to the moment of gesture and body. A new form of *mise-en-scène* seems in the making that could mean a revaluation of physical reality on the far side of either fetishistic fixation on the image or conceptual abstraction of the form. In that case, the unmotivated hero and the pathos of failure will be the two negatives that result in a positive. (292)

The aimless trip denies the possibility of motivation; these films embody a sense of *sehnsucht*, an inconsolable nostalgic longing for something unidentifiable and unattainable (Lewis 1956). During the period of the New Hollywood the cultural atmosphere of *sehnsucht* was articulated in both film and music. Paul Simon's song 'America' (1968) openly expresses *sehnsucht* through the experience of two young lovers who like Wyatt and Billy, have 'gone to look for America'. The song's protagonist anxiously confides to his travel partner '"Kathy, I'm lost," I said, though I knew she was sleeping. "I'm empty and aching and I don't know why".' The poignant sensation of undefinable loss is confounded by Simon as the protagonist pursues the endless task of 'counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike' assured, that like him, 'they've all gone to look for America.' Simon's expression of *sehnsucht*, like Hopper's *Easy Rider*, is distinctly linked to the nation. The road promises to relocate individuals, and reconnect them with the national identity for which they yearn—yet, for Wyatt and Billy, the drag racers of *Two Lane Blacktop*, and *Five Easy Pieces*' Bobby Dupea (Jack Nicholson) this promise proves empty. Ironically in

[66] For Elsaesser the pervasive pessimism that he sees evident throughout the New Hollywood (particularly post-1970) more as a constraint of the new realism, rather than personal statements being made by individual filmmakers.

Charlie Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich*, the New Jersey Turnpike is no longer a site of *sehnsucht* (as it had been for Paul Simon) but a site of emotional and physical ejection—a dead-end. Those who crawl into the portal that leads into John Malkovich's mind are ejected at the New Jersey Turnpike after a fifteen minute 'ride'. This ejection is, in some manner, perceived as revelatory. As Craig (John Cusack), the film's protagonist, exclaims, 'it's supernatural, for lack of a better word,' he excitedly adds: 'it raises all sorts of philosophical questions, you know, about the nature of self, about the existence of a soul. Am I me? Is Malkovich Malkovich?' But for all of Craig's metaphysical inquiry, the ride (and indeed Craig's philosophical quest) must always end at the same place—the rider is always 'spat out' at the turnpike.

Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* is an American Eccentric road film that consciously alludes to the existential road trips of the New Hollywood (particularly *Easy Rider*) through parodic and reflexive evocations of genre conventions while simultaneously maintaining their sincere thematic core. In *The Darjeeling Limited*, the road occupies an uneasy space between the promise of the road experience (exhibited in *Easy Rider*'s title sequence) and the simultaneous awareness of its failure in the New Hollywood (the murder of Wyatt and Billy). Unlike New Hollywood road films, *The Darjeeling Limited* does not project a sense of *sehnsucht* but rather a yearning for interpersonal and existential connection that simultaneously notes the ultimate inability to achieve this aim. *Easy Rider*'s Wyatt and Billy, *Five Easy Pieces*' Bobby, and Paul Simon's speaker in his song 'America' (but also in his narrative songs on *The Graduate* soundtrack) are characters consumed with a spirit of nostalgic longing, or *sehnsucht*, for something that they metonymically consider to be 'America'. Ultimately each of these characters fails to locate and placate that longing—and yet there is a romanticism that propels them toward the road. In contrast, when the Whitman brothers in *The Darjeeling Limited* take to the road, they similarly engage the affect of longing; however, this longing is placed at a distance

beyond an existential barrier. The Whitman brothers travel even though they *know* there's nothing to find. Rather than taking to the road as a personal and political attempt to divorce from mainstream society, *The Darjeeling Limited*'s protagonists do so with the knowledge that the road is only a symbol for the prospect of personal transformation, liberation, and awareness. Thus, rather than being allied with frontier settlers, or those who have 'gone to look for America' in the New Hollywood, these films portray the journey of those who set off with the genuine hope for self-discovery while always being acutely aware that their goal is impossible.

1.4 American Eccentricity and the Postmodern

The American Eccentric mode employs postmodern techniques of parody, pastiche, reflexivity and ironic representation in a fluctuating manner to express a contemporary American existential anxiety. What is often mistakenly characterised as postmodernism (or superficially as post-postmodernism)[67] in the American Eccentric mode is the textual complexity arising from the co-existence of pop-cultural, postmodern aesthetics and otherwise entirely sincere modernist existential concerns and themes. In his essay *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1984), Fredric Jameson characterises the shift from modernism to postmodernism in an era of postmodernity as the replacement of affect with effect: 'a new depthlessness' (58) in which emotional content is replaced with simulacral surface. In this formulation, the 'waning of affect' caused by the simulacral, space-orientated (rather than time-orientated) experience has resulted in the fragmentation

[67] Although the term 'post-postmodernism' has been most explicitly used by Tom Turner in his book *City as Landscape: a Post-postmodern View of Design and Planning* (1996) to document and advocate specific architectural and city planning trends and turns, I use the term more generally to refer to a group of theoretical positions (including Vermeulen and van den Akker's metamodern) that position sincerity and authenticity beyond postmodern irony.

of the once unified or centred self (61-64). Jameson argues that 'this shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterised as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject' (63). For Jameson the postmodern text is not devoid of feeling, but rather is characterised by a certain flatness, or perceived lack of depth (as a result of a preoccupation with surface representation), rendering any emotions present detached and undirected (64). This notion of detached and undirected feeling, in Jameson's configuration, is associated with the late capitalist concept that the liberation of individuals 'from the older *anomie* of the centred subject may also mean, not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling' (64, emphasis in original).

Jameson's view has since been challenged by Linda Hutcheon (2002) in regard to the definition of postmodernism (as distinct from postmodernity) and its ability to provide political critique of the postmodern world. Hutcheon agrees with Jameson's observations of an emphasis on flat, spatial representations that disconnect individuals from a former sense of temporality and history, as well as the notion of postmodern culture as increasingly dominated by simulacra that create and perpetuate a sense of separation from the real. For Hutcheon, however, the key distinguishing feature of postmodernism from modernism is its relation to mass culture. Following Andreas Huyssen's assertions in *After the Great Divide* (1986), Hutcheon states that while modernism 'defined itself through the exclusion of mass culture and was driven by its fear of contamination by the consumer culture burgeoning around it into an elitist and exclusive view of aesthetic formalism and the autonomy of art' (27), postmodern works renegotiate 'the different possible relations (of complicity and critique) between high and popular forms of culture' (27). In addition to postmodernism's relation to mass culture, Hutcheon notes the denaturalisation of the natural, a rejection of grand narratives, the renegotiation of the distinctions between fiction and history, the recognition of the present influences

on conceptions of the past and reliance on textuality, and the denaturalisation of gender and sex, as distinct elements of the form. Hutcheon writes that the politics of postmodern representation are ambivalent: 'what postmodernism does is to denaturalize both realism's transparency and modernism's reflexive response, while retaining (in its typically complicitously critical way) the historically attested power of both' (32). This ambivalent, critically complicit representation allows postmodern representation to open up new relations between art and the world. The boundaries of high art and popular culture (and their requisite discourses) are transgressed and blurred in both postmodern works and theory, often in aesthetic works, through the textual strategy of parody (32-33).

American Eccentricity aesthetically and stylistically makes use of a Hutcheonian conceptualisation of postmodernism (particularly duplicitous and porous boundaries of high and popular culture) without wholly subscribing to the ideological impacts associated with its economic and mass-cultural project. American Eccentricity, as a mode, is beyond postmodernist representation. This may be, as Hutcheon concludes, because:

> The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and ideological critique continue to live on – as do those of modernism – in our contemporary twenty-first-century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. Postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century. (181)

American Eccentricity is aesthetically and formally influenced by postmodernism in terms of cinematic structure, parody, and patische. However, these formal and aesthetic aspects are employed to create a fluctuating distance between the sincere and ironic articulation of the films' core sincerities surrounding existential anxiety. That is, in sense similar to Brecht's *V-effekt*, American Eccentric films employ these postmodern techniques in order to engage the spectator in game-like play of textual

recognition that serves to distance her from the existential aspects of the texts. This game-play, however, simultaneously comments self-referentially on the intertextual and extratextual implications of these postmodern-influenced evocations. That is, the film recognises its own limitations and parameters as a construction, and uses this recognition to encourage the spectator to emotionally connect with the pathos and narrative trajectory of the film *because* these acknowledged parameters actively promise that the character's existential anxiety can be left behind by the spectator at the film's conclusion. Unlike postmodernism, American Eccentricity is not a 'moment' but rather a set of cinematic traits that employ postmodern techniques to enable sincere engagement with existential themes; therefore I do not put American Eccentricity forward as a response to Hutcheon's call 'to find…and name [a new label for postmodernism] for the twenty first century'. However, Jim Collins' New Sincerity, and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's metamodernism provide insightful and relevant responses to that call and points for consideration in relation to American Eccentricity. In this chapter, I analyse the assertions made by Jim Collins, while in Chapter Three I address the interaction between American Eccentricity and metamodernism.

1.5 The New Sincerity and Postmodern Genericity

Rick Altman's theory of genre accounts for the postmodern inflection of genres by highlighting filmic multivalency as an aspect of genre itself. Altman states that genres have the capacity for multiple framing (where an event is framed by more than one narrative context, and thus problematizes the sameness of the event itself), multifocalisation (the multiplication of point-of-view), and fertile juxtaposition (the ability to see films as puzzle-like in formation, where events are positioned in relation to all surrounding aspects, rather than as a linear chain of cause and effect). Within the multivalent form, films are not treated as narratives

according a temporal and linear model, but rather as complex and spatial configurations (135). Altman writes:

> Juxtaposition offers the permanent possibility of multiple interactions. Every screen moment is caught up in a multidimensional loom, in which several elements – foreground and background, shot scale and lighting, *mise-en-scène* and editing, dialogue, music – are woven together into a multidimensionally reversible fabric. With each new juxtaposition new connections are made, and the concepts are reinforced or relegated to storage, potentially leading to that magic moment of conceptual reframing when the spectator-weaver presses on the pedal, raising some threads while lowering others and thus initiating a new series of juxtapositions and reframings. (136)

Altman argues that this form of juxtaposition on one hand accurately describes the process of postmodernism, yet recognises that, as film genres are always in the process of 'becoming', genres have always been hybridised in this manner (139). The invisibility of genrification in process leads to the assumption that there is a significant difference between classical and contemporary generic practice (140). That is, while there have always been multiple elements of genre in each film, postmodern films tend toward bricolage, pastiche, and intertextuality and therefore foreground these existing elements for highly literate film audiences to recognise (142). Postmodern films overtly employ multiple genre conventions and intertextual references that are designed to be noticed by the spectator. Although Altman's multidimensional loom analogy is illuminating when considering the texture and configuration of genericity in the American Eccentric mode, it is important to note that irony and sincerity within the juxtaposed referents are always immediately bound together. Parody, pastiche, allusion, and generic subversion are always multidimensional in the American Eccentric mode, alluding to thematic linkages throughout cinematic history as well as playful intertextuality while acknowledging generic conventions.

In his essay 'Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity' (1993), Jim Collins describes a cultural phenomenon within 1990s film culture that

revolves around the incorporation or rejection of postmodern irony. Collins posits that 1990s genre films can be broadly divided into two categories: one based on 'dissonance, on the eclectic juxtaposition' (242) of seemingly mismatched elements in 'an ironic hybridization of pure classical genres' (243), while the other, consumed with retrieving an harmonious, unified whole, epitomizes a 'new sincerity…that rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity' (243).[68] Collins argues that while these two approaches to genre appear oppositional, they have arisen in the context of a cultural obsession with media and the availability of new technologies in the 1980s and 1990s. These technologies enable a perpetually accumulating array of classic and contemporary texts that are subject to increasingly near-instant, random accessibility and recall in contemporary American society (243-6). Collins describes the co-presence and near-instant recollection of references and imagery from divergent contexts as a 'simultaneity that functions as a techno-palimpsest (rather than the 'collapse of history', in which earlier traces can be immediately called up, back to the surface to be replayed, or more precisely, recirculated)'(249). Rather than diminishing the cultural capital assigned to either the classic or contemporary object, their simultaneity alters their relationship and possible functions (246). Collins relates these possible functions to the evolution of genres beyond a three stage cycle.[69] At this juncture technological and cultural changes enable past popular genre texts to be 'recycled' and viewed as classics alongside contemporary incarnations. This simultaneity not only alters the historical development of a genre cycle, but also the cultural functions of genre films, which if seen as 'symbolically "mapping" the cultural landscape, must do so now in reference to, and through the array that constitutes the landscape' (247). Collins describes

[68] Collins writes that he uses the term 'genericity' to refer to more than specific film genres in that he addresses genre as a mode of film production and viewing (243).

[69] The three stage cycle involves the initial coalescence of patterns and traits into the formation of a recognisable genre with a set of discernible audience expectations; the 'Golden Age' of a genre in which the interplay of stable expectations and traits is subject to variation and permutation; and the final phase in which the genre experiences a decline and the conventions and traits established become the subject of parody or are used reflexively (Collins, 246).

eclectic appropriation associated with the techno-palimpsest of postmodernism as a 'hyperconscious intertextuality' in genre that reflects changes in audience competence and perceptions of cultural literacy (250). While Collins uses Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future Part III* (1990) to illustrate his point in relation to the Western, this form of genericity is evident in relation to the evolution of the road film and its permutations in the American Eccentric mode. American Eccentricity engages with an interplay of genre film historicity, the employment of postmodern historiography, cultural signification and specificity, and contemporary evocation to create and recall meaning.

Collins describes 'the other' form of genericity in 1990s film as the 'New Sincerity'. Rather than engaging and manipulating the media-saturated landscape through ubiquitous use of ironic quotation marks, these films reject irony altogether in favour of an acute lost authenticity that is only realisable through absolute sincerity (257). Collins cites *Dances With Wolves* (Costner 1990), *Hook* (Spielberg 1991), and *Field of Dreams* (Robinson 1989) as films that recover purity and sincerity by locating their narratives in fictional pasts before the infiltration of media corruption. These are impossible fictional pasts that function as symbolic sites for the purpose of resolving contemporary issues (257); they determine 'to resolve the unresolvable in a never-never land that is available neither in the present nor the past, but an imaginary pre-history or originary moment' (260). The purity of these never-never lands in the New Sincerity is in contrast to the techno-sophistication of eclectic ironic expression as a fantasy technophobia; however, both are reactions to a subsequent phase of postmodernism (262).

American Eccentricity does embody a structure of feeling that equates to a new sincerity—however, this is not the New Sincerity outlined by Collins. As Warren Buckland writes:

> Collins seems to mean simply 'sincerity' rather than 'new sincerity'. The *new* of new sincerity signifies it is a response to postmodern irony and nihilism: not a rejection of it, not a nostalgic return to an idyllic, old sincerity. Instead, in a dialectical move, new sincerity *incorporates* postmodern irony and cynicism; it operates in conjunction with irony. (2012, 2 emphasis in original)

Sincerity in the American Eccentric mode does not reflect Collins' New Sincerity (which is bound with purity and a rejection of irony), but rather is aligned with Buckland's description as a response to postmodern irony. American Eccentric genericity embraces aspects of both of Collins' generic forms simultaneously: these films employ an array of eclectic ironic appropriations and create impossible cinematic worlds in which the sincerity of their films can play out. As discussed in Chapter Four, these worlds are not past never-never lands in which contemporary concerns can reclaim a lost purity and be resolved, but rather cinematic constructions, in which the past, present, and future may coexist in relation to cinematically imagined spaces where concerns are unevenly concealed and revealed with an abiding sincerity, albeit lacking in genuine resolution.

1.6 From the *Easy Rider* to *The Darjeeling Limited*

The Darjeeling Limited opens with a wide-screen postcard-like shot accompanied by sitar music from the score of Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar* (1958). The distinctly foreign setting immediately establishes this road trip as divergent from the American cross-country films of the New Hollywood. The static shot is disturbed by a slight movement in centre-screen. The camera zooms in to reveal a taxi travelling at high-speed. The taxi is occupied by Bill Murray dressed in attire reminiscent of Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston 1941) and *The Big Sleep* (Hawks 1946). The image of a Bogartian figure in concert with an exotic soundtrack recalls the opening sequence of *Casablanca* (Curtiz 1942), and with it, the backlot exoticism of the

classical Hollywood era—depictions of the foreign as viewed (at a distance) by American cinema. The music accelerates as Murray anxiously surveys his surroundings, creating an ambiguity as to whether the taxi is being pursued or is in pursuit. The car chase ends as Murray exits the vehicle and races for the Darjeeling Limited cross-country train. Murray, framed in a close-up, hopelessly calls 'wait' as the train pulls away, and he is overtaken by the younger, expressionless Peter Whitman (Adrien Brody). The camera fixes on Peter, running in slow motion. The shift in character focus is aurally reflected as the mixture of sitar music and ambient sounds are drowned out by The Kinks' 'This Time Tomorrow' (1970b), which, in replacing all diegetic sound, repositions the sequence in an indeterminate space between the inside and outside of the film world (Boschi and McNelis 2012). The audio-visual cue of this first slow motion train-chase establishes the structural and textual fabric of road film envisioned by Anderson, and begins the road film proper.

Figure 23 *The Darjeeling Limited*'s first train chase

The prologue destabilises the audience's expectations of the road film. The car chase sequence, coupled with Murray's appearance, calls to mind classic thriller or noir road films such as *Detour* (Ulmer 1945) and *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock 1959). The transition from the fast-paced car chase to the choreographed slow motion of the two men signals a transgression in the road trip imagined by Anderson. In this sequence Anderson encourages the audience to recognise road film tropes in order to subvert them. Anderson has replaced Hopper's two motorcyclists looking for America with three brothers confined to a train carriage in India. The move from motorcycle journey to the train tour highlights that the perceived agency, or freedom, of *Easy Rider* is nowhere to be found in *The Darjeeling Limited*. Rather, *The Darjeeling Limited* is a film that recognises the failure of the road, yet maintains a

reflexive attempt at reconciling the sincere existential anxieties of its road protagonists. *The Darjeeling Limited* follows the Whitman brothers, Francis (Owen Wilson), Peter, and Jack (Jason Schwartzman) on a train journey of spiritual tourism across the Indian subcontinent. Unbeknownst to his siblings, Francis has organised the journey for the purpose of reuniting the brothers with their mother, Patricia (Anjelica Huston), who has absconded to a Himalayan convent to live as a nun. Unlike the open spaces of the road in *Easy Rider*, the Whitman brothers move only within the confined spaces of the train carriages—they do not drive, but rather are driven along a predestined route. The freedom associated with the distant horizons of the American landscape is reimagined by Anderson as a limited freedom. For the brothers, the Indian desert is something to be passed through, viewed through the frames of train windows. In an introductory reunion sequence Francis explicitly declares the purpose of the road trip as a journey of personal and spiritual enlightenment:

> **Francis:** A- I want us to be brothers like we used to be and to find ourselves and bond with each other. Can we agree to that? B- I want to make this trip a spiritual journey where each of us seeks the unknown, and we learn about it. Can we agree to that? C- I want us to be completely open and say yes to everything, even if it's shocking and painful. Can we agree to that? Now, I had Brendan make us an itinerary.
>
> **Peter:** Who's Brendan?
>
> **Francis:** My new assistant. He is going to place an updated schedule under our doors every morning of all the spiritual places and temples that we need to see and expedite the hotels and transportation and everything.

These lines are delivered to Peter and Jack while the three move through the narrow train corridors, facing the camera rather than one another. As Francis articulates the implicit audience expectations of the road film genre, he both parodies these expectations, and ironically reinforces the core anxiety of the film—familial disconnection. Francis' unnatural dialogue, laminated itineraries, and personal assistant, Brendan (who, ironically, is pictured within this sequence despite Francis'

claim 'we never see him—ever'), are in direct contrast to the world of 'the road' set up by Wyatt in *Easy Rider*. In *Easy Rider*'s establishing road sequence, Wyatt delineates 'the road' as other to the mainstream society he and Billy leave, as he silently discards his wristwatch. Wyatt's gesture is formally reflected by a jump cut, reinforcing that both *Easy Rider*'s diegetic action and formal cinematic articulation are incongruous with the conventions of mainstream society, and of classical Hollywood cinema. For Wyatt, the calendrical and clock-measured time of mainstream society has no place on the road, as the road promises immeasurable space and time for spiritual and personal liberation. For Francis, the spiritual journey must be planned with itineraries designating time for anticipated enlightenment and self-reflection. By making explicit these motivations and their planned methods of achievement, Anderson inscribes an ironic distance between what is stated and acted by the protagonists, and their authentic unnamed anxieties.

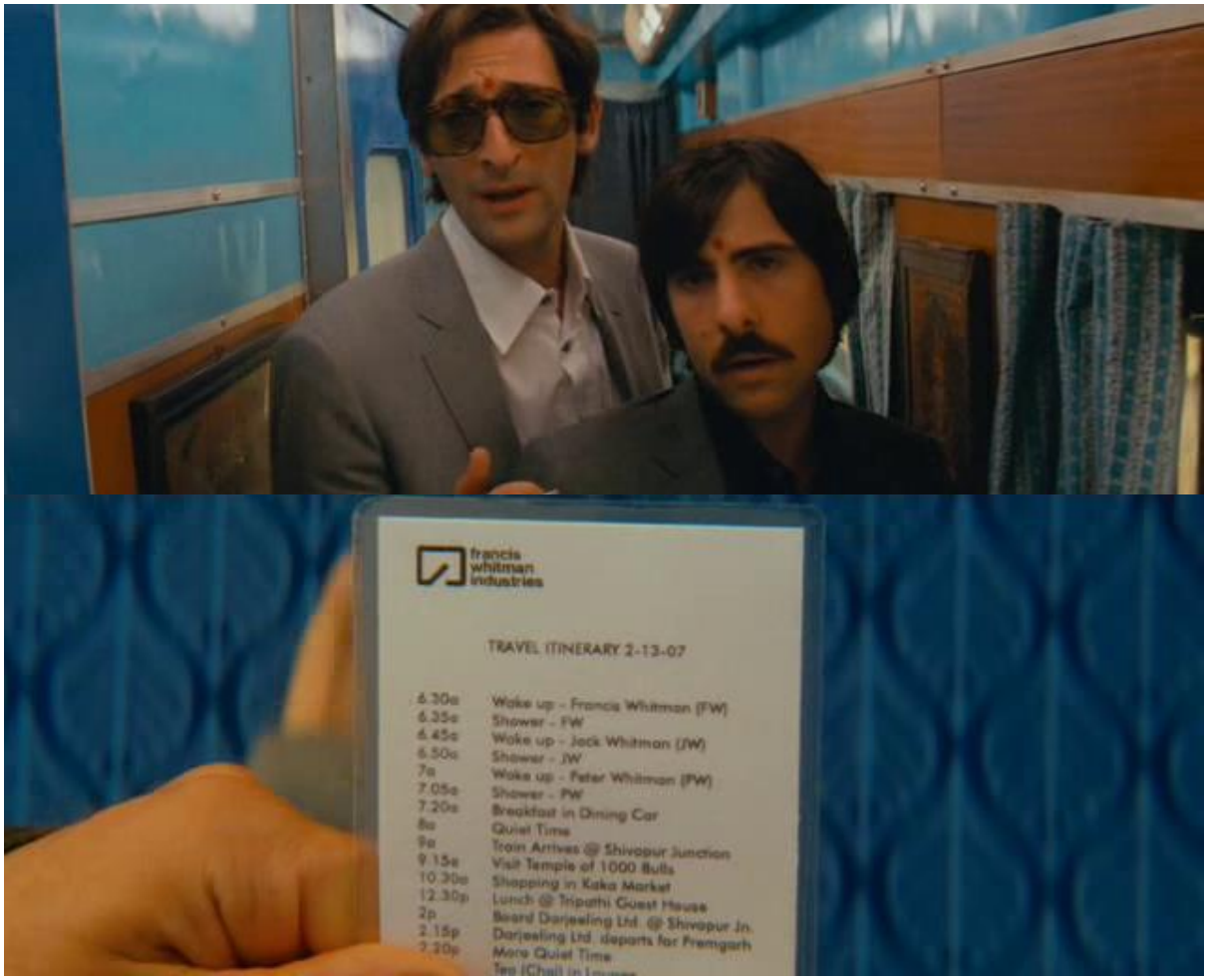

Figure 24 Francis' plans for enlightenment

Throughout *The Darjeeling Limited* the use of parody, pastiche, and allusion are incorporated to denote divergences and thematic continuity with the road film genre and its cinematic (and ideological) predecessors. The interaction of these techniques and strategies within the American Eccentric mode draws on the formations articulated by Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (1985 ed. 2000). Hutcheon analyses parody in the modern context, describing its doubled function and ability to act not only as a site of ridicule, but as a serious act of criticism.[70] According to Hutcheon, parody is

[70] As I relate this work to American Eccentricity, and refer to parody, intertextuality, and allusion as broadly postmodernist techniques (partly in accordance with the general labelling of American Eccentric films within postmodernism, or post-postmodernism), it is necessary to note that Hutcheon's textual formulation of parody does not vary greatly between the modern and postmodern, although she acknowledges that postmodern parody is more willing to blur the boundaries and distinctions between 'reality' and 'fiction', and question the 'unacknowledged

imitation characterised by ironic inversion—repetition with a critical edge (11). This repetition does not necessarily emphasise stasis and continuity, nor does it imply that parody relies purely on difference and deferral. Parody is a textual doubling of unification and reconciliation and differentiation, which highlights irreconcilable conflicts both between texts and between texts and the 'world' (101).

Hutcheon articulates the difference between parody, pastiche, plagiarism, burlesque, and travesty as an issue of intention—pastiche intends to mimic, plagiarism intends to deceive, and both burlesque and travesty, unlike parody, inherently intend ridicule (40). Parody 'has a stronger bitextual determination than does simple quotation or even allusion: it partakes of both the code of a particular text parodied, and also of the parodic generic code in general' (42). American Eccentric films are, like Hutcheon's notion of the contemporary novel, overtly and functionally polyphonic in style and structure (72). They consist of multiple layers—referential, parodic, allusory, and original—that function simultaneously to reveal and contain each film's sincere underpinnings, while retaining a specific relation to film history. American Eccentric films, such as *The Darjeeling Limited*, are not sheer parodies, nor are they merely intertextual puzzles or collages of pastiche. Rather, these films incorporate each of these strategies and techniques in varying degrees and to divergent effect in order to engage the viewer in a multilayered spectatorship, which at times diverts emotional attention via apparent game-playing and knowing recognition. These allusions or parodic evocations may feature broad genre conventions, such as narrative or thematic trajectories, or more specific semantic elements, such as genre tropes and iconography. They provide the thematic grounding for sincere articulation, while at other times they appear as moments of cinephilic revelry.

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modernist assumptions about closure, distance, artistic autonomy, and the apolitical nature of representation' (Hutcheon 2002, 99).

Hutcheon writes that double-directed irony appears to be a substitute for the traditional mockery or ridicule of the target text (32). The ironic inversion that is fundamental to parody is not necessarily always at the expense of the parodied text; parody is not, as many standard or dictionary definitions suggest, a means of ridicule (6). Hutcheon describes parodic transgression as the quotation of iconic norms that move beyond straight quotation. When conventions as well as particular texts are involved in parody, Hutcheon describes this as 'multiple coding'. For instance, *The Darjeeling Limited* has multiple coding in that it parodies many specific texts, such as *Easy Rider*, as well as the conventions of the road film, film noir, and thrillers through the initial chase sequence, and, more broadly, the classical Hollywood narrative and audience expectation. Parodic quotation or 'borrowing' is not intended to simply signal similarity, or be seen as a matter of nostalgic imitation, but rather is a stylistic confrontation, a recoding that establishes difference at the heart of similarity, as no integration into a new context is able to avoid altering meaning (and Hutcheon suggests, perhaps even value) (8). Thus, in parodying *Easy Rider*, *The Darjeeling Limited* both comments on the form of road film established and made popular by the New Hollywood and simultaneously recognises the inability to recreate this moment in cinematic history despite the similarities between presented core anxieties in both films. In partaking in this parodic play with *Easy Rider*, *The Darjeeling Limited* comments on the narrative structure, generic conventions, and audience expectations of the road film.

The narrative purpose for *The Darjeeling Limited*'s Indian setting derives from Francis' desire to reunite with their mother; however, in cinematic terms the setting performs a multifaceted function. Anderson frames the Whitmans as frivolous, privileged tourists, juxtaposed against the rural Indian landscape. The brothers are costumed in Western suits, constantly dragging the overtly symbolic Louis Vuitton designer baggage that once belonged to their deceased father. It is tempting to simply delight, as no doubt Anderson is aware, in the clunky image of the American

tourist—the type of tourist for whom the idea of India is, as Francis describes, 'one of the most spiritual places in the world', and who plans spiritual enlightenment in forty minute visits to temples between having their shoes shined and buying illegal novelty items (including venomous snakes) at town markets during train stopovers. However, *The Darjeeling Limited*'s India is not presented as a contemporary reality, but as a foreign space accessed through Louis Malle's documentaries, the films of Satyajit Ray, and Jean Renoir's *The River* (1951). This is an India that is wholly constructed through the cinematic image for the purpose of Anderson's narrative. As such, *The Darjeeling Limited*'s India primarily serves to highlight the incongruity of the brothers within their surrounds. The *mise-en-scène* provides a visual articulation of alienation. In addition to the brothers' familial alienation, in a foreign landscape they are also culturally and geographically alien. This external 'reality' is in contrast to the contrived interiors of the Darjeeling train.

Figure 25 American tourists in India

The 'reality' of Hopper's road trip, on the other hand, combined Wyatt's and Billy's external lived experience in the American landscape with internal perceptions of that experience in relation to their views on American society. At the time of its release, the on-screen use and discussion of psychedelic hallucinogens, primarily marijuana and LSD, was one of the most controversial aspects of *Easy Rider*. This film incorporated drug use into the film's narrative structure, an idea that evolved

from Hopper and Fonda's earlier film *The Trip* (Corman 1967).[71] The impact of drugs is experienced by the audience not only through the narrative, but also through tone and temporality. *Easy Rider* is not a film in which the protagonists happened to take illicit drugs; rather, it is a film that is structurally informed by experimental, hallucinogenic experiences. Anderson demonstrates the social shift away from the experimental drug use depicted in *Easy Rider* toward contemporary issues of prescription drug-use. The Whitman brothers replace hallucinogens with pain-killers and muscle relaxants which they revere, in an ironic yet profoundly troubling way, as being 'the strongest you can get', or having 'a tranquilliser in it'. These drugs are legal in India but not in their home country. The Whitman brothers are not road-travellers looking for the ultimate trip or drug-induced revelation, rather they are spiritual and chemical tourists who actively seek to disconnect from their reality through anaesthesia. The shift from recreational experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs as a means of ideological enlightenment to recreational prescription drug use for anaesthetic effect chemically characterises the schism between the active and acknowledged deferral of anxiety and the genuine source of anxiety for the brothers—irreconcilable familial disconnection.

Figure 26 Wyatt and Billy experience an hallucinatory 'trip'

[71] *The Trip* was written by Jack Nicholson.

Figure 27 The Whitman brothers anaesthetise themselves for their trip

Anderson portrays the unnamed anxieties of the Whitman brothers through irony and parody, which functions as a mode of distanciation, making serious instances humorous or meta-cinematic. The use of ironic humour encourages the audience to laugh (often knowingly) at a deeply anxious occurrence, while meta-cinematic techniques promote the intellectual recognition of the cinematic quality and intertextuality of an instance in the place of direct empathetic alignment. The Whitman brothers are pure cinematic characters in that they are recognisable on-screen characters, yet they are not presented as believable portrayals of real people (Wilkins 2014). The unlikely experiences afforded Francis, Peter, and Jack are presented not as reflections of relatable lived experiences, but as reflexive evocations of familiar instances in relation to cinematic history and idiosyncratic constructed peculiarity. In the American Eccentric mode the unmistakable awareness of the cinematic character construction mediates the spectator's emotional investment in them, even as their sincerity promotes it. By contrast, the characters of the New Hollywood inhabited naturalistic worlds that were immediately recognisable to their audience as compatible with their own. Where the ideological perspectives and identifiable peers in the New Hollywood mirror their socio-cultural zeitgeist and attendant anxieties, the American Eccentric character presents a site for the displacement of unspoken, personal anxiety. While Anderson's Whitman brothers

share the desire to 'find themselves on the road' with Hopper's Wyatt and Billy, these desires cannot be articulated by having the brothers directly re-trace the countercultural drive along Route 66. A new work cannot simply repeat the work of an older text—even if the two texts share common thematic problems. However, a new text can employ serious parody of the older text in order to share, and reflect on, these common themes (Hutcheon, 98). With its ability to simultaneously 'bury and breathe new life into the dead', parody is an important means by which modern artists negotiate and come to terms with the past, either through ironic recoding or 'transcontextualization' (Hutcheon, 101). This is clearly articulated in the early scene previously discussed in which Francis excitedly articulates his desire for the road trip to his brothers and the audience. Here Anderson allows a central character to overtly state the desires and expectations of the road film, (those that initially served as the impetus for Wyatt and Billy's journey) and, by doing so, acknowledges the impossibility for *The Darjeeling Limited* to simply repeat *Easy Rider*. Francis' speech acts to parody aspects of the road movie genre as an original text, which in turn enables these two films to share the common existential issues *and* reflect on the cultural shifts in articulation and representation of these issues between 1969 and 2007.

As becomes increasingly clear, the perceived absence of familial love and trust is a significant source of anxiety for the Whitman brothers. Anderson brings this tension to a climax in an instance specifically indicative of siblings and boyhood—a brotherly wrestle. Peter physically dominates Francis, while humorously insisting he loves him. Jack, observing apprehensively, provides a clear moment of light-handed Eccentric layering of genuine anxiety and ironic deference. Rather than join his wrestling brothers, Jack shouts 'I love you too, but I am going to mace you in the face!' and does so before retreating down the narrow train corridor and colliding with a screen door. In this frenetic, amusing sequence, Anderson reveals to the audience an authentic source of anxiety, and then immediately re-establishes the

scene as purely cinematic, through the referential switch to a humorous slapstick moment that verges on the absurd. The actions of this sequence result in the Whitman brothers being expelled from the train and a shift in Anderson's tone. Abandoned in rural India, the three men begin the road journey for a second time. 'Charu's theme', from Ray's *Charulata* (1964)[72] plays during the farewell exchange between Jack and a tearful Rita (the train waitress with whom he has had a short covert affair). In a childlike manner, Jack disrupts the sorrowful exchange as he, seeing her tears, enquires, 'Were you maced too?' This expulsion reorientates the narrative toward resolving Rita's puzzled retort (and the film's thematic conundrum), 'What's wrong with you?'

Yet this re-orientated road trip appears, again, to be a parodic representation of *Easy Rider* as the brothers 'get high' on prescription medications around a campfire and, fluctuating between ironic and sincere expression, discuss the failure of their family as a unit, rather than (as in Hopper, Fonda, and Nicholson's campfire scene) smoke marijuana and discuss the failure of American society on the whole. However, the poignancy of this scene is interrupted by a purely-cinematic acknowledgement of the sincerity of the sequence as Jack's sentimental question 'Wouldn't it be great if we heard a train go by in the distance?' is met with Francis' reply 'It'd probably be annoying.' This amusing, and seemingly parodic evocation, however, is revealed to serve sincere purposes. Just as the campfire scene in *Easy Rider* shifts from a marijuana-infused discussion of personal freedom to the violent murder of George Hanson, the tone of the campfire discussion in *The Darjeeling Limited* abruptly shifts in the following scene. Francis, Peter, and Jack witness three young Indian boys attempting to pull themselves across a rapid river, when their

[72] 'Charu's theme' plays a number of times throughout *Darjeeling*. In this context it speaks to the plight and sadness of Rita. In Ray's film Charulata (Charu) is a lonely woman who is married to a busy, but well-meaning man. In her loneliness Charu enters an emotional relationship with her husband's cousin, Amal. For both Charu and Rita, it is only when the extra-marital men must leave that they openly show disappointment and submit to tears, acknowledging that they must return to their secluded lives with their partners.

rope snaps. Anderson's characteristically poised camerawork is sharply abandoned as the brothers frantically attempt to rescue the boys. A sense of panic is created as Anderson cuts dramatically between the points of action, filmed from tilted angles and semi-submerged positions in the river. The frenzied sequence continues until Peter emerges, blankly cradling a limp body. Unlike Peter's deadpan expression in the opening train chase sequence, this blankness reflects inexplicable defeat and bereavement. All diegetic sound fades into the background until the scene is silent; it is a space that cannot be filled with ironic, deflecting dialogue. Anderson uses this silence to mirror the solitude of grief. The narrative world is temporally suspended as the synergy of both silence and slow motion fade into an alternate temporality dictated by a non-diegetic musical source (Boschi and McNelis 2012). The brothers file out of a hut in slow motion toward the river as though driven by The Kinks' ballad of a thwarted spiritual journey 'Strangers' (1970). At the river the grieving father performs the funeral rites for his son, which alludes to the death, and funeral procession, of the young English boy, Bogey, in Jean Renoir's *The River* (1951).[73] The temporal suspension of the dramatic silence in this scene allows Anderson to further break the linear narrative with an emotionally connected flashback to the day of the Whitmans' father's funeral. The slow motion procession follows the Whitman brothers into a rickshaw adorned with funeral flower garlands. Anderson frames the brothers in a tight three shot, with each facing the camera. The music stops suddenly as Anderson cuts to a matching shot of the three brothers seated in a black funeral limousine, identically framed with the exception of location and costume. The brothers are linked to this sequence as though it were a memory triggered by their immediate situation. This cross-temporal linkage not only connects the pre-existing grief with their immediate, tragic situation within the film's diegesis, but demonstrates that these sincere issues, such as bereavement and anxiety, are

[73] Bogey is a young upper-middle class English boy who resides in India. Although his upbringing is predominantly British, due to his interaction with Indian culture, he learns to charm cobras by playing a flute. Tragically, Bogey is killed by a deadly snake bite.

atemporal and porous, despite the metacinematic, ironic reflexivity that confines narrative and characters to purely cinematic representation.

Figure 28 Two paralleled funerals

Unlike Hopper's sense of immeasurable time associated with the road-space as alternative to that of mainstream society, Anderson creates his own achronological imagined space. In contrast to the traceable journeys of the New Hollywood, the Whitmans' journey takes place on a fictional train route. The dated interior of the Darjeeling Limited train (inspired by the 20th Century Limited)[74] is incongruent with the film's decidedly contemporary context depicted through the mannerisms and humorous utterances of the Whitman brothers as well as the presence of contemporary technologies (Jack's iPod, Brendan's laptop, and Francis'

[74] The 20th Century was a passenger train that ran between New York and Chicago between 1902 and 1967, and incidentally also the venue for Howard Hawks' screwball comedy *20th Century* (1934).

search for international power adaptors). Anderson's film world is then further chronologically complicated by his (almost exclusive) diegetic and non-diegetic use of 1960s popular music (The Kinks, The Rolling Stones, and Peter Sarstedt) combined with the notable soundtracks of Satyajit Ray's 1950s-60s Bengali films. The fusion of contemporary technologies and mannerisms, popsongs from the 1960s and 1970s, layered with pre-existing Bengali film music, and a fictional train's dated interior creates a curious interaction between the contemporary and various real and constructed pasts. Michael Chabon likens Anderson's constructed worlds to Joseph Cornell's boxes in that 'the cinematic frame becomes a Cornellian gesture, a box drawn around the world of the film' (2013b)—the film worlds are assembled and contained collages of various specifically chosen elements. The merging of diffuse historical and contemporary contexts and referents promotes both identification and nostalgia that are unable to be specifically placed in a chronological context that is wholly contemporary or retrospective—it is achronologically cinematic, an aspect I will explore further in Chapter Four. However, despite the distinctively cinematic nature of these created worlds, the audience can (at least partially) empathise with the constructed characters within the boundaries of cinematic screen-time. The knowledge of the constructed nature of these characters does not prohibit sincere emotional alignment, but promotes temporary, and mediated emotional investment.

The form of covert, ironised representation of existential anxiety depicted by Anderson may be seen as an expression of illegitimate, or unwilling, anxiety. In the absence of the cultural and national tumult that presented external and legitimate sites for the generation of existential anxiety for the New Hollywood, the American Eccentric mode depicts internally generated crises of identity and purpose. The existential anxiety exhibited in American Eccentric mode as an 'ugly feeling' (in Ngai's terminology) is often expressed through ironic, sarcastic and parodic strategies. However, American Eccentricity does not employ irony consistently to distance the sincere anxieties of a protagonist in order to serve the internal cinematic

logic, but rather the deployment of irony fluctuates to create a tension between ironic reflexivity and sincerity that is to be negotiated by the audience.

Early in *The Darjeeling Limited*, Francis hands his brothers a peacock feather and a set of instructions from a guru as part of a deep meditative ritual to be performed at a poignant moment. Indeed, the brothers perform the ritual in a moment of genuine distress resulting from maternal abandonment. Having located their mother, the brothers are confronted with the realisation that she (the object of the road trip) is wilfully absent. Despite her promise that their discussions are 'to be continued', Patricia Whitman renounces her motherhood as she decamps during the night, leaving her sons' questions unanswered. Thus, the brothers conduct the peacock feather ritual from a position of genuine emotional realisation. However, the deeply mediative ritual intended to provide spiritual liberation is rendered absurd as the brothers perform improvised spiritualistic gestures that, amusingly, mimic recognisable movements of Tai Chi, Bollywood dance, yoga, and Buddhist meditation. Despite the ridiculous appearance of this ritual, Francis claims, 'That went perfectly', signalling the film has fluctuated back from sincere pathos toward ironic representation.

Figure 29 An ironic mediative ritual

The most explicit and poignant articulation of the tension between irony as a distancing mechanism and the sincere desire to confront and reconcile existential anxieties is expressed in *The Darjeeling Limited* through character doubling and parallel situations. Anderson complicates his recurrent double mother figure model in *The Darjeeling Limited* with Francis.[75] In addition to the two biological mothers of the film, Patricia Whitman and Peter's pregnant wife Alice (who has been abandoned in America as a result of the road trip), Francis presents himself in a maternal role. In a manner reminiscent of Salinger's Seymour Glass, Francis states that he believes he has raised his younger siblings and displays oddly mothering tendencies by ordering food for them and keeping hold of their passports. It is not until the appearance of Patricia that it becomes apparent, with both ironic humour

[75] Two mother figures generally feature in Anderson's films as a recurring trait.

and sadness, that her absence is the explanation of Francis' mannerisms, anxieties and neuroses. The acute reflections of the mother's expressions ('can we agree to that?') and gestures (ordering and speaking for her sons) indicate that Francis has been attempting to replicate the mother in order to fill the void of her absence, and that in seeking to reunite with her, his ultimate aim is to reconcile these problems. With their reunion, the unnatural dialogue associated with Francis is shifted onto the mother, while Francis speaks matter-of-factly for the first time in the film.

This is most evident in the instance in which Patricia enquires into Francis' injuries. After Francis outlines the desired outcomes of their trip in the introductory sequence of the film, Peter, speaking both for himself and the audience, asks the heavily bandaged Francis, 'What happened to your face?' Francis responds:

> It was raining. I was going about 50 miles an hour as I went into a corner. Did some wrong steering. Wheels went out from under me. I suddenly skidded off the road and slammed into a ditch and got catapulted 50 feet through the air. Little particles of glass and debris were stinging my face as I flew. And for a second, there was just total silence, then...Bam! Bike crashed to the ground, exploded and caught on fire and I smashed into the side of a hill with my face.

Although dramatic, the account is delivered without emotion and is not mentioned again until Patricia's inquiry. To Patricia, Francis simply and sincerely states: 'I smashed into a hill, on purpose, on my motorcycle.' After this open admission of attempted suicide, the use of irony as a distancing mechanism is retrospectively peeled back as the sincere anxiety of the film is foregrounded. This paralleled situation reconciles the previously asymptotic tension between parodic and ironic expression and the sincere anxiety at its core as a road film. The journey is given a conventional road film motivation: the sincere desire for familial reconnection in response to unrelenting despair. However, as Anderson provides his audience with moments of sincere identification and genuine pathos between self-referential or parodic sequences, he produces an overall tone of bittersweet whimsy, despite the

sincere anxiety of his central characters. The intensity of emotions such of despair, angst, grief and alienation are so immense that they are, perhaps, impossible to be approached and understood without mediation—as Chabon suggests, 'distance can increase our understanding of grief, allowing us to see it whole…but distance does not—ought not—necessarily imply a withdrawal' (2013b, par 7). Anderson's whimsical aesthetic and tone offers the audience mediated access to the central issues of sincere existential anxiety. The distancing tropes employed in the American Eccentric mode facilitate an indirect expression of these issues such that each is not 'too big' or overwhelming. Characters slide between moments of empathetic identification that is not forced on an audience, but is fostered and maintained throughout the narrative, and peculiarities in which the viewer is reminded of the place and role of the cinematic construction of the film. The audience cannot penetrate the assembled cinematic worlds created in the American Eccentric mode, nor is the pure cinematic character or constructed achronological world able to transcend their specific cinematic representation. Thus, although the audience may have been moved by the narrative and characters of an American Eccentric film, the closing credits may not provide satisfactory emotional closure; however it is ensured that both the narrative and characters are irretrievably complete within this cinematic universe.

The Darjeeling Limited concludes with the three brothers abandoning their father's luggage in pursuit of a second train, the Bengal Lancer. The interior of the Whitmans' compartment is almost identical to the first, only with an addition of a portrait of Satyajit Ray hanging on the wall. This bookend conclusion functions as a definitive completion of narrative and character. The events of their narrative, both ironic and sincere, are contained within Anderson's creation of India between the Darjeeling Limited and the Bengal Lancer. As Francis repeats his opening greeting 'Let's go get a drink and smoke a cigarette', he acknowledges that the brothers' journey is complete, and so is Anderson's film. The three exit the compartment, and

Jack closes the door behind them. The train speeds on. Joe Dassin's 'Les Champs-Élysées' (1969) crescendos. The credits roll.

Figure 30 The film's bookend as Satyajit Ray looks on

1.7 The Road and Kaufman's Mind Trips

As has been discussed, *The Darjeeling Limited* demonstrates parodic evocations and transgressions of the road film genre which enable the Whitmans' attempt to 'find themselves' on the road, yet limit their journeys to a form of cinematic representation. Part of the parodic evocation of the road trip in *The Darjeeling Limited* is the replacement of the motorcycle or automobile with the train. Here, not only are the Darjeeling Limited and (at the film's conclusion) the Bengal Lancer trains restricted to tracks, but these trains are also fictitious constructions whose aesthetic interiors signal antiquated, nostalgic technologies.[76] As Timothy Corrigan writes in his book, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (1992), as the road film genre

> develops through the fifties, the quest motif becomes increasingly mechanized through those central vehicles in a manner far different from even the industrial quests of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. By the mid-sixties, the protagonist's identity is almost fully displaced onto the mechanized vehicle as that vehicle becomes transformed into a human or spiritual reality. Peter Fonda would become his motorcycle, and both become something transcendent. More importantly, the perspective of the film as relayed through the central characters becomes a function of those vehicles…the camera adopts the framed perspective of the vehicle itself. (145-146)

Corrigan's statement elucidates the distinction between the interaction between the traveller and the mechanised vehicle in *The Darjeeling Limited* and the fundamental link between vehicle and traveller in films such as *Easy Rider*. *The Darjeeling Limited*'s trains expose the inability of these characters to drive, and in doing so, deny the

[76] The nostalgic artifice of these trains separates them from other contemporary films that show high-speed train travel, such as the introductory sequence of Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995). In both Linklater's and Anderson's films the main characters are drawn together due to their common annoyance at a pair of quarrelling German co-passengers. In *Before Sunrise*, a loud argument between a German couple initiates the conversation between Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Celine (Julie Delpy) whereas in *The Darjeeling Limited*, Peter announces 'these Germans are bothering me' before requesting two quarrelling German women 'keep it down.' This interruption provides a silent moment in which Francis states a key thematic element of the film, by asking his brothers 'did I raise us?'

characters the physical aspect of driving—the rush of adrenalin and perceived liberation involved in the merging of human and vehicle at high speed. The transcendental amalgamation of human and vehicle (and vehicle and camera) to which Corrigan refers manifests in Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999) as a willed yet doomed union of traveller and vehicle in order to elevate anxiety.

Being John Malkovich, like the New Hollywood road films, explores American existential anxiety through the perceived ability to dislocate oneself from mainstream society potentially afforded (albeit temporarily) by an external vehicle. Here, however, the external vehicle is not automotive or locomotive, but rather a portal into the mind of John Malkovich located behind a small door on the 7½ floor of a New York office building. Kaufman's protagonists, unlike the New Hollywood road travellers, no longer set out across the country to identify and relocate themselves within a grounded concept of the nation, but rather dive inward to re-define themselves, and reinvent a personal identity by changing the physical body. The vast American landscape of the New Hollywood road film is replaced in *Being John Malkovich* with confined internal spaces. The notion of liberating the self from the confines of identity is reminiscent of John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966) in which the protagonist, Arthur (John Randolph), a successful yet listless middle-aged man with a wife and adult daughter, approaches 'The Company', an organisation that enables those who have found their lives unfulfilling to be 'reborn' with another identity. Like Craig's (John Cusack) desire to inhabit the Malkovich body, Arthur desires to be, and indeed becomes, a younger, successful and popular artist named Tony Wilson (Rock Hudson). Just as Craig longs to remain in the Malkovich body despite the impossibility of a future, Arthur is similarly unable to remain Tony, nor is he granted his plea for another rebirth—both films end with the subsumption of the protagonists by the mechanisms that they believed would provide liberation. Craig disappears into a void within a new vestigial host body, while *Seconds*

hauntingly concludes with Arthur, strapped to an operating chair, being read his 'last rites' as he is wheeled out of frame.[77] In both films personal rebirth and reinvention are presented as a possible reaction to existential anxiety only to be denied as a viable solution.[78]

In the New Hollywood, the road journey was not guided by maps or itineraries. *Five Easy Pieces*' Bobby Dupea (Jack Nicholson) travels endlessly to 'get away from things that get bad' while the trip of the two unnamed racers of *Two-Lane Blacktop* concludes only through the literal destruction of the film on screen. *Being John Malkovich* presents the existential journey as a nonlinear, achronological, associative event that, rather than being narrativised by physical movement, is contained within the restricted area of a mind that does not belong to the traveller. The drug-induced mind trips of *Easy Rider* or *The Trip* have here become literal. A ditch beside Paul Simon's site of *sehnsucht*, the New Jersey Turnpike, is now the dumping ground for those whose fifteen minutes of 'being John Malkovich' have expired, enacting Corrigan's assertion that 'if the road movie traditionally subsisted on gasoline as a metaphor for restless energy, when that gasoline begins to dry up in the seventies the vehicles it propelled become scrap by the road' (153). These dumped travellers return covered in a brown fluid and gasping for air while explaining how the experience has altered their perception of life. It is only with the return to their own body that the occupants of Malkovich are able to articulate their

[77] The concept of an organisation that alters identity is echoed in Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry 2004) in which a company named Lacuna Inc. creates a map of their client's brain in order to locate all memories associated with an undesirable emotion and systematically delete these emotions—it is as, Dr. Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson) explains, brain damage but 'it's on par with a night of heavy drinking.'

[78] Corrigan further distinguishes between the road and rail, stating 'if in the fifties, the road spawned social outcasts that the film's narrative tried to socialize, this narrative action is then the naturalizing of a visible anxiety that would become an (hysterical) excess of indeterminable possibilities contained only by its self-consciousness in the road films of the sixties. By 1953, the United States had six percent of the world's population and sixty percent of its cars. By 1959, 1.25 million Americans had died in car accidents, more than in all U.S. wars combined. The strangers on the trains of the early fifties began hopping into cars by the turn of the next decade and acting out a psychodrama in which cars were the vehicle of escape, as well as the grim reminders of repression and death' (147).

perceived inadequacies—for Craig, the desperate need to be acknowledged, recognised, and celebrated by others; for Craig's wife, Lotte (Cameron Diaz) it is her sexuality and sudden desire to undergo gender realignment surgery.[79]

[79] This revelation is surprising as Lotte had previously appealed to Craig to consider becoming parents. Scott Repass similarly notes the importance of identification within the film and its connection to travel within the Malkovich body: 'self-identification, aside from naming, becomes crucial as characters pass from one body to another. Characters who travel through the portal into Malkovich announce their identities regularly. Through simple, declarative sentences, they state their professions, genders, or other aspects of themselves that are fundamental to their beings. "I'm a puppeteer," Craig says on a number of occasions. Later, when he has taken over Malkovich's body, he declares his dominance over Malkovich—"I'm no longer an actor," he tells his (Malkovich's) agent. "I'm a puppeteer." Lotte has a sexual awakening while in Malkovich and afterwards tells Craig, "I'm a transsexual"' (34).

Figure 31 Craig's first Malkovich ride

The portal into the actor John Malkovich's brain is presented as an exhilarating ride. Once the participant crawls into the small, dark cavern they are propelled toward a light in the distance. The visceral sensation of being catapulted forward is captured in point-of-view shot, giving the impression of travelling at high-speed, not unlike the drag races in *Two Lane Blacktop*. However, where the body of the car houses the driver in *Two Lane Blacktop*, the participant in the Malkovich ride does not drive the body, but rather is a passenger who observes Malkovich's life from his point-of-view. Like the exhilaration of the high-speed race or chase, or drug sequence in which there appears no clear delineation between the self and the state-altering vehicle, the Malkovich passenger is simultaneously inside another's mind yet not outside their own.

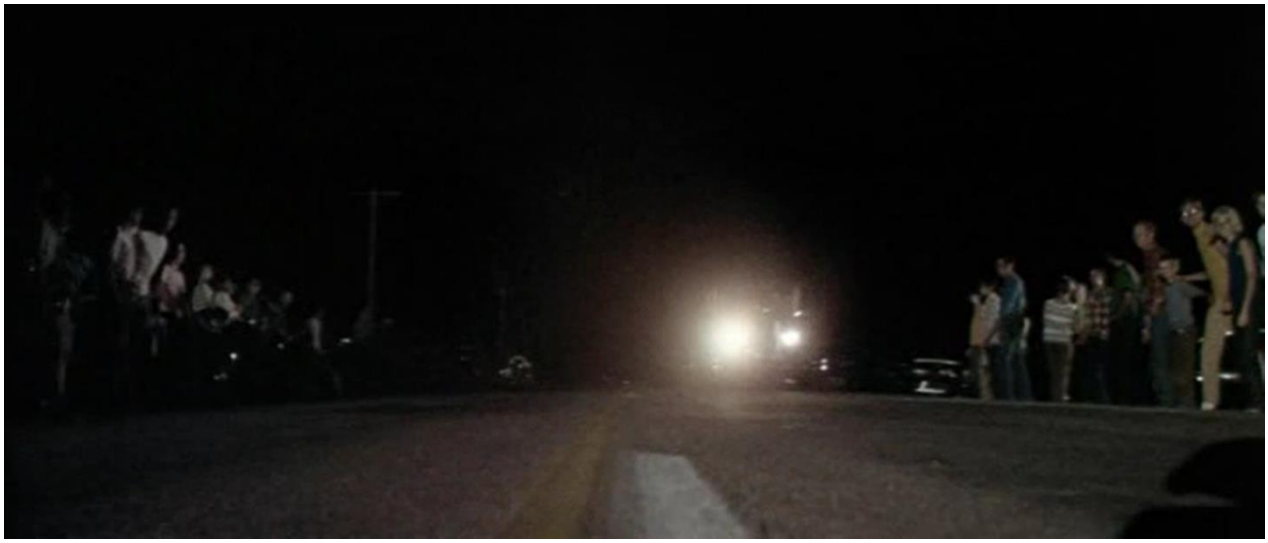

Figure 32 Drag races in *Two Lane Blacktop*

Figure 33 A rider being sucked in to the Malkovich portal

The portal (humorously noted by Craig as being a 'metaphysical can of worms'), like the New Hollywood's illusion of the road, suggests to the passengers the possibility of being 'someone else'. Maxine (Catherine Keener), Craig's co-worker and unrequited love interest, acknowledges and exploits the pervasive cultural desire to 'be someone else', by opening the Malkovich portal to the public as a paid experience. Although the character John Malkovich is enthusiastically established as a famous actor within the film, the desire to enter the Malkovich body has very little to do with his celebrity. Despite the fifteen minute time allocation for 'being John Malkovich' undoubtedly referencing Andy Warhol's phenomenon of fame in a postmodern, pop-culture context, the individuals who experience the

Malkovich ride not only are aware that they will not become famous themselves, but Kaufman presents John Malkovich as a celebrity about whom the public know (and desire to know) very little. Upon first mention of the Malkovich portal, Maxine nonchalantly asks 'who the fuck is that?', and no-one is able to recall any of his work.

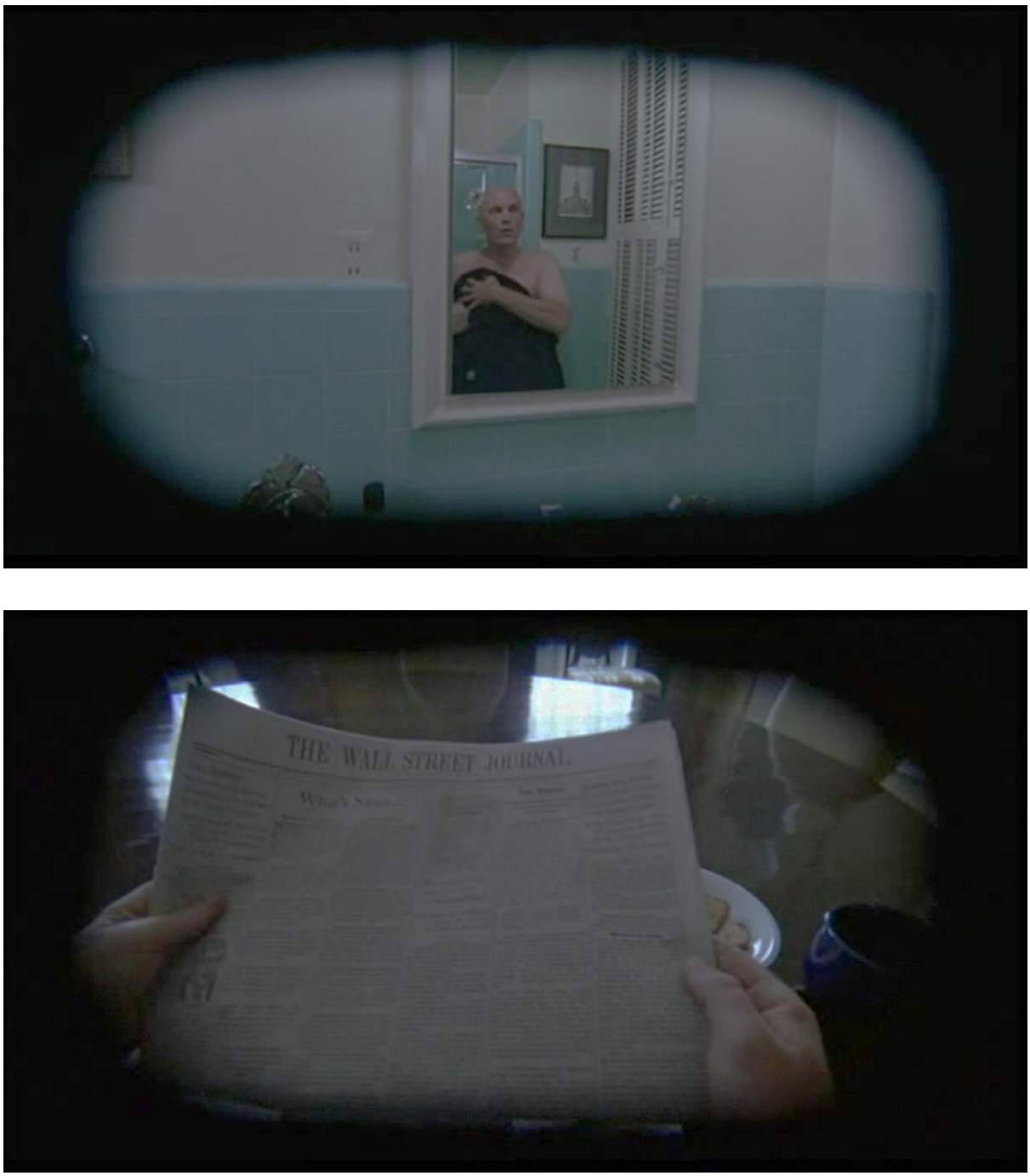

Figure 34 The view from the Malkovich portal

The travellers are enticed simply by the knowledge that Malkovich is indeed famous, and are thrilled to experience mundane events (ordering bath towels, reading the paper) through his eyes. The irony that results from the incongruity of these routine events and the elation these banal activities evoke in them as passengers demonstrates that the profundity of the ride is less contingent on the distinctiveness of the vehicle they enter than the temporary ability to exit their own body. As Craig explains to Lotte: 'it's the thrill of being able to see through somebody else's eyes'. This notion of the inter-body-outer-self experience is illustrated in a humorous exchange in which a new client of the Malkovich ride responds to the advertisement by asking Craig and Maxine if he can be anybody that he wants to be. When matter-of-factly informed by Maxine that he can only be John Malkovich, he exclaims 'Perfect! I mean, it's my second choice, but it's wonderful!' — what is wonderful, to this client, is simply the possibility of not being himself. The biggest irony of *Being John Malkovich*, however, is that within this context nobody is able to *be* John Malkovich. Once Malkovich takes the 'Malkovich ride' his entire ontological foundation becomes unhinged. The term 'Malkovich' replaces all other signifiers (Repass, 34). There is no distinction between the Malkovich dinner date, the Malkovich on the menu, the Malkovich as song, or the Malkovich the occupant of Malkovich ride: 'being John Malkovich' is devoid of meaning.[80]

[80] Garry L. Hagberg also signals the importance of this sentence within the film in his essay 'The Instructive Impossibility of Being John Malkovich' (2011). Hagberg's essay focusses on a strictly philosophical reading of the film, and situates his work within the Wittgensteinian tradition.

Figure 35 Malkovich takes the Malkovich ride

Once a passenger enters the Malkovich ride, their physical body is removed from the screen and replaced by a black hole through which they peer out at the world.[81] The viewer is given the illusion of seeing through the eyes of the passenger as they occupy Malkovich. The audio effects are muffled and the field of vision is limited—the passenger and viewer look out through a cut-out—positioned a step back from Malkovich's eyes, as though looking through a car windscreen at the world experienced through this vehicle (Repass 2002, 34-35). Here Corrigan's assertion of the camera's adoption of a vehicle's framed perspective within the road film genre is literalised by Kaufman and Jonze (146). The Malkovich passengers are positioned, like the film's viewers, such that they view a different life on a screen—the excitement of sensation is heard as though the spectator is privy to both the Malkovich ride and the experience of it by a third party (DasGupta 2007, 454-455). The world becomes literally framed for the passenger, mediated in its perspective

[81] In his essay 'On *Being John Malkovich* and Not Being Yourself' (2011) Christopher Falzon also writes of the Malkovich portal as a ride. Falzon uses this concept in relation an analysis of the film in relation to the Cartesian self.

just as Kaufman's constructed New York and narrative are framed and mediated for his audience. The occupant does not *become* Malkovich, he takes a ride *in* Malkovich. This is most evident when occupants who, unlike Craig, cannot control the Malkovich vehicle take the ride—for instance, when Lotte is inside Malkovich, it is her thoughts and desires, rather than those of Malkovich, that are heard. She may be 'inside someone else's skin' but her experiences are restricted to physical sensations. The desire declared by Craig *to feel what another feels* remains unachievable. Even Craig, whose puppeteer skills enable him to steer the Malkovich vehicle, is unable to *be* John Malkovich. Once Craig is inside the Malkovich ride the Malkovich body begins to behave like Craig. Rather than becoming John Malkovich, those characters who repeatedly inhabit this vehicle employ it in order to pursue their existing goals. Just as Wyatt's and Billy's motorcycles were a means to pursue liberation, and Bonnie and Clyde's automobiles were vehicles that enabled their robberies, the body of Malkovich performs a function for its passengers. Craig describes it as a 'really expensive suit that [he enjoys] wearing'—this 'expensive suit' enables Craig's marriage to Maxine, and social acceptance as a puppeteer. For Lotte, the Malkovich vehicle is a prosthesis that allows her to consummate her love for Maxine, who then is able to conceive their child.

Malkovich is viewed as a vehicle for perceived liberation, however this liberation is only attained through the theft of the Malkovich body. As Craig's employer, Dr. Lester (Orson Bean) explains to Lotte, Malkovich is a host vessel that can be used to prolong life indefinitely. But, as Dr. Lester reveals, Malkovich must not be entered any earlier or later than the eve of his 44th birthday to ensure that the vessel is ripe for inhabitation. If this window of entry is missed and an individual enters the body thereafter, they will be transferred to the subsequent vessel body: an unborn child. Thus, entering the Malkovich vessel at precisely the age of forty-four figures as the site of indefinite future, while failure to inhabit the vessel results in gradual extinction. With multiple characters vying for eternal life, the Malkovich

body becomes an object of extreme desire. In this sense, *Being John Malkovich* may be read in dialogue with the objectives (rather than the formal generic, or structural narrative properties) of the heist film, or caper film—only unlike classic caper films, such as *Topkapi* (Dassin 1964) or *The Sting* (Hill 1973), where the aim to is swindle an object of financial value, here the aim is not only to abscond with the life of the vehicle, Malkovich, but also to cheat death. Thus, the acquiring of (and absconding with) the stolen vehicle becomes a site of anxiety.

New Hollywood road films, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn 1967) feature the stolen vehicle as a site of excitement, freedom, and a state of change—as Clyde explains to Bonnie, they may have arrived in town in one automobile, but 'that don't mean we've got to go home in it'. However, where the stolen cars of *Bonnie and Clyde* temporarily open up the landscape to the characters, the state of change that the Malkovich vehicle provides inversely sets Craig on an increasingly claustrophobic inward journey. This perpetual inward spiral mirrors Bonnie Parker's realisation that 'At first, when we started out, I thought we were really goin' somewhere; but this is it, we're just goin'—the lack of destination for the New Hollywood has here been replaced with a life bereft of movement. In direct contrast to the promise of freedom through the vastness of the road, Craig becomes confined to increasingly smaller spaces. He begins the film in a small, dark New York apartment surrounded by dozens of caged pets, is employed on a half-floor in which he cannot stand upright, crawls into the portal to occupy a space within the mind of John Malkovich, and eventually concludes his journey inside the larval vessel of Emily, the daughter of his wives, Maxine and Lotte (Repass 35-6). Inside Emily, Craig is solely fixated on Maxine. His field of vision is further restricted, and the audio effects muffled beyond decipherability. Just as the conclusion of *Two-Lane Blacktop* mutes the audio track before the film burns an end to the narrative, so too do Craig's distant, ineffectual cries for Emily to 'look away' from Maxine end the narrative. Craig is trapped, and powerless and completely invisible. Craig does not, as Clyde suggested, go home in

the vehicle in which he came; in fact, Craig is no longer afforded the ability to go home at all as not only does 'home' for Craig no longer exist, neither does he.

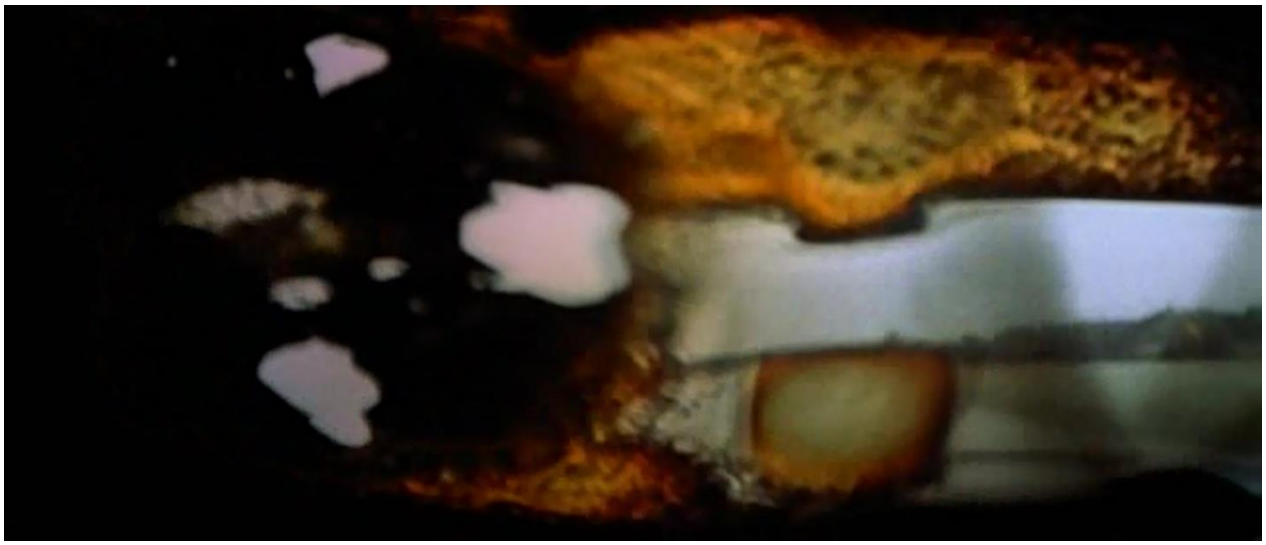

Figure 36 The burning film at the end of *Two-Lane Blacktop*

Figure 37 Craig's ever decreasing frame

Figure 38 Craig ineffectually pleads Emily to 'look away'

In the concluding frames Craig Schwartz literally ceases to exist. He is subsumed by his wives' daughter, and the camera. The frame closes in on him. This ending confirms that Craig's plight, like those of *The Darjeeling Limited*'s Whitman brothers, is only possible within cinematic screen time. Craig Schwartz is born with the film's first frame and here literally expires with the last. In the next chapter, I will consider further the nature of pure cinematic characters as constructions that are always contained within their respective texts.

Chapter Two: Pure Cinematic Characterisation

Figure 39 Steve Zissou introduces his son Ned on film

2.1 Pure Cinematic Characterisation and Eccentricity

Ned Plimpton (Owen Wilson) hangs from the side of Steve Zissou's (Bill Murray) boat, the Belafonte, by one arm. Ned wears a blue Team Zissou uniform and a red beanie, and casually holds a smoking pipe in his free hand. The flickering of a projector is heard beneath Mark Mothersbaugh's score. The use of Ektachrome[82] film stock creates bright and overblown colours forming saturated, flat blocks of ocean and sky as though filmed on 16mm. Steve Zissou narrates the scene: 'Kingsley Ned Zissou. 29. Junior grade diving tech, executive producer. Energetic, spirited, youthful'. Steve faces the camera head-on with Ned by his side as he explains the aim of the adventure planned in his next film 'The Jaguar Shark, Part 2.' The projector stops as the camera cuts from the film-within-a-film to the film we are watching, Wes Anderson's *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004). As they sit in the editing room wearing the same blue uniforms and red beanies, Steve suggests to 'probably [his] son', Ned, 'This is what I'm talking about. A relationship subplot. There's chemistry between us, you know?' The chemistry Steve refers to is not the

[82] Ektachrome is the brand name for a type of film colour reversal stock owned by Kodak that produces unique colour effects, as in these sequences of *The Life Aquatic*, and David O. Russell's *Three Kings* (1999).

relationship between a prospective father and son, but an affinity that will appear appealing *on-screen*. The irony of this statement is that in the sequence of 'The Jaguar Shark, Part 2' shown, there is a distinct lack of cinematic chemistry; the only interaction between Steve and Ned is a series of awkward camera-aware nods. In this sequence, Anderson notes the necessity of character alignment in both documentary and narrative film. He reminds the audience of the constructed nature of character identification in cinema as a medium.[83]

Figure 40 Team Zissou watch their footage

[83] Donna Peberdy offers a detailed reading of the father-son relationship between Ned and Steve in her article '"I'm Just a Character in Your Film": Acting and Performance from Autism to Zissou' (2012).

While Steve's ironic statement works against character identification by drawing attention to its fictitious and manipulative elements, within Wes Anderson's *oeuvre* it is a moment of reflexivity that the knowing Anderson audience expects of his offbeat characterisation. The double-edged film-within-a-film introduction of Ned foregrounds the complexities of alignment and identification with characters that are at once eccentric, reflexive constructions yet simultaneously emotionally engaging. Wes Anderson, working within the American Eccentric mode, creates pure cinematic characters that are distinctive, yet unidentifiable as representations of real people. Pure cinematic characters do not directly relate to authentic lived experiences but rather are presented as constructed figures whose improbable experiences and reflexivity are facilitated by, and imaginatively confined to, one particular film. Yet, despite their distinctive cinematic nature, the audience can empathise with the constructed characters within the boundaries of screen-time. The awareness of the constructed nature of these idiosyncratic characters (pure cinematic character) does not preclude identification and alignment, but promotes temporary emotional investment that concludes with the closing credits.

In the late 1960s Bonnie and Clyde declared themselves the first voices of a new generation of film consumers and filmmakers; two years later Wyatt and Billy demonstrated that despite their best efforts this new generation had no definable and locatable place in their society. By the 1970s, the New Hollywood had ushered in a new form of characterisation. The year 1971 saw the release of films explicitly dealing with the sexual revolution and the women's movement (*Carnal Knowledge* [Nichols 1971], *A Safe Place* [Jaglom 1971]), anti-war sentiment (*Drive, He Said* [Nicholson 1971]), societal paranoia (*Straw Dogs* [Peckinpah 1971], *Klute* [Pakula 1971]), drug use and addiction (*The Panic in Needle Park* [Schatzberg 1971]), the corruption of authority (*The French Connection* [Friedkin 1971]), loss of American innocence and the disruption of foundational mythology (*The Last Picture Show* [Bogdanovich 1971], *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* [Altman 1971]), and youth existential

anxiety (*Harold and Maude* [Ashby 1971], *Two Lane Blacktop* [Hellman 1971]). Thomas Elsaesser identified the 'new liberal cinema' of the 1970s as a form in the process of divorcing classical Hollywood norms of fictional worlds in which protagonists were constructed as heroes that were 'psychologically or morally motivated: they had a case to investigate, a name to clear, a woman (or man) to love, a goal to reach' (2004b, 281). In the place of the 'affirmative-consequential model' of the classical Hollywood narrative, the New Hollywood presented films that were unbound by these strictures—goal-orientation appeared nostalgic in these films (King 2004, 22-23). The New Hollywood complicated the role of the cinematic hero within these films that at once captured 'the banality of the everyday that dominates most people's lives' (Howarth 2004, 15) and engaged with contemporary socio-cultural issues. Elsaesser writes that the New Hollywood problematized the implicit confidence in conflict resolution of the classical Hollywood narrative as their films 'specifically neutralise[d] goal-directedness and warn[ed] one not to expect affirmation of purpose and meanings' (2004b, 281). These characters reflected Elsaesser's 'pathos of failure', that is: 'the inability of the New Hollywood protagonist to take on the symbolic mandate that classical Hollywood narrative addressed to its heroes: to pursue a goal or respond to a challenge' (Elsaesser 2004a, 63). The conventional goal-orientated protagonist of the classical Hollywood narrative was replaced with morally complex individuals like the charismatic, anti-authoritarian criminal Randle McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) in Miloš Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), the two aimless drag racers in Monte Hellman's *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971) and Schlesinger's naïve aspiring hustler Joe Buck (Jon Voight) in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). Elsaesser explains:

> Above all, there is the notable bias for the underdog, the outsider, the outlaw, the working man or disaffected middle class protagonist, whose idea of happiness and freedom imply emotional bonds that live outside the nuclear family, and for whom the romantic, heterosexual couple is not the end-point of the narrative, but doomed from the start, as in the many

> criminal couple films made in the wake of *Bonnie and Clyde*, such as *Thieves Like Us* or *Badlands*. (2004a, 59)

New Hollywood protagonists were relatable and recognisable figures that reflected, embodied, and informed a generational zeitgeist concerned with existential and cultural interrogation. These New Hollywood characters became cinematised peers that at once were 'vehicle[s] of perspective' for an American society in a 'state of crisis and self-doubt' (Elsaesser, 283) and embodiments of a pervading generational sense of inconsequence and futility in regard to ambition, motivation, and the pursuit of the American dream. At a time when 'the reality of America received as much recognition as its phantasms' (Howarth 2004, 15) characters were created as representations of real people: some were taciturn and mumbling like George Roundy (Warren Beatty, *Shampoo* [1975]), others saw planning a future as futile, like Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman, *The Graduate* [1967]), while others viewed the future as an impossible moral compromise, like Charlie (Harvey Keitel, *Mean Streets* [1973]). Whether undesirable (Travis Bickle, *Taxi Driver* [1976]) or superficially attractive (Jacy Farrow, *The Last Picture Show* [1971]) these characters reacted on-screen to the real-life frustrations and mood of their audience as cinematised peers. These were on-screen figures that were imaginable within a real-world context.

In contrast, characters in the American Eccentric mode are conceived of as purely cinematic: that is, they are characters that are at once peculiar and empathetic, yet consciously created to inhabit only a specific cinematic milieu. Like the protagonists of the New Hollywood, the plights of the Eccentric pure cinematic character centre on genuine existential and political issues. In David O. Russell's *I Heart Huckabees* (2004) characters literally interact with professional existential detectives, and the protagonist of Kaufman and Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002), Charlie, directly deals with concerns of personal and artistic authenticity and failure. These characters cannot be imagined outside the cinematic frame because they are at once

sincere and ironic amalgamations of filmic allusion and quotation, parodies of cinematic norms and convention, and designed characters whose plights within individual films cannot be mapped onto our everyday lived experiences.

For instance, Dennis Lee's *Jesus Henry Christ* (2012) centres on the plight of Henry James Herman (Jason Spevack) to locate his biological father. While this narrative trajectory may initially appear within the boundaries of conventional filmmaking and believability, Lee makes his narrative absurd through Henry's characterisation as a child prodigy conceived in a petri-dish with the 'second highest IQ ever recorded' and a memory akin to a video-recorder. During the course of the film, Henry is suspended from kindergarten for enquiring into the purpose of the planned lessons, expelled from a Catholic secondary school at age ten for producing his 'Manifesto on the Nature of Truth' which denies the existence of 'the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, Santa Claus, the Devil, and God,' and subsequently, decides to attend college after being admitted following unprecedented admittance scores. The film's supporting characters are similarly peculiar. Henry's mother, Patricia (Toni Collette) is a disapproving, outspoken left-wing feminist. His proposed father, Dr. Slavkin O'Hara (Michael Sheen) is a college professor with memory loss problems that force him to be reliant on post-it notes, who has raised his daughter, Audrey (Samantha Weinstein) without gender bias as a sociological experiment for his own academic interest. Whit Stillman's *Damsels in Distress* (2011) further elucidates the overt construction of empathetic yet utterly peculiar characters. Stillman's Violet Whistler (Greta Gerwig) is presented as an explicit character construction whose narrative drive cannot be imagined outside the confines of the cinema. Violet is an upper-class East Coast college student, who together with her florally-named cohort (Heather [Carrie MacLemore], Lily [Analeigh Tipton], and Rose [Megalyn Echikunwoke]) runs a suicide prevention centre for the clinically depressed. Not only is Violet revealed within the film to have (literally) invented

herself as character distinct from her birth-given identity, Emily Tweeter,[84] but her actions within the film are curious and incompatible with everyday life. The women offer ridiculous advice and advocate preventive measures for depression, such as the importance of pleasant fragrances, free doughnuts, and tap dance classes. Violet, although obviously intelligent, is not concerned with graduating from college, but rather is wholly consumed with the pursuits the college environment affords her without the burden of accounting for the future.[85] For Violet this is improving the odour of the students in the college's Doar Dorm, and launching a new dance craze called 'The *Sambola!*' in an attempt to change the course of human history.

While I argue that the American Eccentric mode is not an auteurist phenomenon, director Wes Anderson has, to date, released films that all sit squarely within the parameters of American Eccentricity. As Anderson's work provides a unique example of pure cinematic characterisation across his *oeuvre*, this chapter analyses pure cinematic characterisation as an element of American Eccentricity through Anderson's films, although the textual elements of the pure cinematic character, as demonstrated through *Damsels in Distress* and *Henry Jesus Christ*, are certainly not confined to his works.

Figure 41 Violet's dance in *Damsels in Distress*

[84] Similarly, it is revealed that Rose, who speaks with an ostentatious British accent throughout the film, is really Violet's 'nice American friend' and only spent four weeks in London.
[85] In this sense, Violet is linked to Wes Anderson's Max Fisher in *Rushmore* (1998).

Figure 42 Dr. Slavkin's post-it adorned office

Wes Anderson's aesthetic style draws directly on the New Hollywood era. Anderson evokes the New Hollywood aesthetically through signature use of 1970s music, retro costumes and interiors favouring the 1960s and 1970s. He consistently uses the Futura (bold) typeface (Browning 2011, 6) and rich primary colours associated with the early years of colour television and film;[86] more specific links (if not straight homage) are apparent between *Rushmore* (Anderson 1998b) and Mike Nichol's *The Graduate* (1967), and the nostalgia arising from minute aesthetic detail and presence of precocious children in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Anderson 2001) and Peter Bogdanovich's *Paper Moon* (1973) (Browning, 104-5). There are also clear parallels between the plights of the New Hollywood and Anderson's protagonists. Like Joe Buck's dream of sexual and financial success in the city (*Midnight Cowboy*), *Bottle Rocket*'s (Anderson 1996) Dignan (Owen Wilson) naïvely dreams of living the exciting life of an outlaw based only on knowledge from American Western mythology and popular culture. *Rushmore*'s Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman), like *The Graduate*'s Benjamin Braddock, actively avoids pursuing a future beyond his schooling years and rather focuses on a complicated involvement with an older woman.[87] Steve Zissou is plagued by filial obligation like Bobby Dupea (Jack

[86] I refer here to modern colour film, not early forms of colour film such as tinted or hand-coloured film.

[87] Although, in *Rushmore* it is the school age Max that pursues the older woman, Miss Cross, despite her consistent rejections (many of which are on the grounds of age related propriety), whereas the

Nicholson) in *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). Royal Tenenbaum (Gene Hackman) acts beyond ethical norms in order to maintain his position and relevance within an institution like Howard Beale (Peter Finch, *Network* [Lumet 1976]). As discussed in the previous chapter, *The Darjeeling Limited*'s Whitman brothers embark on an existential journey in order to regain something lost, similar to Wyatt and Billy's journey in *Easy Rider*. *Moonrise Kingdom*'s (2012) Sam Shakusky (Jared Gilman) and Suzy Bishop (Kara Hayward) unite against the inequities of mainstream society in favour of a limited existence beyond its boundaries, like Bonnie and Clyde. *The Grand Budapest Hotel*'s (2014b) Monsieur Gustave H. (Ralph Fiennes) flirts with life and mortality through his penchant for women in the twilight of their natural lives, like Harold (Bud Cort) in *Harold and Maude* (Ashby 1971).[88]

Figure 43 Max Fisher and Benjamin Braddock

Figure 44 *Moonrise Kingdom* and *Bonnie and Clyde*

older woman of *The Graduate*, Mrs. Robinson, is a complex and lonely woman who actively pursues the younger Ben.

[88] Reviewer Lisa Wallace describes Suzy Bishop as 'wearing a sweet pink pinafore and Bonnie Parker beret' (2012).

Figure 45 *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and *Harold and Maude*

While Wes Anderson's American Eccentric protagonists experience genuine existential anxiety, there has been little discussion of the sincere anxiety evident within these protagonists. Despite the severity of two twelve year-olds rejecting society, *Moonrise Kingdom*'s Sam and Suzy have been read as amusing and odd, but ultimately benign—as though the unarticulated causes of their discontent will pass with age (McCarthy 2012, 58-59; Lally 2012, 96; Davies 2012, 70; Wallace 2012). However, Sam is an orphan whose disturbing behaviour has resulted in his removal from foster-care to become a permanent ward of the state, and Suzy is an emotionally troubled girl who experiences uncontrollable spurts of aggression that alienate her from her family and peers. The causes of Sam's and Suzy's behaviour are an instrumental component of their rejection of society, rather than a product of pre-teen confusion—after all, Wes Anderson rarely presents age as a component of maturity, or emotional equilibrium. *Moonrise Kingdom* is not, as Todd McCarthy claims, 'a portrait of young love'(58), nor is it primarily concerned with the 'obsessive love of two 12-year-old outcasts' (Lally, 96). The primary thematic concern of *Moonrise Kingdom* is a profound existential anxiety and the inability to articulate these anxieties for both children and adults.[89]

[89] Jeffrey Sconce refers to *Moonrise Kingdom* in his review, not wholly unironically, as a 'timeless account of first love' he does also note the connection between *Moonrise Kingdom* (and *The Royal Tenenbaums*) and Salinger's existential Glass family novels (see *Nine Stories* [1953], *Franny and Zooey* [1962], *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* [1963]). However, Sconce stops short of discussing the sincere issues in Anderson's films by claiming the film is overall too whimsical to reach the darkness of the earlier existentialist works. Sconce writes 'White America's nostalgia for the days when every white kid had to read *A Catcher in the Rye* has, oddly enough,

Bonnie and Clyde's ambiguous morality and violence against the establishment positioned them as voices for the countercultural movement in response to the Vietnam War.[90] Yet, despite the seriousness of their troubling behaviour, Sam Shakuksy and Suzy Bishop have not been read as reflections of the increasing recognition of mental illness in children,[91] nor as the outcome of emotional alienation in a contemporary society in which the virtual experience has largely replaced the physical. *Rushmore*'s Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman) has been described as 'one strange kid…monomaniacal enough to make people uncomfortable' (Turan 1998, 9) rather than a teenager deliberately avoiding adulthood, and Steve Zissou as performing a 'paterfamilias/jerk role' (Agger 2005, 74) rather than a childlike man emotionally stunted in adulthood. Although Anderson's pure cinematic characters display anxieties similar to those evident in the New Hollywood, the audience reception of these characters suggests a different mode of viewing and interaction. Whereas the New Hollywood character, as a

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transformed the rather dark postwar anomie lurking in and around Holden Caulfield into a type of timeless teen awkwardness—*who wasn't a little weird as an adolescent, am I right?* And while Dahl's whimsy created a magical chocolate factory (and a fantastic Mr. Fox), it was also a place where desire very well might kill you. *Moonrise Kingdom*, meanwhile, remains wholly untouched by Salinger's neurotic existentialism or Dahl's ability to highjack whimsy in service of something more sinister. Sure, a dog gets an arrow through his neck in *Moonrise Kingdom* (seemingly for the sole purpose of setting up the film's best one-liner), but such sadness is hardly on a par with "A Perfect Day for Banana Fish." And while "Suzy's" troubled bookishness may have an antecedent in the aforementioned Zooey, I doubt we will ever see *The Bell Jar-esque* sequel where she's at Smith in the 1970s, gingerly testing razor to wrist after reading *Being and Nothingness'* (par 7). Sconce concludes his review with *'Moonrise Kingdom* can only remain magical, whimsical, and timeless by thoroughly extricating itself from this messier social world on the mainland, wistfully stopping the clock before the real hurricane hits' (par 12,2012).

[90] Peter Biskind writes 'Bonnie and Clyde legitimised violence against the establishment, the same violence that seethed in the hearts and minds of hundreds of thousands of frustrated opponents of the Vietnam War. Bonnie and Clyde was a movement movie; like *The Graduate*, young audiences recognised that it was 'theirs'' (49). See also Elsaesser's 'Last Great American Picture Show' (279-292).

[91] Goldman and Grob write 'Serious mental illness is a term used in federal regulations that defines some 5.4 percent of the U.S. adult population with a mental disorder that interferes with at least one area of social functioning. About half of these people (2.6 percent of adults) experience a severe and persistent mental illness. For children, federal regulations refer to a subpopulation with serious emotional disturbance (SED), involving some 5-9 percent of children, who have a mental disorder that imposes more limitations than experienced by the approximately 20 percent of children who experience some mental disorder during the course of a year' (2006, 737-749). See also Leibenluft et al. 'Irritability in Pediatric Mania and Other Childhood Psychopathology' (2003, 201-218) and Stein and 'The changing nature of diagnosis in an inpatient service over 20 years' (1983, 443-461).

cinematised peer, promotes an alignment with a figure able to be imagined, and identified with, outside the confines of the cinema, the American Eccentric pure cinematic character is positioned at a distance that is facilitated by, and confined to, a particular film's diegesis. Rather than a *reflection*, the pure cinematic character is a *refraction* of contemporary existential anxiety mediated through idiosyncratic cinematic aesthetics.

2.2 Smart Cinema and Eccentricity

In recent years much attention has been devoted to the distinctiveness of Anderson's visual cinematic style in accordance with Jeffrey Sconce's smart cinema aesthetic. Warren Buckland's editorial for a special 'Wes Anderson and Co.' edition of *The New Review of Film and Television Studies* begins with the note: 'In response to my call for academic papers on the films of Wes Anderson – 10 of which are published in this special issue – two key terms regularly cropped up to make sense of his films: the "smart" film and the "new sincerity"' (2012, 1). Similarly, over one third of the articles in Peter C. Kunze's recent collection *The Films of Wes Anderson: Critical Essays on an Indiewood Icon* (2014) relate Sconce's work to Anderson.[92] Indeed, the perceived reliance on 'brainiess' in the area of cinema that includes American Eccentricity has been discussed by a number of critics and theorists in relation to 'smart' cinema. Jeffrey Sconce first identified smart cinema in an article for *Screen* titled 'Irony, nihilism and the new American "smart" film' (2002) (although the term was also used by Peter Biskind in his book *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* [2005]).[93] Sconce describes smart cinema as 'an American school of filmmaking that survives (and at times thrives) at the

[92] My own article 'Cast of Characters: Wes Anderson and Pure Cinematic Characterization' features in this collection and is the basis for this chapter.
[93] Biskind claims that in the late 1980s American art cinema was replaced by contemporary American smart cinema on the film festival circuits.

symbolic and material intersection of "Hollywood", the "indie" scene and the vestiges of what cinephiles used to call "art" films'(351). The smart cinema style emerged in response to the increasing prevalence of irony and parody in cultural discourse, demonstrated in the smart cinema sensibility through 'a predilection for irony, black humour, fatalism, relativism and, yes, even nihilism' (Sconce 350). Sconce names Todd Solondz, Neil LaBute, Alexander Payne, Hal Hartley, Wes Anderson, P.T. Anderson, Ang Lee, John Herzfeld, Doug Liman, Atom Egoyam, Todd Haynes, Spike Jonze, Richard Kelly, and Richard Linklater as directors that, although disparate, are ideologically sympathetic in their depiction of this form of cinematic style (350). The smart audience is intended to be disenchanted, educated (in Sconce's terms 'bespectacled' [349]) individuals who exhibit disdainful irony and emotional detachment from their socio-cultural existences (Brereton 2011, 1). Sconce establishes a premise for the 'smart' aesthetic based on a shift in its approach to critiques of bourgeois culture: where codes of 'bourgeois realism' and 'bourgeois society' had previously been largely critiqued in forms of art cinema through formal experimentation with film style and narrative structure, smart cinema reinstates classical narrative structures, and rather focuses on experiments with tone in order to comment on 'bourgeois' taste and culture (352). The emphasis on tone (rather than form) does not designate that smart films are unable to be structurally defined outside of mainstream Hollywood fare; both smart cinema and more conventional American cinema share formal antecedents in classical Hollywood, yet the smart sensibility exists largely in opposition to the mainstream. For Sconce there is a clear delineation between 'smart' cinema, which he sees as being outside of the Hollywood mainstream (as suggested in the name), and 'dumb' cinema, a category in which the mainstream Hollywood films of Jerry Bruckheimer, Michael Bay, and James Cameron can be placed.

Sconce's formulation of smart cinema's connection to the aesthetically, and thematically, challenging American films of 1960s and 1970s in many ways mirrors

the relationship between American Eccentricity and the New Hollywood. He states that smart cinema is no longer concerned with the same social politics that were central to the 'art' cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, but instead has replaced these ideas (often with ironic contempt) with personal politics 'regarding power, communication, emotional dysfunction, and identity in white middle class culture' (352). Despite the semblance of disdain, apathy, and intellectual detachment present in these films, the use of irony is a strategic gesture as well as an indescribable cultural condition that groups the audience into those that 'get it' and those who do not. The employment of a blank ironic tone in smart cinema is undertaken to perform an alliance with like-minded peers and to provide distance from the vast 'other' audiences. Defining smart cinema a 'sensibility' (a term he notes is 'admittedly vague'), Sconce writes that these films emerge at the intersection of two chief components — 'the sociocultural formation informing the circulation of these films (a "smart" set) and a shared set of stylistic and thematic practices (a '"smart" aesthetic)' (352). Noting the immense breadth of the smart sensibility (even in the comparative distance in the representation of society's ironic bohemian margins in *Slacker* [Linklater 1991] and *Ghost World* [Zwigoff 2001]) Sconce establishes smart cinema as a sensibility centred on a set of definable narrative, stylistic, and thematic elements, that can be, and are, deployed in various combinations in single films. Sconce outlines the five distinct elements of the smart film sensibility as:

> 1) the cultivation of a 'blank' style and incongruous narration: 2) a fascination with 'synchronicity' as a principle of narrative organisation: 3) a related thematic interest in random fate, 4) a focus on the white-middle class family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction; 5) a recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity. (358)

While Sconce is careful to acknowledge that not all of these elements appear in all films concerned with irony and nihilism, and that films that demonstrate these elements are not necessarily constructed to present like politics (textual or outwardly projecting), he does note that they appear with sufficient regularity to indicate wide

dissemination in smart cinema directors. From these five discernible elements, and notable inclusion of works by filmmakers such as Anderson, Linklater, Haynes, and Hartley, a link between the American Eccentric mode and smart cinema can be established. Like smart cinema, the American Eccentric mode often plays with narrative frameworks and the notion of 'synchronicity' in conjunction with 'random fate' (especially in the existing American Eccentric films of P.T. Anderson and Richard Linklater), and is largely concerned with familial obligation, dysfunction, miscommunication—themes particularly prevalent in Wes Anderson's films. However, in examining the linkages and deviations between the American Eccentric mode and Sconce's smart cinema, the sensibility's focal point—'blank' style and incongruous narration—requires further consideration.

Blank style is described by Sconce as an endeavour to express the story of a film regardless of that story's 'absurdity, sensationalistic, or disturbing nature' (359) with a perceived *dampened affect* which, in turn, creates the impression of blank narration. Rather than relying on stylistic *vérité* to produce the idea of blankness, Sconce lists the use of long-shots, static composition, and sparse cutting as deliberately employed aesthetic and stylistic practices that manufacture a sense of authorial blankness and cultivate distance and disengagement. Sconce writes that:

> [while] respecting classical space and time, this strategy often *de-intensifies* continuity into a series of static tableaux. Thus, while the rest of cinema turns to the acceleration of the continuity techniques described by Bordwell as a means of intensifying character identification and plot involvement, the new smart cinema often produces tension through dividing the audience and storyworld, not necessarily in some Brechtian distanciation but more as a means of fostering a sense of clinical observation. (360)

This stylistic pose places films in the smart cinema sensibility in opposition to the Hollywood mainstream—Sconce locates their 'smartness' precisely in their resistance to the conventions of rapid editing and inordinate camera movements. For Sconce: 'If the "jump-cut" became the signature marker of "self-conscious" style in

the French new wave's cinematic revolution, the static tableau may well be the thinking man's shot of choice of the 1990s' (360). In addition to this signature shot choice, Sconce notes that the central focus on interpersonal alienation in the white middle class, in particular within marriage or other domestic relationships, is so ubiquitous that it has led to a set of stock shots—the 'awkward couple shot' (a shot of a tense couple distanced by blank space), the 'awkward coupling shot' (an aerial shot from the ceiling above the bed displaying a couple performing indifferent sex), and the 'awkward dining shot' (long shots of dysfunctional or maladjusted families trapped in their dining rooms by the performance of meal time) (364)—that signal its presence. The blandness of this formal representation enables awkward and intolerable events (such as the predatory paedophilia of Todd Solondz's *Happiness* [1998]) to be delivered as though mundane (361).[94] These formal aspects (among others) of the smart cinema are utilised beyond their direct associations with the emotional dysfunctionality of America's white middle class in that they reflect the personal politics of Generation X, specifically in regard to the construction of identity with the resources of, and in the face of, consumer capitalism (364-9), rather than broader concerns of existential anxiety, as I would argue is the case in American Eccentricity.

The divide between the audience and story-world is expressed through another aspect of the blank style outlined by Sconce: the use of blank narration in which the images presented to the audience appear incongruous with the aural narration of a scene or sequence. Sconce provides the opening sequence of Alexander Payne's *Election* (1999) as an example of the technique. The sequence opens with the morning routine of the film's protagonist and antagonist, the idealistic, well-meaning schoolteacher Mr. McAllister (Matthew Broderick) and the ambitious student body president hopeful Tracy Flick (Reese Witherspoon). Both

[94] Sconce writes that the presentation of taboo or intolerable events as mundane has undoubtedly encouraged critics to label these films as nihilistic (361).

McAllister and Tracy narrate the events of the student body election, their relationship to the school environment (including each other), and their ambitions from their respective positions, in the past tense. Mr. McAllister admits that teaching 'is not just a job' for him because he 'knew he touched the students' lives during their difficult young adult years, and [he] took that responsibility seriously'. However, he concedes that he'd seen 'a lot of ambitious students come and go over the years, but Tracy Flick was a special case.' Tracy, by her own admission, is 'special', but she disregards those who call her an over-achiever as being 'just jealous'. The 'election' narrative and character background are delivered against the imagery of school life—staged musical performances, school halls, and classroom situations—which establishes a dialogue with the relative innocence of John Hughes' coming-of-age high-school dramedies (*Sixteen Candles* [Hughes 1984], *The Breakfast Club* [Hughes 1985], *Pretty in Pink* [Deutch 1986], *Some Kind of Wonderful* [Deutch 1987]) and their examinations of identity politics and class division. Suddenly, almost as an afterthought to his narration, Mr. McAllister adds 'oh, there's one more thing about Tracy I think you should know.' The camera then jarringly frames Mr. McAllister's colleague and best friend, Mr. Novotny (Mark Harelik), in a close-up, as he declares 'her pussy gets so wet, you wouldn't believe it.' This confession jolts the viewer away from the safe boundaries of a Hughes-style coming-of-age high-school dramedy (as Sconce notes), toward the recognition of sexual misconduct, harassment, and statutory rape. The result of this jarring incongruity is that the banal narration and the overtly referential genre cues are placed in juxtaposition with the gravity of the story. From this point on, the juxtaposed narration and image function in an increasingly ironised manner throughout the film until, by the film's conclusion, image and voiceover appear in complete opposition to one another (Sconce, 362).

Figure 46 Opening sequence and narration of *Election*

For Sconce the use of synchronicity, episodic plot structures, and multi-protagonist narratives, coupled with this 'blank' style of narration have shifted the formal organisation of the conception of *la condition humaine* away from the modernist position of a protagonist's search for meaning toward the postmodern ensemble being 'fucked by fate' (362-3). In all forms of cinema formal structure and textual politics are interconnected, however the formal construction of narrative in the smart cinema no longer favours

> the passive observer of an absurd world who eventually experiences some form of epiphany, but rather a range of characters subjected to increasing

> despair and/or humiliation captured in a rotating series of interlocking scenes in which some endure while some are crushed. (362)[95]

The use of synchronicity as an organising principle employed by the American smart film is representative of its thematic concern with fatalism. In classical Hollywood films, overt coincidence was overall considered as a tactic to be avoided, as it would appear suspicious to the audience on account of its recognisability as a narrative tactic, and the belief that coincidence is wholly unrealistic (363). Synchronicity in smart cinema, through its episodic, multi-character structure, demonstrates a shift away from the coincidence; Sconce writes, 'the narrative (and philosophical) investment in the 'accident' yields to a narrative (and philosophical) belief in a logic of the random' (364). Unlike the concept of 'chance' that David Bordwell notes in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985) as playing a significant role in 1960s film in regard to the loosening of cause and effect in narrative, synchronicity is displayed as a form of narrative realism that recognises the poignancy of the random nature of modern existence.

Sconce's smart cinema has informed both Marc Raymond's writing on the topic of smart cinema 'Too Smart, Too Soon: The King of Comedy and American Independent Cinema' (2009) and Claire Perkins' book *American Smart Cinema* (2011). Using Martin Scorsese's career (in particular his film *The King of Comedy* [1982]) as a linkage, Raymond's article comments on the industry and cultural history through the transition from what he refers to as a heightened expressionism in the New Hollywood art cinema, to the critically disparaged style associated with the period of 'high-concept' film that became dominant at the end of the New Hollywood period, through to the emergence of the American smart cinema in the early 1990s. Like Sconce, Raymond sees two major themes as running through the smart sensibility—

[95] Sconce uses the Greek chorus scene from *Magnolia* (1999) in relation to 'indie' film as an example of this structuring technique to depict suffering, isolation, and loneliness. While I do not debate that this scene does demonstrate acute loneliness, suffering, and isolation, I further argue that this scene also recognises its own cinematic parameters, and encourages the audience to do likewise, thus creating a tension between genuine affect, character alignment, and immersion in the cinematic world.

interpersonal alienation within the white middle class, usually focusing on the family unit, and alienation within consumer culture. Raymond agrees with Sconce that smart cinema for the most part embraces classical narrative strategies, and experiments with tone as a means of critiquing bourgeois taste cultures; however he relates this formation to an inversion of New Hollywood cinematic expression, where societal concerns were depicted through form. Raymond writes that due to this inversion, it is necessary that the films of the American smart cinema be placed 'relationally within contemporary culture because, due to their standard ironic tone and the distance this creates from characters and events in these films, their impact relies on oppositional sensibility rather than an obviously oppositional style' (23). The key emotion and tone within these films is embarrassment—smart auteurs operate keenly within the realm of discomfort, they strive to make their audience cringe, or even be forced to turn away during their films (22-3). The notion of discomfort is compatible with the form of black humour and refusal to participate or abide by societal norms described by Sconce, and highlights a fundamental distinction from American Eccentricity. While films in the American Eccentric mode often employ similar aesthetic and dramatic techniques to those listed by Sconce and Raymond, American Eccentricity does not relish disengagement or uneasy cringe-worthiness but rather encourages audience engagement with idiosyncratic characters and narratives that are outside the parameters of naturalistic presentation and identification.

Unlike Raymond, Claire Perkins does not necessarily take an auteurist view of smart cinema, rather she considers smart cinema to be a 'sensibility within contemporary American commercial/independent cinema' (4). Perkins' work makes use of the tendencies outlined by Sconce in order to address the critical aesthetics that she sees present in smart cinema: in this formulation smart cinema not is a 'fixed textual type' of film—but an affective force (4). In accordance with both Sconce and Raymond, Perkins states that the use of ironic disengagement is central to the smart

sensibility in that it relies on the intelligence of an audience to recognise, decipher, and comprehend a film's central premises or questions.

In line with my formulation of the American Eccentric mode as a reframing of Elsaesser's pathos of failure, Perkins traces the inherited 'formal lack of pragmatic motivation' (81) in the smart sensibility through the New Hollywood—the unmotivated hero, in Elsaesser's terms. Perkins similarly notes that that in smart cinema, as in American Eccentricity, there is a palpable shift away from a collective or social politics toward personal politics of power. Where I make the claim that this has, in the American Eccentric mode, resulted in representations of objectless existential anxiety being mediated through irony and parody, Perkins states that the smart film addresses the 'crisis image' (the pathos of failure) in more explicit terms (81). Perkins analyses this shift through the genre of melodrama. Perkins traces melodrama from the disguised, ironic critiques of the family in the 1950s (the films of Douglas Sirk, Vincente Minelli, and Nicholas Ray), through its decline in the New Hollywood, to its re-emergence in smart cinema—albeit in a vastly different form. She writes that unlike the 1950s melodramas, which disguised their social commentary through ironic layering, the 'smart' melodrama imparts its critiques at the elemental level of narrative which now centre on vexed issues (paedophilia, abortion, serial adultery, incest, misogyny, rape) as well as broader themes of unhappiness and failure. In accordance with Sconce, Perkins sees the 'anti-humanist' nature of these films as 'directly embodied in family-based themes' (81).[96] Perkins states that through the melodrama, smart cinema exposes its preoccupation with family dynamics, and the family as a troubled institution in which dysfunctionality has become the norm. However, due to the societal dominance of the family structure, in the smart melodrama there can be no plea to forces that are external to

[96] Following Thomas Schatz, Perkins signals that 'a paradox emerges in the genre when the melodrama moves its thematic focus to the family as an institution, and the attendant politics of emotion and communication. Once this occurs, family crisis becomes the dominant narrative conflict' (79).

the family for narrative resolution. Thus, in these films the family is not used to symbolise and magnify external, societal complications, as had been the case in earlier forms of melodrama, but as a social institution it is the basis for narrative, and thematic, conflict itself. These thematic and narrative elements are aesthetically mirrored through the employment of the awkward smart stock images outlined by Sconce.[97]

Perkins compares the use of irony and distanciation in smart melodrama with the use of these strategies in the classic Sirkian form.[98] She writes that in the smart film ironic expression is seen as a move away from diametrically oppositional meanings (where what is expressed is in direct contradiction to what is meant) towards employing a more tonal function, in which irony 'pluralises everything it says' (81). Thus, according to Perkins, when smart cinema critiques the nuclear family as an institution, unlike Sirkian melodramas, that critique is not concealed in a seemingly positive surface representation that masks an oppositional ironic charge. Instead a smart film's surface is the site of critical confrontation. A smart film's 'critique of the nuclear family is not concealed in an apparently positive representation but is right on the surface, where the very *fact* of the unit is at once ironic and affirmative' (Perkins 81, emphasis in original). Perkins' conceptualisation of surface representation and core thematic elements or 'facts' in the smart cinema's approach to genre (specifically melodrama) is somewhat inverted in the American Eccentric mode. Here, the critiques and existential anxieties inhabit the space of the film's core, while the film's surface is adorned with irony and reflexive genericity. It is American Eccentricity's interplay of surface and core that forms a dialogue

[97] Perkins notes a further paradox in the persistence of melodrama in the American smart cinema in that it insists on nuclear incarnation in an era where this is incongruous with the social reality. Through the focus on both the nuclear family and the emotional dysfunction and individual alienation within the family unit, smart cinema offers an argument for the termination of the institution, yet the recurrence, and dependence on the family unit as a concrete social foundation at least partially reinstates its dominance (80).

[98] Perkins writes that classic melodrama is a genre that was 'never that happy' (92).

between ironic, reflexive, and metacinematic expression and the manifestation of existential anxiety.

Perkins discusses the formation of a 'smart' environment in suburban family dramas that centres on multiple families living in close proximity. Suburbia in these films is seen as a landscape that has been divided and then sculpted 'into blankly drawn and forgettable spaces; carparks, schools, kitchens, bedrooms, parks, backyards, car interiors' (134). Often these landscapes are rendered both flat and bright: their stylised repetitious uniformity seen as 'a motif of suburban representation as the projection of a "no-place", a world devoid of local, realistic detail' (134). In the suburban smart film the incarcerating model of the family is transposed onto the physical environment through the recurring imagery of fences, gates, and doors, and relentless patterns of routine (134). In Perkins' reading, suburbia is displayed as a version of an absolute totalitarianism 'that denies individuality and represses freedom through its institutions of work, school and family' (141). The idealised lifestyle of the comfortable and educated imagined by a utopian suburbia, in Perkins' conception, manifests as a trajectory from a deadened and caustic lifestyle toward violent unhappiness and abuse (141). The smart suburban family drama centres on characters that are both physically and psychically interchangeable and suburban locales that are stylised, but shallow. This formulation is vastly divergent from the idiosyncratic, and highly constructed nature of the pure cinematic character in the American Eccentric mode, and the achronological, cross-spatiotemporal Eccentric cinematic worlds they inhabit. The American Eccentric mode, while certainly concerned with the deadened, anaesthetic approach to contemporary American society within suburbia (and indeed in the sub/urban figure within other environments such as *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* or *The Darjeeling Limited*) does not trade in a bleak, or even darkly satirical approach.

In accordance with her position on familial constructs in both the melodrama and the suburban space, the distance between Perkins' smart cinema and American Eccentricity is evident through characterisation. Perkins states that smart characters are often depicted as hyperbolically 'depressed, repressed, anxious, addicted, phobic, narcissistic, regressive and emotionally detached' (12). These characters inhabit a world in which clinical therapy is not required for mental stability and wellbeing, but is an expected representation of a cultural phenomenon 'where the form of thinking that characterises the relationship between individual and therapist becomes an instrument for shaping public perception on a variety of issues and social institutions' (10). The attitude and presence of therapy culture highlights the shift from a concern with socio-cultural tensions to one of personal tensions (although the personal tensions are largely the result of social and familial issues) (Perkins 12). In this way, smart cinema speaks to and is representative of only a small percentage of the American population—the urban, white middle class. Entwined with this culture of therapy present in smart cinema is the concept of the 'post-youth,' which Perkins describes as a state in which adulthood is not necessarily achieved through age, and many adults appear to live in a stunted state of emotional development or maturity (9-10).

While the concept of post-youth, and indeed many of the positions taken by Perkins in relation to characterisation, can be applied to the sincere elements of American Eccentricity's pure cinematic characterisation, Perkins' notion of the smart character does not account for the reflexivity of character construction within the American Eccentric mode. Rather than being recognisably depressed, repressed, anxious, and emotionally detached, as Perkins' model suggests, American Eccentric pure cinematic characters reflexively perform their on-screen roles through ironic distancing, knowing performance, and the use of hyper-dialogue such that they provide the impression of being 'alright for now' by the film's end—despite a lack of thematic closure. This structure is evident in the final sequence of P.T. Anderson's

Boogie Nights (Anderson 1997) in which Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg) psyches himself up for this perceived triumphant return to the pornography industry. Dirk begins the film as seventeen-year-old Eddie Adams, whose jealous mother forces him from the family home and into a makeshift family headed by pornography producer, Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds). Under Horner's guidance, Eddie adopts the pseudonym Dirk Diggler and swiftly rises to porn stardom. Unable to cope with his newly acquired fame and wealth, Dirk succumbs to cocaine addiction, paranoia, and an inability to perform in new films. After a failed attempt at a music career to finance his drug habit and lifestyle, Dirk eventually resorts to homosexual prostitution (and is assaulted by homophobic social vigilantes). At his lowest point, Dirk's actions result in the murder of a close friend, when an attempt to swindle a wealthy addict by replacing a large quantity of cocaine with bicarbonate of soda turns violent. Dirk's plight follows a conventional narrative trajectory in that it traces his rise and fall from fame. The film's final moments, in which Dirk is framed surrounded by lights in his dressing room, in the classical narrative would signal that Dirk has overcome adversity and learnt a moral lesson from his experiences. Dirk faces his dressing room mirror and practices his lines for his next film. He unzips his trousers and recites the mantra: 'I'm a star. I'm a star. I'm a star, I'm a big, bright shining star.' Indeed, this final sequence does initially appear celebratory. However, rather than allowing this sequence to function as a conclusion, Anderson consciously reminds the audience that Dirk is a character that has been specifically designed for the screen. This scene directly recalls Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980), in which after reciting Marlon Brando's lines, 'I coulda been a contender', from *On the Waterfront* (Kazan 1954), the fallen Jake LaMotta (Robert DeNiro) stands up and repeats his mantra 'I'm the boss, I'm the boss,… ' before appearing before his audience. This allusion[99] doubles Dirk's fate—by linking him directly to Jake LaMotta and Marlon Brando Anderson not only pointedly recalls these characters'

[99] Like Todd Haynes' layered cinematic worlds in *I'm Not There* analysed in Chapter Four.

masculine anxieties, underlying male violence, solitude, and failure, but he also relegates Dirk to a position as a character within the history of cinema.

Figure 47 *Boogie Nights*' final scene

Figure 48 *Raging Bull*'s final scene

2.3 Wes Anderson's Eccentric Characters

While Wes Anderson's films focus on white, middle-class (although perhaps more narrowly upper-middle class) issues, Sconce's inclusion of Anderson in the

smart aesthetic is contentious. Operating within the American Eccentric mode, Anderson's use of irony does not function to include or exclude viewers. Rather, Anderson employs irony with sincerity in a manner that fluctuates between the two modes of expression but never completely divorces from either position, as analysed by MacDowell in his discussion of the quirky aesthetic.[100] MacDowell writes that the quirky aesthetic is 'a visual style that courts a fastidious "artificiality", a thematic interest in childhood and innocence, and—most pervasively—a tone which balances ironic detachment with sincere engagement' (2011, 6). The mixture of comic registers allows the audience to 'simultaneously regard a film's fictional world as partly unbelievable, laugh at its flat treatment of melodramatic situations and still be moved by characters' misadventures' (9). In his formulation, MacDowell aligns the quirky aesthetic with what he sees as a new structure of feeling that builds on the New Sincerity and metamodernism (2010). This structure of feeling moves away from the dominant mode of ironic and cynical expression represented by Sconce's smart aesthetic, and toward the coexistence of irony and sincerity. In American Eccentric films, meaning is revealed in the tensions between irony and sincerity, and complicated by inconsistently shifting the balance between the two. These inconsistent fluctuations promote and destabilise character alignment as genuine empathies emerge and are distanced (unevenly) during the course of any one film.

Conventionally conceived characters present the audience with individuals whose aim within a film is to overcome specific problems or attain certain goals. David Bordwell writes that the classical Hollywood construction of character follows conventions that had been established in earlier literary and theoretical forms, whereby characters are conceived initially by occupation, gender, age, and ethnic identity. From this initial conception, more discrete individualised traits are added in order to create 'a discriminated individual endowed with a consistent batch of evident traits, qualities, and behaviours' (1985, 157). Carl Plantinga writes that the

[100] A concept that is considered in further detail in Chapter Four.

exposition of a narrative provides the audience with introductory information on character, setting, and events that serve to arouse curiosity in the audience and establish the basis for identification with the protagonist (91).[101] The complications or disruptions to the protagonist's narrative goal elicit emotional responses in the viewer that are dependent on the new situation in relation to both the viewer's and the protagonist's desires. Thus, in conventional narratives, there is a 'consistent ebb and flow of emotion, rooted in clear and relatively simple paradigm scenarios, and kept simply and on course in…a linear narrative' (Plantinga 93).[102] As characters are often presented as agents of causality within a film, these individualised, consistent traits are often used to serve a narrative function (Bordwell 1985b, 14).[103] This occurs even in films where conventional characters or film worlds are highly stylised. For instance, Jean Harrington (Barbara Stanwyck) first appears in Preston Sturges' film *The Lady Eve* (1941a) as a youthful, and beautiful woman, hanging blithely over the railing of a ship to view a dapper gentlemen boarding the ship from below.[104] Jean

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[101] Plantinga differentiates between 'protagonist structures' (which can be broken down into the following categories—single protagonists, single protagonist with partially sympathetic antagonist, aligned dual protagonists, parallel dual protagonists, initially misaligned dual protagonists, opposed protagonists, three protagonists, and network narratives) and 'protagonist types' (which can be broken into—conventional hero, flawed hero, warped protagonist, or conflicted or confused protagonist'). While these are important distinctions, particularly in the relationship between narrative and protagonist structures, there is no category articulated by Plantinga that corresponds to the pure cinematic character as his categories centre on the ability for the character to achieve set goals and the redemptive elements associated with each character. In relation to these structures and types of protagonists Plantinga states the audience elicits one, or many, of the following responses—congruence, benign incongruence, movement from incongruence to congruence or vice versa, mixed, ambiguous, and conflicted congruence, and distanced and/or ironic observation (150-154). Pure cinematic characters are constructed such that they elicit fluctuating responses (mostly) between congruence and distanced and/or ironic observation.

[102] Paradigm scenarios are 'types and sequences of events that are associated with certain emotions' (Plantinga, 80).

[103] While Bordwell refers here to the construction of film in the classical era (pre-1960), his formulation of character construction remains the dominant form today.

[104] Wes Anderson is often compared to Preston Sturges in terms of filmic style. Jeff Jaeckle writes: 'Having combed through the host of filmmakers to which Anderson has been likened, I submit that the most astute comparison is to Preston Sturges, the writer-director of a string of groundbreaking achievements in American film comedy during the 1940s, among them *The Lady Eve* (1941), *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944), and *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944). Sturges' films are touchstones for understanding how Anderson constructs what Orgeron has rightly described as "highly stylized worlds for his highly stylized characters to

directs her first line of dialogue to her father, and his business partner: 'Gee, I hope he's rich. I hope he thinks he's a wizard at cards.'

Figure 49 Jean first sees Charles

inhabit."'(2013, 155).' While I agree that Sturges' characters are highly stylised, they are still constructed within the conventions of classical Hollywood, and thus, provide an elucidating comparison to those constructed by Anderson. The comparison between Sturges' work and American Eccentricity is discussed in the next chapter in relation to hyper-dialogue.

The combination of Jean's physical appearance, palpable excitement, and admission of desire to acquire the wealth of the man boarding the ship through nefarious means, establishes her character as an alluring con-artist who is in business with her father and his assistant. Charles (Henry Fonda), the man boarding the ship in this sequence, is first seen on the banks of the Amazon expressing his gratitude for a recently concluded expedition in ophiology. Charles soon thereafter is revealed to be the handsome heir to an ale company fortune, whose mild manners and relative naïveté render him oblivious to the plethora of female attention paraded at him on the boat. These consistent character traits, Jean as the savvy and seductive con-woman and Charles as the endearing yet naïve wealthy heir, serve as the firm basis of the film's narrative—a screwball comedy resulting from Jean's initial intention and her father's continued plan to fleece Charles, with genuine love emerging between the two as an obstacle. The consistency of these character-based attributes enables the audience to create logical and discernible links between a character's actions and reactions within the film's diegesis, which in turn aids the film's internal coherence and verisimilitude and promotes character alignment and identification (Bordwell 1985 19). In *The Lady Eve*, the audience is only able to follow the second humorous encounter between Charles and the scorned Jean's assumed persona, Lady Eve, because it has been established that Jean is a manipulative con-artist and Charles a trusting man who was genuinely besotted with Jean (to whom Eve bears an overt resemblance). It is the genuine love exhibited between Jean and Charles in their first encounter that enables their reunion at the film's conclusion, despite the complications and deceptions presented during the narrative. In accordance with Plantinga's notion that within narrative film 'coupling/mating, integration into the social group, and/or survival in the face of threat' (2009,83) are consistent emotion scenarios as they essentially pertain to human existence, the audience largely desires the possibility of reunion between Charles and Jean as the resolution of a coupling scenario.

While specific responses to emotion scenarios vary between individuals, all narrative films present characters and events as well as preconfigured responses to them within 'a particular complex of affective experience' (Plantinga, 79). Mainstream, or Hollywood, narratives are not simply the presentation of events but rather the elicitation of desires, concerns and aversions, and (sometimes) judgements arising from these repeated scenarios that arouse and fulfil the desires of a mass audience (Plantinga, 84). Conventional characterisation establishes individuality and consistency through the recurrence of detailed behaviours or motifs that establish associations for the film's progression in accordance with the protagonist's goals or desires (Bordwell 1985b, 16). Elsaesser writes that New Hollywood films, such as *Two Lane Blacktop*, defy or downplay the audience expectations driven by a psychologically motivated protagonist to provide conventional casual narrative links in part as a rejection of the ideologies of 'the dramaturgy and film-language developed by classical Hollywood' (281) that contradicted the sociocultural zeitgeist of the 1970s. As Elsaesser writes, the New Hollywood unmotivated heroes disrupted the classical Hollywood narrative where:

> The image or scene not only pointed forward and backward to what had been and what was to come, but also helped to develop a motivational logic that functioned as an implicit causality, enveloping the hero and connecting him to his world. Whether Hitchcock thriller or Hawks comedy, one was secure in the knowledge that the scenes fitted into each other like cogs in a clockwork, and that all visual information was purposeful, inflecting toward a plenitude of significance, saturated with cues that explained motivation and character. Out of conflict, contradiction and contingency that narrative generated order, linearity, and articulated energy. (2004b, 280)[105]

[105] David Bordwell and Janet Staiger write that although the New Hollywood largely followed the same mode of production as the classical Hollywood, and that their technological feats can be read alongside the way classical Hollywood used technological innovation to promote films, these filmmakers did incorporate a non-classical approach to narrative and technique (including characterisation) that borrowed largely from international art cinema, which enables characters to be presented without precise goals or desires (1985, 367-377).

The absence of consistent behaviours, traits and qualities in American Eccentric pure cinematic characters restricts the formulation of logical action/reaction linkages to a different effect. Rather than following perceived logical action/reaction connection, the audience is compelled to allow actions and reactions to occur without pre-formulated or logical expectations. The subversion of expectation in the American Eccentric mode creates a mode of viewing in which characters undergo constant reassessment by the spectator, as a pure cinematic character's actions, while not inconceivable in hindsight, can rarely be predicted in advance. Through this, American Eccentric films deny the audience the sense of verisimilitude afforded by more conventional cinema. Rather, American Eccentric films create two intersecting fields of performance—normative believability and eccentric possibility—between which characters fluctuate without prior indication. This fluctuation is evident in the sequence in which Royal Tenenbaum attempts to 'brew some recklessness' in his grandsons against the will of their widowed, vigilant father, Chas (Ben Stiller). A montage sequence, played to Paul Simon's 'Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard' (1972), whimsically displays a range of rebellious juvenile behaviours that oscillate between normative believability (leaping off furniture into a pool, jaywalking, go-karting) and eccentric possibility (dogfights, petty theft, riding on the back of a garbage truck).

Figure 50 Royal Tenenbaum brews some recklessness into his grandsons

Chas, incensed at this discovery, corners his father in a walk-in closet in the Tenenbaum house, surrounded by board games. The setting is curious, as given the information provided in the film's prologue board-game activity seems unlikely in the Tenenbaum family. Rather than responding to Chas' castigation, Royal engages in a moment of nostalgia as he exclaims, 'my god, I haven't been in here in years!' Royal's reaction (amused by his surroundings rather than concerned for his son) is believable and concordant with the audience's prior knowledge of him as a man who has deliberately misinformed his family that he has cancer for his own personal gain, and harshly criticised his adopted daughter's first theatre piece on her eleventh birthday. However, Royal's expected disengagement is abruptly reversed as he responds to Chas' shouted question 'Are you listening to me?' with an observant and sensitive (albeit yelled) 'Yes, I am! I think you are having a nervous breakdown! I don't think you recovered from Rachel's death.' This response is unpredictable prior to its occurrence as Royal has hitherto expressed little knowledge of his children's lives during his extended absence from the family. (Earlier in the film, Royal appeared ignorant of Chas' deceased wife's name, and referred to her as 'another body' in the cemetery). However, Anderson swiftly undermines Royal's momentary concern for Chas when, rather than pursue his distressed son, he remains in the closet, admiring his prized mounted javelina's head.

Figure 51 Chas confronts Royal

While the linkages between action and reaction are disrupted in the American Eccentric mode, Plantinga argues that the audience nonetheless aligns themselves with Royal because Anderson affords him the most screen-time and a narrative trajectory that alludes to a classical formation. Royal establishes a goal out of selfish financial necessity (his reinstatement as the patriarch of the Tenenbaum household and reunification with this estranged wife, Etheline [Anjelica Huston]) and is presented with an obstacle to that goal (the arrival of an opposing suitor, Henry Sherman [Danny Glover]). The audience follows Royal through his unethical and manipulative plan to achieve his goal, his retribution at being discovered as false, and his apparently sincere realisation of the importance of familial connection (Plantinga, 87-89). Plantinga, however, notes that the reflexivity of Anderson's film promotes a secondary form of emotion directed toward the film that he calls an

'artifact emotion'. These emotions do not take the fictional worlds created within films as their objects, but rather relate to the films themselves as artefacts. He writes:

> One of the film's intended affective responses is laughter, humor, and perhaps admiration, artifact emotions directed at the imagination shown by the filmmakers. Thus, the film draws attention to its artificiality throughout, all the while attempting to elicit the strongly sympathetic emotions that depend on the spectator granting weight to the fictional characters and world of the film. (90-91)

While Royal is an unpredictable character constructed such that he requires constant renegotiation, he is also configured as a protagonist for empathetic audience alignment. This alignment, however, can only occur during the narrative (which is consciously constructed as a work of fiction through the novel as a narrative framing device), and as such Royal is not only deceased by the film's conclusion but fictitiously eulogised on his tombstone, with his (self-composed) epitaph reading 'Royal Tenenbaum—died tragically rescuing his family from the wreckage of a destroyed sinking battleship'.

Despite the limitations Anderson's pure cinematic characterisation places on alignment and identification, he has created some of the most idiosyncratic, and memorable protagonists in contemporary American cinema. Sam Davies writes, 'He doesn't do characterization so much as character design' (2012, 68)—indeed, Anderson's characters are recognisable products of his films.[106] Wes Anderson creates a brand-like consistency through the recurrent casting of Bill Murray, Owen Wilson, Jason Schwartzman, Kumar Pallana, Anjelica Huston, Luke Wilson, Seymour Cassel and Andrew Wilson.[107] In keeping with Anderson's carefully

[106] The luggage carted around India in Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* was in fact designed by Marc Jacob for Louis Vuitton and employs an obvious, consistent motif.

[107] The re-casting of particular actors within a director's American Eccentric roles is not confined to Wes Anderson. Throughout P.T.'s *oeuvre* (including his non-American Eccentric productions) the appearance of certain actors; John C. Reilly, Julienne Moore, Philip Seymour Hoffman, William H. Macy, and Louiz Guzman, reappear in similar, or dialogic roles (Julianne Moore as the unfit woman who comes to care too late, William H. Macy as the invisible, unloved man etc.). However, at other times, Anderson casts actors

constructed set designs, clothes are intrinsically bound with identity—Dignan's yellow jumpsuit, Max's Rushmore blazer, the consistent Tenenbaum outfits (Lacoste dress, red sweat suit, and tennis garb), Team Zissou's uniforms, the Whitman brothers' bespoke lounge suits, Sam's Khaki Scout uniform and Suzy's shift dress, and Zero's (Tony Revolori) and Gustave H.'s (Ralph Fiennes) uniforms in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*—which establishes a theatrical stage-like quality. Indeed, the clothes worn by Anderson's characters more than visually individualise them—they are elementally constructed into the characters' identity such that their absence or alteration would result in an absolute reshaping and re-evaluation of the character (Baschiera 2012, 123; Browning 2011, 97-98).

In addition to their stage-like appearance, Anderson's pure cinematic characters do not directly relate to the authentic lived experiences of his audience. Conventional characters are created in relation to a problem that they must overcome throughout the course of the narrative, and conclude with a definite resolution (Bordwell 1985b, 17). Anderson's characters are regularly driven toward unconventional ambitions—committing burglaries, remaining in a high-school institution despite being an outsider, exacting revenge on a fictional sea creature. As Anderson's characters are invariably wealthy there is no financial necessity or material drive toward these unusual ambitions.[108] Rather, these characters *perform* these unconventional ambitions through an ironic amalgamation of expectations

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in an unexpected manner, for example Tom Cruise in *Magnolia* and Adam Sandler in *Punch Drunk Love*. As noted in the Introduction, the seemingly unusual casting of Adam Sandler in this film initially appears incongruous with this cinematic world, yet, if we consider Sandler's previous roles, it comes clear that Anderson has cast Sandler in this role due his aggressive characters in *Billy Madison* and *Happy Gilmore*. In this sense, Anderson parodically uses the audience's awareness of Sandler's previous roles in order to subvert the audience's expectations of his character-type. Something similar can be said of the casting of Cruise, as Anderson has at times openly stated that he created his character as a parody of Cruise's public persona. It is in the subversion of expectations that Anderson distinctively articulates his knowledge of the pervasiveness of pop-culture, creating characters from recognisable images to engage with his overall cinematic style.

[108] Those who are not wealthy (i.e. Max Fischer, Steve Zissou, Gustave H.) have access to wealth that they claim as their own (Herman Blume, Eleanor Zissou, inheritance from wealthy women, respectively).

compiled through pop-cultural references. This performance produces a simulacral form of identification in which a *cinematic* experience substitutes for direct recognition and a shared *lived* experience that more conventional characters provide. *Bottle Rocket* begins with Anthony (Luke Wilson) performing an escape from a voluntary mental hospital (by makeshift rope consisting of sheets tied together) for the Dignan's benefit, evoking Huck and Tom's 'rescue' of Jim from the Phelpses' shed in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Dignan and Anthony's first—and only—successful act is to rob Anthony's family home, not for financial gain, but for practice because he can afford it. Like Virgil Starkwell (Woody Allen) in Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run* (1969), Dignan and his team of robbers are not only odd and inefficient, but essentially inept (Browning 2011, 4-5).[109] Dignan's knowledge of criminal activity is primarily informed by heist films like *The Sting* (Hill 1973). The reflexive performance of pure cinematic characters based on genre films is clearly demonstrated by Francis Whitman in *The Darjeeling Limited*. The sequence in which Francis explains the purpose of the brothers' cross-country journey that I discussed in Chapter One provides an illuminating example of this strategy. Francis' lines—

> A-I want us to be brothers like we used to be and to find ourselves and bond with each other. B- I want to make this trip a spiritual journey where each of us seeks the unknown, and we learn about it. C- I want us to be completely open and say yes to everything, even if it's shocking and painful—

are, for narrative purposes, directed at his brothers, Peter and Jack. However Francis delivers these lines facing the camera, and thus he also addresses the audience. Through this performative gesture, Anderson ironically acknowledges the audience's genre expectations of the road film. Yet, he simultaneously situates Francis as a self-referential character performing these expectations while remaining genuinely invested in the pursuit of their emotional fulfilment within the film's

[109] Woody Allen's overt use of dialogue and unusual comic situations situate him as a New Hollywood precursor to Wes Anderson and American Eccentricity.

diegesis. As MacDowell suggests, deliberate camera recognition is a recurring Andersonian trait:

> Anderson exemplifies one extreme of the sensibility's visual style, and has perfected a type of shot that we find across many quirky films: a static, flat-looking, medium-long or long 'planimetric' shot [Bordwell 2007] that appears nearly geometrically even, depicting carefully arranged characters, often facing directly forward, who are made to look faintly ridiculous by virtue of a composition's rigidity (seen particularly plainly in Anderson's character introductions). Partly because of their presentational neatness, there is a degree of 'self-consciousness' to such shots…(2012, 8)

In addition to self-conscious performance, Anderson's pure cinematic characters deliver dialogue in off-kilter, straight tones and unexpected expressions. Following Sconce's discussion of Anderson within the smart aesthetic, this mode of delivery has frequently been described as 'deadpan' (349-69). Indeed, Anderson often frames his actors in close-up, static shots, with focus on the characters' motionless faces (Peberdy 2012, 56). However, as Donna Peberdy notes, deadpan performance does not equate 'motionless' and 'emotionless' in this context, but rather the blocking of emotion. As Anderson lingers on deadpan expressions, the minute details of the characters' faces become amplified in the absence of more distinct visual representations of emotion (Peberdy, 56-59). This is evident in *Rushmore* when Herman Blume, seated beside Max Fisher at a wrestling match of his twin sons, states with deadpan intonation, 'Never in my wildest imagination did I ever dream I'd have sons like these.' The camera holds on a two-shot of Herman and Max, as the gradual clouding of Herman's eyes, infinitesimal trembling of the downturned mouth, and faint quiver of downward slanting eyebrows subtly suggest the sincere filial and masculine anxieties beneath his motionless exterior. Peberdy writes:

> The deadpan performance mode is thus an illusion of blankness, functioning as a mask that both disguises and protects. Deadpan is not a simple case of emptiness, as Randall Knoper has pointed out, deadpan takes on a 'doubleness…between an intentionally blank face and idiocy, or between

> cunning and naïveté.' This definition is particularly appropriate in thinking about the deadpan on display in Anderson's films where the character's interactions are often as much about the incapacity of expression as they are the result of ignorance regarding an appropriate response (59).

Figure 52 Herman admits his unhappiness to Max

While the term deadpan is accurate in describing the delivery of dialogue by pure cinematic characters (particularly those played by Bill Murray), the written dialogue is distinct in that it always acknowledges the presence of a composed, formal script through the use of self-referential statements ('You don't know me; you don't want to know me…I'm just a character in your stupid film.' [Ned, *The Life Aquatic*]), unexpected expression (I'm sorry for your loss. Your mother was a terribly attractive woman.' [Royal, *The Royal Tenenbaums*]), and deliberately repeated lines ('Let's go get a drink and smoke a cigarette' [Francis, *The Darjeeling Limited*]). More than ironic dialogue with a deadpan mode of delivery, Anderson employs what I refer to as hyper-dialogue: that is, the intensified, unevenly fluctuating, and often ironically inflected delivery of dialogue *in the place of action*, the dynamics of which are further elucidated in Chapter Three.

Bordwell suggests that individualised character action—that is, consistent physical reactions including gesture, expression, movements and speech—aid the construction of character psychology as the outward expressions of inner emotions

(1985b, 15). Hyper-dialogue, as action or gesture, stems from the presence of a deep, unspoken anxiety; this may be seen when Suzy's explanation for her constant use of binoculars— 'It helps me see things closer. Even if they're not very far away. I pretend it's my magic power'—elicits this response from Sam Shakusky: 'That sounds like poetry. Poems don't always have to rhyme, you know. They're just supposed to be creative.' Rather than inquire into Suzy's obsessive investigation of external and internal worlds she cannot comprehend, Sam provides the audience with a moment of hyper-dialogue—he distances the anxiety of the exchange by ironically reciting a piece of information in a deadpan manner. The constructed nature of dialogue is consistent with the American Eccentric cinematic milieux created by Anderson. The characters, in effect, recognise the presence of a world constructed by a screenplay. The recognisability of an Anderson character's use of dialogue, costume, motivation and casting, however, is slightly different from Sam Davies' notion of 'character design,' where the concept of design implies a degree of superficiality, as though these characters are variations in shape cut from the same signature motif. While there is an undeniable intertextual dialogue across the Anderson *oeuvre* (Francis' laminated itineraries for the brothers' spiritual journey in *The Darjeeling Limited* is a somewhat 'matured' version of Dignan's hand-written seventy-five year life plan in *Bottle Rocket*),[110] this speaks only to the knowing Anderson audience in subverting or affirming character expectations.

[110] Both Francis and Dignan are played by Owen Wilson.

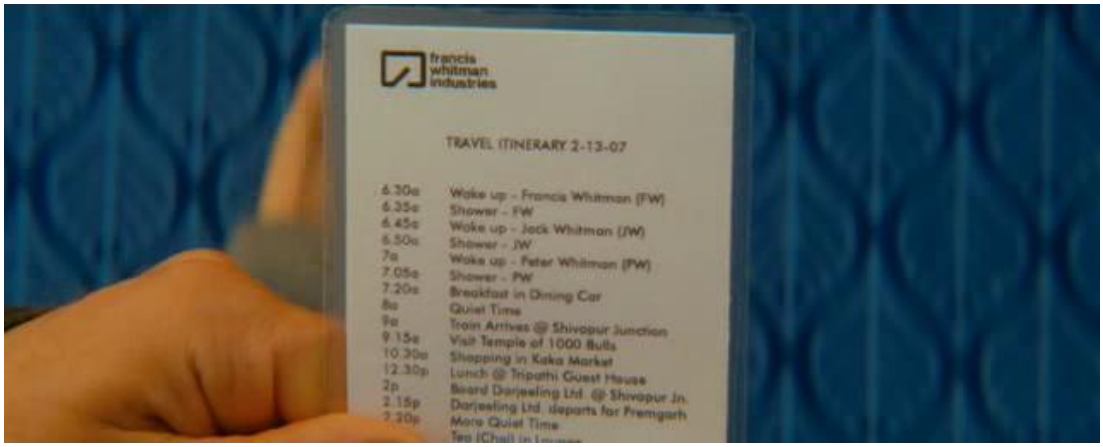

Figure 53 Francis' itineraries for enlightenment

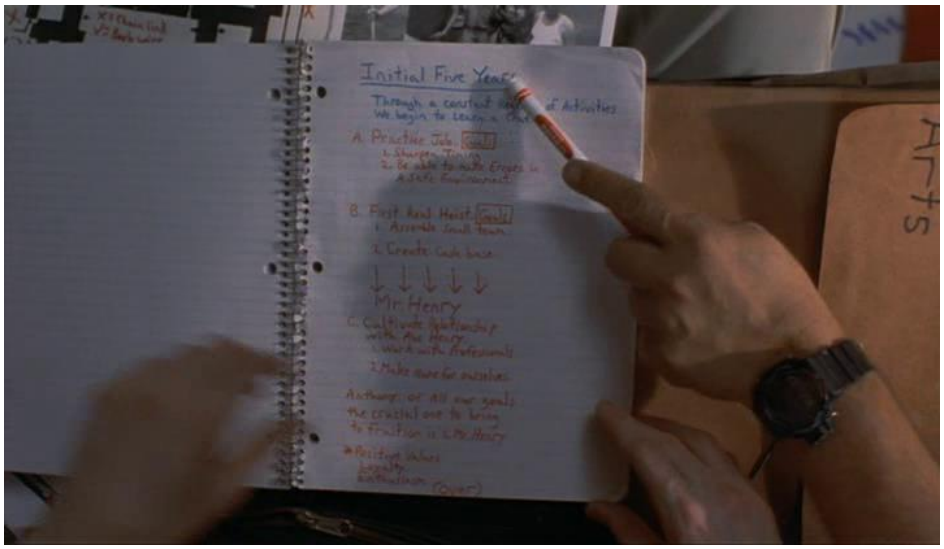

Figure 54 Dignan's plan for criminal success

The performative nature of the cinematic medium is recognised by Anderson in the recurring use of theatre, film, and literature both diegetically and formally. Max Fischer and Margot Tenenbaum are playwrights, Steve Zissou is a film director, Suzy Bishop reads fantasy novels, and Jack Whitman writes thinly-veiled autobiographical short stories. Mirroring the internal representation of character construction and believability, Anderson acknowledges the formal construction of film as a medium.[111] Max's interest in the theatre is formally reflected in *Rushmore* as

[111] For example, Steve Zissou's declaration 'it's a documentary, it's all really happening!' Max Fischer's compliment to his 'Heaven and Hell' theatre co-star 'you were incredible tonight, Margaret. You were that poor girl,' and Jack Whitman's frequent caveat that in his stories 'the characters are all fictional.'

the narrative is propelled by grand drapes displaying intertitles that delineate the passing of time. *The Life Aquatic* begins and concludes inside the Teatro di San Carlo at a film-festival screening of Zissou's documentaries 'The Jaguar Shark Part 1' and 'The Jaguar Shark Part 2', respectively. *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* open as 'a novel by the same', the *The Royal Tenenbaums* is narrated in book chapters by Alec Baldwin off-screen, and *Moonrise Kingdom* features an on-screen narrator (Bob Balaban) who interacts with both the on-screen characters and audience. Additionally, Anderson twice incorporates animated 'still' photographs to reveal specific details about certain characters. In *Rushmore*, after Dr. Guggenheim (Brian Cox) declares that Max Fischer is 'one of the worst students' at the academy, the camera cuts to an aerial shot of a school year book. The year book is opened and a montage of Max's extracurricular activities with explanatory inter-titles is played to The Creation's 'Making Time' (1966). Similarly, in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, Margot's colourful secret history is revealed through a private detective's file. Again, an aerial shot shows the file opening and a montage sequence of animated photographs displays Margot's sexual exploits as The Ramones 'Judy is a Punk' (1976) plays. The montage sequences not only deliver background information but function outside narrative time. Both montages end by abruptly cutting the accompanying music as the action returns to the narrative time of the film. As Boschi and McNeils suggest, the jarring editing in these sequences draws the attention to the constructed nature of Anderson's montages as dynamic representations of still images and words (2012, 33-4). However, this notion of montage technique as a form of construction can be taken further. In both of these sequences Anderson uses the montage to provide access to the character that Max has created for himself at Rushmore and the character that Margot has concealed from her family by performance.

Figure 55 Curtains in *Rushmore*

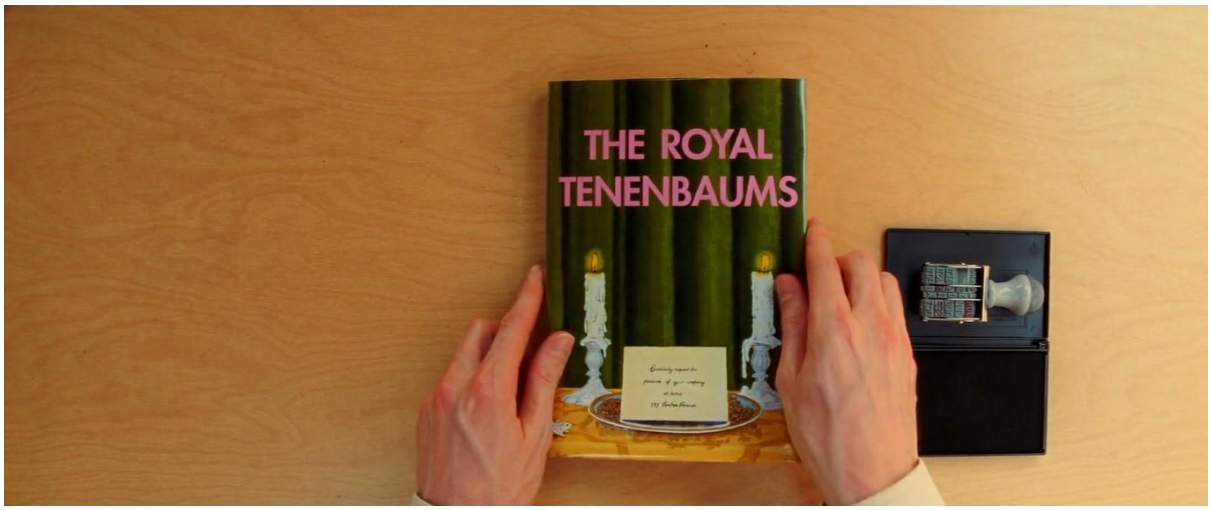

Figure 56 The opening of *The Royal Tenenbaums*

Figure 57 The opening of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*

The most distinct example of Anderson's use of formal techniques to highlight cinematic performance is the introductory 'Cast of Characters' sequence in the *The Royal Tenenbaums*.[112] The sequence introduces the major players in medium close-up, facing the camera (in the position of a mirror), as they carry out a variety of tasks expressive of each character's personality. The actors/characters face forward as opening credits appear stating characters by name and the star portraying them: 'Gwyneth Paltrow as Margot Tenenbaum,' 'Gene Hackman as Royal Tenenbaum,' and so forth (Peberdy, 48). As this sequence appears after the film's prologue, which outlines the narrative background of the film, it destabilises conventional character alignment by encouraging the audience to recognise the role of the actors in their portrayal of the characters. Margot Tenenbaum is at once a fictional character created by Wes Anderson *and* a role played by Gwyneth Paltrow.

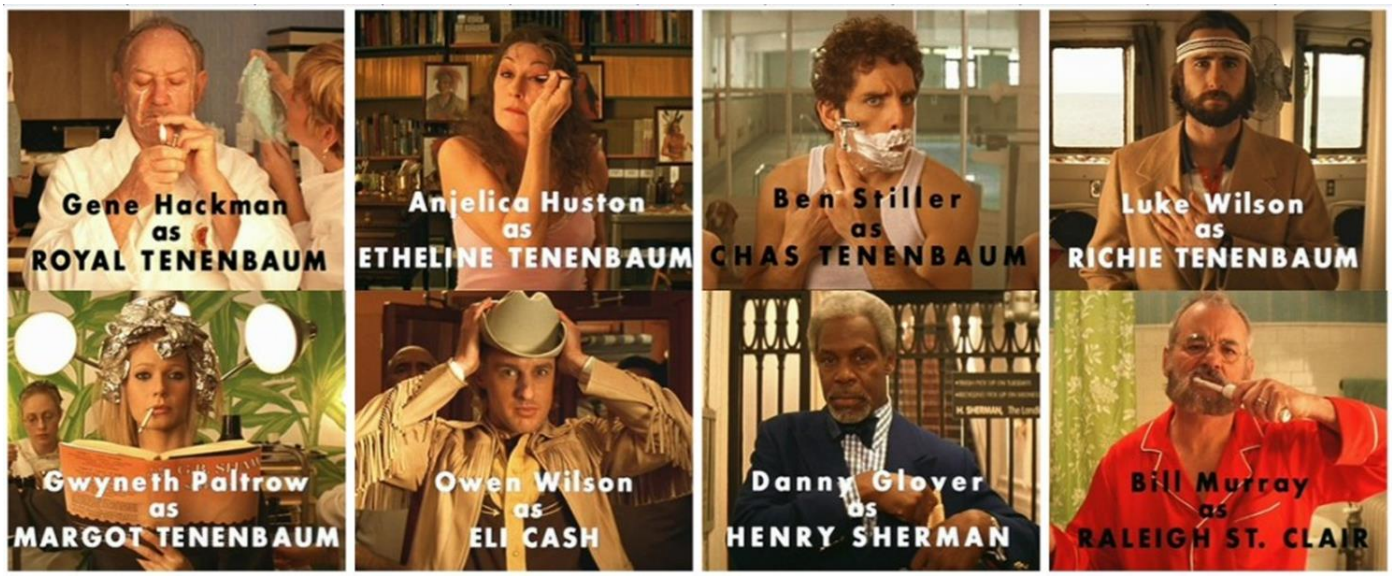

Figure 58 A cast of characters

Yet, while Anderson reminds the audience that Margot Tenenbaum is a figure to be negotiated within *The Royal Tenenbaums* and a character portrayed by Paltrow, beyond the 'Cast of Characters' sequence Paltrow does not bring the intertextual

[112] *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Welles 1942) concludes with a voice over by Orson Welles introducing each Amberson character and actors who played them in a close up, as well as Booth Tarkington's novel *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918) as the film's adapted text.

dialogue of her past roles to the character as this is her first American Eccentric role. The appearance of a recurring actor within an American Eccentric (or specifically, in this context, Anderson) film on the other hand, creates an intertextuality that is separate from the actor's complete body of work. Thus, due to his previous roles as Herman Blume, Steve Zissou, and Raleigh Sinclair, the appearance of Bill Murray at the opening of *The Darjeeling Limited* leads the knowing Anderson audience to suppose that he will figure in the film to come as a problematic biological or surrogate father. It is therefore unexpected when Murray is revealed as peripheral to the central storyline. This subversion of Murray's American Eccentric and Andersonian persona performs a subtle dramatic function within the film. Murray is notably absent, which shadows the thematic presence of the Whitmans' deceased father. Murray's multifarious Andersonian paternal role is subsequently reinstated in *Moonrise Kingdom* as Suzy's father, Walt Bishop, and thus speaks to his absence in *The Darjeeling Limited*.

The presence of Murray in an Andersonian American Eccentric context creates different expectations from those created in *Stripes* (Reitman 1981), or the *Ghostbusters* films (Reitman 1984; *II* Reitman 1989).[113] Likewise, there is a definite distinction between Jason Schwartzman as an American Eccentric figure—such as his Andersonian roles, Albert Markovski in David O. Russell's *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), or Louis XVI in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006) and his characters in *Shopgirl* (Tucker 2005) or *Saving Mr. Banks* (Hancock 2013). This character intertextuality is not the 'thespian intertext formed by the totality of antecedent roles' (2000a, 60) described by Robert Stam, but rather a thespian sub-intertext formed by the totality of antecedent *American Eccentric* roles. This distinction is in part due to the variation in performance elicited by the pure cinematic character. The deviation from conventional characterisation alters the delivery of performance.

[113] Murray does present a similar performance in Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* (2005), however, in this context, this performance is done to different effect.

Unlike conventional characters, Anderson's American Eccentric actors do not attempt to consistently elicit a specifically identified emotion or audience reaction, or to necessarily communicate a distinct motivation or interiority. Rather, the integration of ironic representation (albeit within the American Eccentric formula) promotes distance in alignment as the aesthetics of ironic expression highlight fictitiousness, artifice, and a mode of performance that complicates the affective response of the audience. As Anderson provides his audience with moments of sincere identification and genuine pathos between self-referential or parodic sequences, he is able to produce an overall tone of bittersweet whimsy, despite the sincere anxiety of his central characters. The shifting representations of characters adhere to Vermeulen and van den Akker's formulation of metamodernism as a mode that oscillates between modern sincerity and postmodern irony in a pendulum motion. As is discussed in Chapter Three, metamodernism negotiates both modes of representation but rests on neither.

The fluctuation between sincere identification and ironic or absurdist distancing is exemplified in the reconciliation sequence in *Rushmore*. In a childlike gesture Max offers Herman his pick of two badges—'punctuality' or 'perfect attendance'—obtained during his time at Rushmore as a truce to the escalating sabotage between the two men. The camera focuses on Herman's distraught face, his reddened eyes indicative of exhaustion. Upon discovering that Max is the son of a modest, convivial barber (Seymour Cassel) rather than (as previously claimed) a renowned neurosurgeon, Herman's face tiredly shifts to a resigned sigh of comprehension that the Max he has known has been a performance contrived by Max in accordance with his image of Rushmore. In revealing himself to Herman, Max offers a moment of complete sincerity within the film. Herman swivels in the barber's chair to face the mirror, and the camera. The viewer is placed in a moment of genuine identification as Herman recognises himself in a moment of sincere crisis. Herman has been driven by single sequential motivations—building his business,

the courtship of Rosemary Cross (Olivia Williams), revenge on Max Fischer. Without distinct motivation, he lacks identity. Within the idiosyncratic Andersonian aesthetic, this scene is poignant in its careful articulation of reconciliation and bereavement. The camera cuts to a refreshed Herman, as Max casually inquires, 'How much are you worth, by the way?' With Max fully restored to his Rushmore self, this inquiry immediately suggests an elaborate plan. This suggestion is reinforced as Max continues, 'we're going to need all of it.' The two men exit the scene to a crescendo of John Lennon's whimsical love song 'Oh Yoko!' (1971). Anderson cuts to a montage of the reconciled men performing choreographed dance sequences in Blume's steelworks, riding bicycles (albeit while smoking), and planning their next enterprise. The montage evokes the training sequence in *Rocky* (Avildsen 1976), yet due to Lennon's jaunty love song, appears in lieu of a 'falling in love' montage.[114] The montage re-situates the characters within the milieu of the American Eccentric world—the sincere pathos and emotional distress of the previous sequence are whimsically reframed as the camera cuts to an inter-title displaying 'Kite flying society' and the re-emergence of Max's typewriter as he begins his next play.

[114] For examples of the falling in love montage trope, see John Stockwell's *Crazy/Beautiful* (2001), and David Zucker's *The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad!* (1988).

Figure 59 Max and Herman's reunion montage

Despite their eccentric fluctuations, Anderson's pure cinematic characters are not incongruous within their cinematic contexts. Anderson focuses on small families (biological or constructed) of characters in confined, insular environments. The characters are isolated from external interaction and few additional characters enter the Anderson families. Those that do enter (Margaret Yang, Jane Winslett-Richardson, or Social Services) are pure cinematic characters that fit within the filmic milieu so that they appear more to be *discovered* within the created world, rather than entering it from an outside position. Only Anderson's road films, *Bottle Rocket* and *The Darjeeling Limited*, provide instances of naturalistic characterisation. However, in both films these characters are foreign (Inez and Rita); by contrast the language and cultural barriers they introduce further highlight the eccentricities of the small cohort of central characters. This is most evident in *The Darjeeling Limited* when Rita, after the brothers have been expelled from the train, tearfully asks Jack 'what is wrong with you?' Neither Inez nor Rita are present at the conclusion of the films, which signifies that their naturalistic on-screen presence is incongruous within the reflexive cinematic worlds.

American Eccentric cinematic worlds are creations that are both familiar and inauthentic representations of reality. The Grand Budapest Hotel is not a site

relevant to the history of World War Two, but an on-screen fictional literary creation in which Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), and Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) interact with Joseph Cornell's *Untitled (Pink Palace)* box (1946). The New York of *The Royal Tenenbaums* is not a recognisable contemporary reality but an imagined space informed by the literature of Salinger (the Glass family stories) and the films of Orson Welles (*The Magnificent Ambersons* [1942]) for the purpose of facilitating the narrative.[115] The Belafonte and its surroundings in *The Life Aquatic* are not reflections of natural wonders, but the melding of spectacular artifice and metacinematic documentary and melodrama informed by the films of Jacques-Yves Cousteau. As explored in Chapter One, *The Darjeeling Limited*'s India is not presented as the real country, but as a foreign place accessed through Louis Malle's documentaries, the films of Satyajit Ray and Jean Renoir's *The River* (1951). The aesthetics of these settings—the sandstone walls of the Rushmore academy, the monolithic Tenenbaum house, the aesthetic (yet largely impractical) 'long range sub-hunter from WWII' (The Belafonte), a first class compartment on the luxury

Darjeeling Limited train, and the large seaside Bishop house, a monumental hotel in a fictional European country (the Republic of Zubrowka)[116]—denote upper-middle class nostalgia. Yet while the locations suggest a past bourgeois era, the films' soundtracks are dominated (diegetically and non-diegetically) by a combination of songs from the British Invasion, and the characters are decidedly contemporary. In *The Darjeeling Limited*, when Jack Whitman (Jason Schwartzman)

[115] Brent Kredell writes that New York City, as depicted in *The Royal Tenenbaums* is 'an imaginary city that exists only within the confines of [Anderson's] mind' (2012, 95). Claire Perkins writes that the 'house on Archer Avenue' is described in the film's prologue purely in terms of the activities of its child genius inhabitants – with every bedroom 'set up as a shrine to its occupant's discipline (Chas' archived financial magazines, Margot's library of plays, Richie's tennis trophies), the ballroom houses Richie's obsessive drawings of Margot and doubles as her ballet practice space, and a blackboard keeps track of everything' (90). Perkins further notes that the house also functions as the logical space for all events past and present: Margot's eleventh birthday and first performed play, Etheline's bridge club and her marriage to Henry, Royal's sickbed, Richie's suicide attempt, Eli's car crash and Margot and Richie's vocalisation of their pseudo-incestuous love.

[116] Żubrówka is the name of a Polish Bison Grass vodka.

attempts to seduce Rita while on board the Darjeeling Limited he selects Peter Sarstedt's 'Where Do You Go To (My Lovely)?' (1969) on his iPod. The fusion of a contemporary technology, a sixties narrative popsong and the train's dated interior inspired by the 20th Century Limited, creates a curious interaction between the present time and various pasts. The merging of diffuse historical and contemporary contexts promotes identification and nostalgia that is unable to be specifically located in a wholly retrospective or contemporary chronological context. These films occupy a chronological space imagined only by the filmmakers.

Figure 60 Joseph Cornell's *Untitled (Pink Palace)* 1946

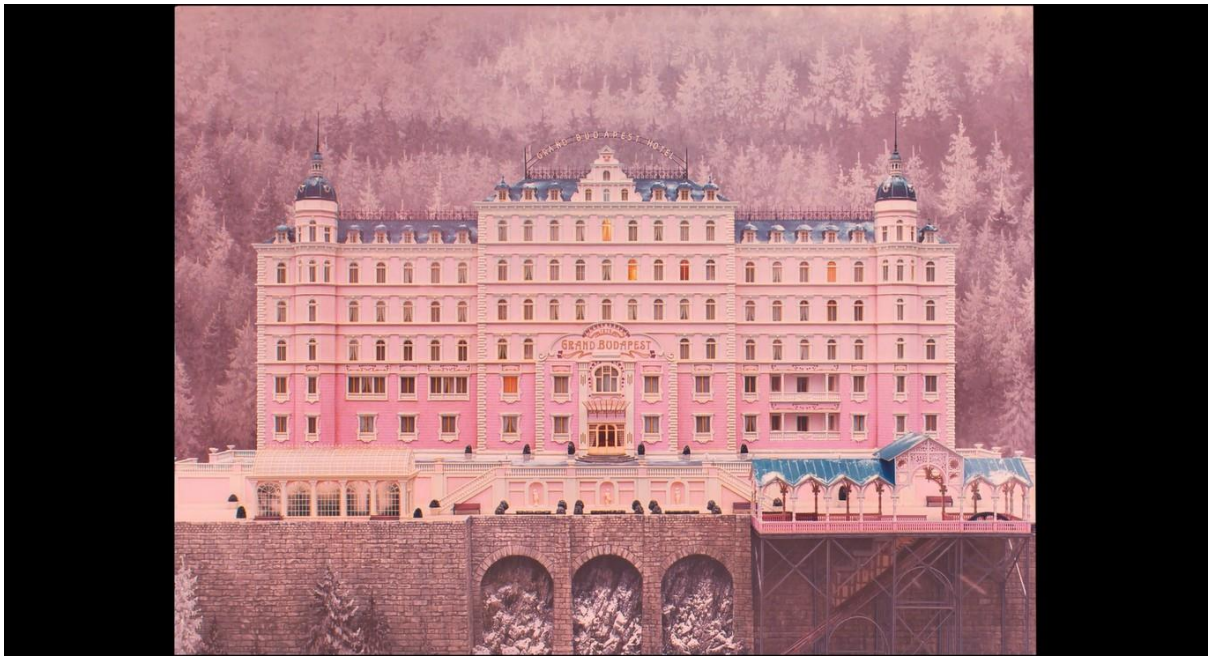

Figure 61 Anderson's Grand Budapest Hotel

The characters of the New Hollywood inhabited naturalistic worlds that were immediately recognisable to their audience as compatible with their own. As identifiable and recognisable as reflections of real people, these characters were able to become integrated into the audience's sense of *imagined community*—a community not based on direct experience of existence but conceived through an imagined kinship (Anderson 1991). By contrast, it is the inescapable awareness of their cinematic construction that limits the audience's emotional participation with the pure cinematic character, even as their sincerity promotes it. While pure cinematic characters are largely unfathomable outside of the film's diegesis, they slide between an empathetic identification that is not forced on an audience but encouraged and desired, and a semi-absurdity in which the viewer is reminded of the place and role of the cinematic construction of character within the film. The audience cannot infiltrate the constructed cinematic worlds created by Anderson, nor are the pure cinematic characters able to transcend their specific cinematic representations. Anderson's signature use of a concluding slow motion sequence draws attention to the film construct: it signals the end of the narrative, and the characters within it.

While the audience may have been moved by the narrative and characters, the closing credits ensure that both are irretrievably complete.

Chapter Three: The Role of Hyper-dialogue in American Eccentricity

In Chapter Two I analysed the role and construction of the pure cinematic character in the American Eccentric mode primarily through Wes Anderson's films. One notable aspect of the pure cinematic character is the manner in which dialogue is written for, and delivered by, these characters. Jeff Jaeckle notes the highly stylised verbosity of Wes Anderson's characters through a comparison to the films of Preston Sturges, both of which he sees as meeting 'the criteria of literariness by foregrounding language patterns that deviate from the mundane talk often found in mainstream Hollywood films. The filmmakers remind audiences that what they're hearing and seeing is unconventional, constructed, and performative' (2012, 156). This description can certainly be mapped onto the heard textures of what I call hyper-dialogue in the American Eccentric mode. In line with the construction of a pure cinematic character, hyper-dialogue is delivered in such a way that it always acknowledges the formal elements of performance and screenplay. However, hyper-dialogue is not purely a 'literary' function, to use Jaeckle's terms. This chapter analyses how hyper-dialogue, as a component of the pure cinematic character, is employed in relation to existential anxiety in the American Eccentric mode.[117]

Vivian Jaffe (Lily Tomlin) sits at a desk in a sparse office. Costumed as Linnea Reese 31 years later, she stares silently at the man sitting opposite her.[118] The camera cuts to a reverse close-up of Albert Markovski (Jason Schwartzman), dressed in a casual suit and with long hair reminiscent of Dave Davies circa *Death of a Clown* (1967).[119] Vivian silently observes Albert with irregular flicks of her head and

[117] A version of this chapter appeared as an article in *New Review of Film and Television*: Volume 11, Issue 4, 2013

[118] Linnea Reese is the character played by Tomlin in Robert Altman's New Hollywood era film *Nashville* (1975).

[119] Music by The Kinks, and other 1960s and 1970s British Invasion artists, has been prevalent on the soundtracks of American Eccentric films. In particular, the work of Wes Anderson, whose *The*

peculiar eye movements. The heteroclite, wordless scene feels pregnant with humour, as though it is stiflingly aware of the confounded laughter it is evoking in the audience. Albert shuffles uncomfortably under Vivian's interrogative gaze. Vivian, reclined with her high-heeled feet on the desk, finally breaks the tense silence. 'Why don't you just tell me what your situation is?' The odd and swift conversation that results from her inquiry reveals that Albert Markovski has (purportedly) enlisted Vivian and Bernard Jaffe, a husband-and-wife team of existential detectives, to investigate the significance of a three-part coincidence surrounding a tall Sudanese man. The fast-pace, off-kilter dialogue is accentuated by syncopated pauses. The unnatural exchange eventually climaxes as Albert exposes the full extent of his existential anxiety.

Figure 62 Albert meets Vivian

Darjeeling Limited uses three Kinks' songs in slow motion sequences, but also the use of 1960s and 1970s music in P.T. Anderson's *Inherent Vice* (2014a) and the use of Bob Dylan in Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There* (2007). This use of music (and retro costuming) demonstrates a nostalgia for the time of the New Hollywood era.

Albert: … should I keep doing what I am doing? Is it hopeless?

Vivian: Mr Markovski we see a lot of people in here who claim they want to know the ultimate truth about reality. They want to peer under the surface of the big everything, but this can be a very painful process, full of surprises. It can dismantle the world as you know it. That's why most people prefer to remain on the surface of things. Maybe you should go home. Let sleeping dogs lie. Take it easy. What do you say?

Albert: I say don't give me the brush off, please. I want to know. This is big.

Vivian: Have you ever transcended space and time?

Albert: Yes. No. Time, not space. No, I don't know what you're talking about.

This scene is part of the opening sequence of David O. Russell's *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), a film that humorously plays with popular metaphysics while expressing the existential anxiety associated with individual authenticity, freedom, and responsibility. Aside from signposting the key themes of the film, and establishing its narrative trajectory, this initial scene demonstrates a significant stylistic trend in contemporary film toward an emphasis on overtly wordy, unnatural dialogue. Stylised wordiness is a familiar aesthetic trend; recall the characters played by Katharine Hepburn, the comedic women of Howard Hawks,[120] or the quirky dialogue and characters constructed by Woody Allen. Contemporary television series such as *The West Wing* (Sorkin 1999-2006) have incorporated quick-fire dialogue into their scripts, which although undeniably stylised, is congruent with the pace and setting of the production as a whole, and in keeping with the confrontation and intensity of political discourse. However, when this alacrity is assigned to the exaggeratedly articulate and witty Capside teenagers of *Dawson's Creek* (Williamson 1998-2003),[121] or the over-caffeinated, self-aware, mother–daughter

[120] Brian Wilson writes that Hawks' dialogue falls into two (often overlapping) categories—that which approaches a form of aural naturalism within the classic Hollywood context, and the highly stylised dialogue associated with his comedies (2013, 117).

[121] When (awkwardly) approaching his father for advice on the 'mechanics of kissing', fifteen year old Dawson Leery (James Van Der Beek) states 'It's kind of a girl slash relationship question. And I don't

duo of *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino 2000-2007) who fittingly bear the tagline 'Life's short. Talk fast,' the aesthetic impact of this form of dialogue as a fashionable inclination is most distinctly highlighted (Amjadali 2008). However, it is merely an inclination. Thus, when Jason Reitman's *Juno* depicted a loquacious and pregnant 16-year-old Juno McGuff (Ellen Page) in 2007, reviewers uniformly noted Diablo Cody's unnatural and precocious script over the ordinarily controversial themes of teenage pregnancy and abortion.[122] Indeed, in many instances the dialogue of *Juno* diverts attention away from the gravity of the film's premise. As Juno verbally acknowledges her unwanted pregnancy for the first time, she accuses her best friend Leah (through a telephone call) of 'acting shockingly cavalier' before displaying 'the emotion she was searching for on the first take'; this is in reaction to her announcement of being 'fo'shizz up the spout'. It is of course highly unlikely that anyone, let alone a single teenager dealing with an unexpected and unwanted pregnancy, would approach such a sensitive and daunting conversation with coherent, light-hearted confidence. In the context of the film as a whole, it is also unlikely that each character surrounding Juno would be equally garrulous and witty.[123]

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want it to go to your head that I'm soliciting fatherly advice or anything, cause I clearly don't condone yours and Mom's perverse sex life but I'm not too proud to admit that my own inexperience is hindering my current female relations' (Miner 1998).

[122] Although *Juno* centres on the plight of a pregnant teenage girl, it is a fairly conservative film. While Juno does become pregnant, she opts for adoption rather than abortion and is supported by her family and friends throughout her pregnancy. Furthermore, Juno is completely supported by the baby's father, Bleaker (Michael Cera). The two are afforded a happy reconciliation at the film's conclusion with their baby adopted out to Vanessa (Jennifer Garner), a barren but motherly woman, and Juno reinstated as a 'typical' teenager.

[123] I refer in particular to the film's opening sequence in which a MiniMart cashier greets Juno with 'what's the prognosis, Fertile Myrtle? Minus or plus?' and follows up Juno's amusing revelation of a positive result with 'that aint no etchersketch, this is one doodle that can't be undid, homeskillet.'

Figure 63 Juno tells her best friend about her pregnancy

It may be fashionable to have idealised characters, like Juno, equipped with an artillery of one-liners layered with pop-culture references and filtered with just the right amount of self-referential irony to sound quirky, indie, or simply cute. Productions like *Juno*, *Gilmore Girls*, or *Dawson's Creek* create characters that are never lost for words, or, in the event that a character should be rendered silent by, perhaps, shock or amazement, the 'naturalistic' silence is replaced by a witty, if not self-reflexive, comment on the situation, as in Juno's justification for abortion as having 'heard in health class that pregnancy often results in an infant'. Dialogue in American Eccentric films operates beyond *Juno*'s quirkiness. The philosophically veneered rhetoric of *I Heart Huckabees* demonstrates that hyper-dialogue is not only an aesthetic or stylistic choice, but serves a dramatic function.

The New Hollywood created characters as idealised peers, characters that appeared to live out the anxieties and unrealised desires of their audience on screen in a 'naturalistic' manner to which the audience could relate. Such characters provided an outlet for social, cultural, and political action—however, in the American Eccentric mode, the self-conscious boundaries and limitations placed on the contemporary expression of existential anxiety materialises as an ironic

distancing and a distinctive postmodern aesthetic that revises the sincere thematic underpinnings. The characters and narrative trajectories of these films no longer directly relate to an authentic lived experience. The knowledge of the constructed nature of these idiosyncratic characters does not preclude genuine character alignment, but encourages emotional investment for the duration of a film's screen time. The shift in the expression of existential anxiety from the New Hollywood to American Eccentricity is characterised by a transformation in the use of dialogue and silence.[124] The naturalistic silences that pervaded, and indeed characterised, many of the New Hollywood films (*Five Easy Pieces* [Rafelson 1970], *Badlands* [Malick 1973] , *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* [Altman 1971], *A Woman Under the Influence* [Cassavetes 1974]), have, in the American Eccentric mode, been filled with intense and fluctuatingly ironic dialogue as the site of narrative and character progression in the place of action (*Waking Life* [Linklater 2001], *I Heart Huckabees, Damsels in Distress* [Stillman 2011]). The New Hollywood produced films in which the script was generally (with the notable exception of Woody Allen) part of the invisible scaffold of the film as a whole. In accordance with Sarah Kozloff's (2000) formulation of film dialogue as exchanges and utterances on which audiences eavesdrop, or are positioned to overhear, the dialogue of the New Hollywood was often given the illusion of improvised spontaneity. Kozloff writes that the dialogue of the New Hollywood 'was noticeably more colloquial, less careful about rhythm, less polished, more risqué, and marked by an improvisational air. The accompanying acting style was less declamatory, faster, and more throwaway; the recording of lines allowed much more overlapping and a higher degree of inaudibility' (23). Although sometimes poignant, this dialogue was primarily delivered as a natural product of the film's narrative and action, rather than a deliberately recognisable formal element. In the American Eccentric mode, the self-conscious use of dialogue always acknowledges the presence, and performance, of a composed formal script. In this,

[124] By 'silence' I mean the absence of dialogue, rather than the complex auditory silences described by Chion (1994, 56-58).

the constructed nature of the dialogue is consistent with their created cinematic milieux and characters, all of which recognise the presence of a world constructed by a screenplay. As Michel Chion states, verbocentricism in film sound occupies a heightened position of privilege far above the pure vococentricism (Chion 1994a, 6).[125] That is, in the majority of film sound recordings the intelligibility of the words spoken by a character is sought above 'acoustical fidelity to [the] original timbre' of a performer's voice (1994a, 6). Dialogue, in the New Hollywood, was often presented as imperfect, naturalistic speech—epitomised in Robert Altman's work. The verisimilitude of the dialogue in these films enables the audience to discount the presence of a formal script within the finished film, and attribute moments of unintelligible speech to naturalistic representation. Hyper-dialogue, on the other hand, exhibits an often unnatural level of intelligibility which promotes a complex form of engagement with the words spoken by the character. In these instances the intelligible spoken words are not necessarily cues for narrative or character progression, but are artificially constructed to distance the sincere thematic anxieties from the articulations. Hyper-dialogue forces the audience to be aware of the presence of a script constructed for the characters within an assembled cinematic world. The mimesis of the New Hollywood *absent-script*—the aesthetic effect of the deliberate invisibility of a structured script, has, in the American Eccentric mode, become the diegesis of the *present-script*—the aesthetic effect of an obviously recognised performed script. By absent-script I mean to suggest that, congruent with the influence of Italian Neorealism and the Maysles brothers' documentary style, the New Hollywood sought an aesthetic that would appear unscripted, as in the dialogue presented in John Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) or Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), where characters deliver lines of dialogue that are audibly unclear, and misspeak their sentences. Cassavetes further violates film dialogue conventions as his characters' dialogue is not only unpolished but at times

[125] Chion writes that the human voice is given a privileged position in the audio-mix, in which ' the presence of a human voice instantly sets up a hierarchy of perception' (1999, 5).

is proven to be irrelevant to the plot, which extends the illusion of natural speech (Berliner 2013, 107).[126] The use of the term 'present-script' thus connotes the inverse, scripts in the American Eccentric mode are often foregrounded within the films. A clear distinction between the absent and present script is evident in the different functions of cyclical speech between John Cassavetes' *Husbands* (1970) and Hal Hartley's *Simple Men* (1992).

In Cassavetes' film, three old friends—Harry (Ben Gazzara), Gus (John Cassavetes), and Archie (Peter Falk)—are reunited at the funeral of a mutual friend. All three men are middle-aged, married, and facing their own mortality in response to their friend's death. Their conversations are repetitive, cyclical without consequence—they are merely (and often drunkenly) an attempt at passing time. In one scene the three men, having just arrived in London, discuss their personal hygiene, fatigue, and London weather.

> **Archie:** Look at the rain
>
> **Harry:** It rains a lot in London
>
> **Gus:** I like the rain
>
> **Gus:** Let's take a shower. Let's take a shower and get some sleep and then we'll order some clothes... and get some clothes...
>
> **Harry:** That's right. That's right. We'll take an hour's nap. All I need is an hour.
>
> **Gus:** We need some clothes.
>
> **Harry:** I sleep an hour, I feel like I've slept twelve.
>
> **Gus:** Oh, boy.
>
> **Archie:** Rain is fantastic.
>
> **Harry:** Then we get some women.

[126] David Mamet is another filmmaker whose use of dialogue is intriguing in this manner is David Mamet, whose film dialogue has undoubtedly been influenced his extensive background in the theatre. Mamet's dialogue is constructed such that there are often overlapping, incomplete sentences, and his characters correct their own utterances on screen.

Gus: We need some sleep.

In this interaction, the dialogue between the three men is cyclical and repetitive because it is naturalistic. The men are physically and emotionally exhausted. Each man has his own perception of what will remedy his mid-life malady, and this plays out in this interaction through repetitious, and only half-acknowledged, utterances.

In contrast to this, Hartley's film employs repetitive, cyclical dialogue as a self-conscious theatrical device. *Simple Men* follows the bizarre journey of the estranged brothers, Dennis (Bill Sage) and Bill McCabe (Robert Burke), as they reunite to locate their anarchist father, who has escaped from police custody while in hospital. Bill is bitter about being swindled by his partner in crime and ex-girlfriend, and swears to exact his revenge by breaking the heart of the next 'tall, good-looking blonde' he encounters. Following the breakdown of their motorcycle, the men find themselves stuck at a remotely located diner, owned by Kate (Karen Sillas)—a beautiful, blonde woman. Bill desires Kate, however he faces competition from Martin (Martin Donovan), her (newly released from jail) ex-husband's short-tempered friend. One evening, following a conversation about their feelings for Kate, Bill and Martin discuss their drinking habits.

Martin: I got to go.

Bill: No.

Martin: I get too emotional when I drink.

Bill: Have another beer.

Martin: I've got to get up early.

Bill: No, you don't. Sit down.

Martin: I get too emotional when I drink.

Bill: Will you have another beer?

Martin: I've got to go!

Bill: Why?

Martin: I got to get up early in the morning.

Bill: You're drunk.

Martin: And emotional!

Bill: You got to go.

Martin: Why?

Bill: You got to get up early in the morning.

Martin: Yeah, you're right.

Martin: Here. Have another drink.

Bill: No. I got to get up early, too.

Martin: No, you don't. Sit down. Have a drink.

Bill: Go on, get out of here.

The exchange begins somewhat naturalistically, as an interaction between two new acquaintances urging one another to remain for a nightcap, while each half-heartedly explains their need to depart. However, as the conversation continues, its cyclical repetition approximates a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*.[127] Where the repetitious dialogue in *Husbands* demonstrates the naturalistic interaction of three men concerned with their own internal battles, here repetitious dialogue mediates the audience's engagement with the loneliness of the two men. The audience is drawn out of considering the romantic intentions of each man toward Kate, and is encouraged to acknowledge the presence of the written script—the screenplay from which these romantic intentions stem.

Through the 'present script', hyper-dialogue aligns with Jaeckle's notion of the meta-language employed by Anderson and Sturges—in which characters openly

[127] Hartley's film features a number of these instances. One such notable sequence follows on Martin's exasperated yell 'I can't stand the quiet!' in which Elina (Elina Löwensohn), Dennis, and Martin perform a repetitive dance sequence to Sonic Youth's 'Kool Thing' (1990) in a bar. This sequence is not simply a deliberately jarring sequence in the film, but a quotation of Jean-Luc Godard's *Bande à part* (*Band of Outsiders*) (1964), and as such functions to reinforce the film's construction, and self-conscious place within film history.

discuss their (often idiosyncratic) names or debate the use of language itself, which demonstrates the use of 'language [in these films] as an explicit means for characters to convey information, shape their identities, and indulge in literariness, all of which heighten the defamiliarization effect and call attention to the constructedness of language' (Jaeckle 2012, 166). However, hyper-dialogue in the American Eccentric mode functions beyond Jaeckle's observation that 'aware of the characters' simultaneous fascinations and problems with language, audiences are invited to contemplate the aesthetic and social complexities of communication' (168) —it is employed in order to both obscure and illuminate sincere meaning. Although my analysis refers specifically to the use of dialogue in finished films,[128] the overtly constructed nature of hyper-dialogue requires the recognition of the written screenplay.

Jill Nelmes, in her chapter on dialogue in *Analysing the Screenplay* (2010a), writes that screenplay dialogue aids the creation of believable and realistic film worlds and characters. Nelmes, referring broadly to mainstream American narrative film, states that screenplay dialogue serves two primary functions:

> first to make the storyworld more believable, to create a world in which the characters talk, have voices, say what they think and feel, building the illusion of a real world inhabited by real people; and second, to provide narrative information as the film characters express themselves in their fictional world. (217)

In its conventional use, dialogue has traditionally been designed to appear naturalistic within a cinematic context. Indeed, mainstream screenplay dialogue accentuates the film's sense of realism through the use of language in accordance with setting, while simultaneously progressing and developing the film story. However, as Nelmes notes, cinematic realism is not an authentic representation of life, but rather an artistic construct that masks its own cinematic devices, and utilises

[128] Both Kozloff and Jaeckle advocate taking the finished film product as the source for the analysis of film dialogue.

conventions that cinema audiences have learnt to read as being on-screen depictions of reality (Berliner 1999, 3; Nelmes 2010b, 217). Kozloff writes that film dialogue

> has been scripted, written and rewritten, censored, polished, rehearsed, and performed. Even when lines are improvised on the set, they have been spoken by impersonators, judged, approved, and allowed to remain. Then all dialogue is recorded, edited, mixed, underscored, and played through stereophonic speakers with Dolby sound. (18)

Thus, while the film viewer may be eavesdropping on the conversations and utterances of the characters, it must be noted that the dialogue has been constructed and designed for the viewer to overhear (Nelmes, 16).

Despite the appearance of naturalistic, and often seemingly simple film speech, screenplay dialogue is a complex and sophisticated artistic construction in which 'certain aspects of "real life" dialogue are drawn upon to aid our acceptance of the screen world' (Nelmes 218). Of these aspects the most important device is the style of language employed—appropriate colloquial language, accent, tone, timbre, rhythm, pace, and the sentence construction are essential elements of the characterisation and construction of a believable and immersive cinematic world (218). Indeed, just as a cinematic frame is comprised of angles, and the effects of scale, lighting, and focus, the language, words, and syllables that comprise film dialogue are a combination of phonographic details (pitch, pace, and volume). These details, together with linguistic and literary qualities that are distinctly bound with word choice, denote national and regional languages, dialects, and accents (Jaeckle 2013, 7). The manner in which the characters speak, the rhythms, inflection, and word choice reflect, and at times indicate, the character's motivations, ideologies, aspirations, and beliefs. Thus, by affording them an expressive voice, characters are imbued with complexity (including wants, desires, emotions) and the textures of realism, while simultaneously encouraging audience identification and alignment.

Most characters in mainstream cinema are constructed in order to elicit a connection with the audience. As such, these characters are required to be considered believable representations of real people. For instance, in Rob Reiner's *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) the spectator is encouraged to emotionally invest in the romantic plight of Harry (Billy Crystal) and Sally (Meg Ryan) because they are presented as plausible characters with consistent personality traits and distinct objectives. The film centres on the differing views of the two protagonists as to whether genuine friendship can be maintained between members of the opposite sex. The film investigates this question from the positions of each character's view and personality—Harry is a somewhat pessimistic (and sexist man) who is nevertheless devoted to his friendships, while Sally is an upbeat feminist, who approaches life in a more whimsical manner. People in the real world often do not express themselves openly and transparently, but rather tend to mask or disguise their true meanings and feelings in certain situations. As Karl Iglesias notes

> speaking indirectly is the way most of us talk when the emotional stakes are high, when we deal with intense emotions like anger, hate, love, or desire we're often afraid to expose ourselves emotionally. So we usually hide our true feelings and motivations. (2007, 44)

It is therefore unsurprising that screenplay dialogue is constructed such that in emotionally charged situations information is (at times partially) withheld, or delivered in a way that may appear to mislead other characters or the audience. Indirect speech (like accent, word choice, and speech patterns) is an artistic contrivance that aids the appearance of realism in conventional narrative cinema. For instance when Sally explains to her now good friend, Harry, that their unplanned sexual encounter 'was a mistake', she deliberately misleads him in order to mask her true feelings and hide her emotional vulnerability. The use of speech to mask true emotion or motivations is what Iglesias and Nelmes call subtext. Often the subtext of an exchange or utterance is known to the audience, which can introduce further complexity and believability to the characters while maintaining character

identification and alliance (Nelmes, 229). Sally's feelings for Harry are made known to the audience through a close-up of her face displaying overt disappointment; her brave smile slips away as Harry declares 'I'm so relieved that you think so too'.

Figure 64 Sally's disappointment

Todd Berliner writes that there are distinct conventions by which most mainstream American films abide: dialogue either enhances the plot or provides pertinent background information; dialogue progresses along direct lines, often with characters winning or losing a scene or interaction; conversations generally stay on topic with both or all characters listening to one another; unlike real people, characters tend to speak with clarity and without error; and films that depart from these conventions usually do so for narrative purposes, that is, violations tend to highlight something essential to the film (3–5).[129] Adherence to these mainstream dialogue conventions affords the audience a sense of secure familiarity in which all utterances are relevant to the film story, and therefore can be read and interpreted through conventional narrative film frameworks (6).

[129] Robert Altman's New Hollywood films provide good examples of cinema that plays against these norms—characters mumble, dialogue is at times unclear, and characters speak over one another.

Film dialogue is a tool for guiding the response of the viewer. Dialogue can prepare the viewer for a visual interruption, elongate an important moment, punctuate a suspenseful climax, or be used to distract the viewer from another element of the film (Kozloff 49). Films in the American Eccentric mode encourage the audience to recognise the conventions of mainstream dialogue while simultaneously subverting these expectations through their uneven ironic employment. American Eccentric films do not attempt at realism in the manner described by Nelmes, rather, the presence of the screenplay (and screenplay dialogue) is at times foregrounded as a dramatic function. Whereas mainstream Hollywood films generally aim to completely captivate the audience in an alternative reality (Berliner, 5), films in the American Eccentric mode fluctuate between immersive captivation with an alternative reality, and emotional distanciation from an observably unnatural, constructed world. The use of dialogue in these films shifts between naturalistic expression and self-conscious scripted performance. These films both encourage engagement with a cinematic world that is at once familiar and impossible, and identification and alignment with characters that are purely cinematic figures. Dialogue, in the American Eccentric mode, does not use conventional speech rhythms and timing to enhance the mood of emotional or poignant moments in the film story (Nelmes, 220), but rather employs fluctuatingly ironic language, to distance the core anxieties of these moments.

3.1 Hyper-dialogue and Performance

I Heart Huckabees, as a film in the American Eccentric mode, demonstrates this tendency toward hyper-dialogue: that is, intensified, unevenly fluctuating, and often ironically inflected use of dialogue in the place of action. Speech-act theory, first introduced by John L. Austin, designates that utterances are themselves actions (Kozloff, 10). In *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), Austin distinguishes between

constative utterances and performative utterances. Constative utterances are those that report or describe a situation and can (generally) be analysed as either 'true' or 'false', while performative utterances do not describe a situation and cannot be labelled 'true' or 'false.' Performative utterances are those, where 'the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action' (5), such as marrying, betting, promising, or apologising. Austin divides the performative utterance into three components: the locutionary—'the act of "saying something"', the illocutionary—the act of creating meaning, and the perlocutionary—'the performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance *of* an act of saying something', that is, the performance of a locution with a certain force (intention, tone, attitude, etc.) (94–107). As speech-act theory places a great importance on the contextual situation of the utterance, the intentions, thoughts, and feelings of the individual performing the linguistic act are vital to its outcome. If the attitude of the individual is not consistent with the performative utterance, or there is a disconnection (or misfire) in the performance of the utterance, the utterance is said to be 'infelicitous' or 'unhappy' (12–24).[130] While hyper-dialogue does, by its nature as speech, contain both constative and (felicitous and infelicitous) performative utterances, its effect cannot be distilled into these categories. The performative nature of hyper-dialogue is not the utterance itself as a locutionary act, nor does it necessarily perform a discernible illocutionary act. Hyper-dialogue does produce an effect on the addressee (other characters and the audience); however, this is not locatable in a single utterance, a perlocutionary act, but in a passage or conversation in which language is used reflexively, humorously, and with fluctuating irony in order to create a distance between what is stated and what is felt.

Hyper-dialogue, as action or gesture, stems from the presence of a deep, unspoken anxiety. In conversation with Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal

[130] Austin later problematizes the distinction between constative and performative utterances, and subsequently reconfigures the notion of the 'performative utterance' into the explicit, implicit, or inexplicit performative categories.

(1994), hyper-dialogue is *more than dialogue*—dialogue that blends real or sincere anxiety and its slippery, referential articulation. What Jeff Jaeckle refers to as 'figurative dialogue' (10)—the manner in which the lines delivered, through word choice, give rise to wordplay, or what Kozloff terms 'verbal embroidery' (52), the use of rhymes, allusions, metaphors, puns, and alliteration—is accentuated in both the American Eccentric mode and in 'talky' films like *Juno*. As Thomas Leitch writes, there are many moments in films in which, characters, or entire casts do not express themselves naturalistically, and rather speak 'like characters in a book' (2013, 85). These moments of heightened literary expression in Leitch's observation may be 'momentary and disruptive; it may help define a particular character or situation; or it may establish a new decorum for an entire film' (85).[131] The use of literary verbosity in order to create distinct characters works to identify Rory and Lorelai Gilmore in *Gilmore Girls*, whereas loquacity is attributed to all characters in *Juno* as an overall film aesthetic. However, while films like *Juno* use overt dialogue as an element of cinematic style, hyper-dialogue performs more than a purely aesthetic function. In the American Eccentrics mode, hyper-dialogue mediates, and indeed serves to displace or distance, an existential anxiety that cannot be directly accessed. Thus, hyper-dialogue mediates, or temporarily masks, existential anxiety beneath a blanketed verbosity. Hyper-dialogue is not just the foregrounding of dialogue over or above action but is part of the action of the film itself; either in substituting directly for action, or serving as a gestural act of distancing the present anxiety

[131] Leitch's work here primarily looks at film adaptation of the novel and the presence of literary dialogue within delivered speeches within films. Leitch writes 'Although a good deal of dialogue has clearly been written and delivered in a manner that is meant to be overheard by filmgoers who fancy themselves usually perceptive eavesdroppers, at least some dialogue, like some stage dialogue, is designed to be heard rather than overheard; it is addressed to the audience, with the fictional characters to whom it is ostensibly addressed mere conveniences. And because speeches that are addressed to the audience typically take the form of speeches in the more public, rhetorical, or political sense of that term, it would be misleading to construct a theory of stage dialogue or film dialogue based on a duality of real speech (spontaneous, unpremeditated, casual, realistic) and staged speech (expository, rehearsed, formal, artificial). At the very least, film dialogue draws on three sets of conventions: naturalistic conventions of oral conversation, formal conventions of literary language and declamatory conventions of public speaking' (90).

through incessant talking. Although pace is frequently a feature of hyper-dialogue it is not a necessary criterion, provided that the dialogue itself acts to distance an underlying, unspoken anxiety. Hyper-dialogue may be present throughout an entire film as exemplified in Linklater's *Waking Life* and Whit Stillman's films, such as *Metropolitan* (1990), *Barcelona* (1994), and *The Last Days of Disco* (1998), or Russell's earlier work *Flirting with Disaster* (1996). Alternatively, it may be distinct to a certain character within a film, as in the case of Barris (Robert Downey Jr.) in Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) or Craig (John Cusack) in *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze 1999). Hyper-dialogue may also be fleeting, exemplified in Charlie Kaufman's (Nicolas Cage) internal monologues in *Adaptation* (Jonze 2002) or Francis' (Owen Wilson) speeches to his brothers in *The Darjeeling Limited* (Anderson 2007).

Hyper-dialogue as a cinematic 'technique' may initially appear to conform to Raoul Eschelman's 'performatism' (2008), a monist aestheticism in which viewers are coerced into identifying with characters and situations that are plausible only within the confines of a particular text, as there are many citable instances in the American Eccentric mode in which the audience is drawn to recognise the realistic implausibility of purely cinematic characters due to their use of dialogue. However, the performatist work is designed such that the reader or viewer is initially forced by the author 'to opt for a single, compulsory solution' (2) to the problems raised within the work, who then uses the reader or viewer's textual immersion to impose an identification with characters or situations that are realistically unbelievable beyond textual parameters. The ability to transcend the intellectual acknowledgement of the disparity between knowledge and identification through belief signifies a divergence between performatism and the effect of hyper-dialogue in the American Eccentric mode. While American Eccentric films often present their audiences with situations or characters that are largely unfathomable outside the diegesis, they do so in such a manner that the semi-absurd, metacinematic, or reflexive instances, remind the spectator of the film's constructed nature—yet, despite their highly composed nature

she is is encouraged empathise and emotionally align herself with the film's characters. The American Eccentric pure cinematic character is constructed such that cinematic elements (like performance and script) are always evident, if not foregrounded. Rather than presenting the audience with metaphysical transcendence in order to provide resolution, as in the performatist work, American Eccentricity highlights cinematic tropes in order to defer the audience's expectation of a definitive resolution. As the inconsistency between moments of sincerity and distancing moments of absurdity and irony fluctuate within American Eccentric films, genuine identifications may emerge and be repelled, unevenly, during the course of any one film. Importantly, although the measure of irony and sincerity fluctuates at various instances throughout a film, in the American Eccentric mode the two positions are always intertwined.

3.2 Hyper-dialogue and Metamodernism

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker describe the emergence of irony and sincerity as a cojoined phenomenon in a nascent structure of feeling, that they call metamodernism (2010). Vermeulen and van den Akker write:

> Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm. (5-6)

Indeed, American Eccentricity embodies a 'both-neither' dynamic in relation to irony/sincerity, but fluctuations in the deployment of irony and sincerity function in order to engage and distance the viewer from a core existential anxiety that is constant in its presence. While hyper-dialogue does not in itself oscillate between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony (as the technique necessarily indicates that what appears to be postmodern irony masks an expression of modernist existentialism [in Vermeulen and van den Akker's terms], thus indicating the two always exist simultaneously), its uneven deployment does trace this movement of oscillation between the modernist and postmodern, in that hyper-dialogue swings between being overtly foregrounded and covertly retreating within a single film. In *I Heart Huckabees* the audience is presented with three central characters, Albert, Tommy (Mark Wahlberg), and Brad (Jude Law), and a situation in which individuals in a small community respond to an imposing institution's (the Huckabees Corporation) plan to construct a department store on protected marshlands. Each of these men actively seeks a solution to a named case through the employment of the existential detectives Vivian and Bernard Jaffe, and their French nemesis Caterine Vauban (Isabelle Huppert). Albert, head of the Open Spaces Coalition environmental group, names the case of a coincidence with a Sudanese man (Ger Duany). Tommy, a firefighter, frequently cites his despair at the world's use of petroleum, and Brad, an executive at Huckabees, contacts the detectives in order to undermine Albert, whom he sees as an antagonist to his rising business career. The Huckabees Corporation embodies the individual obsessions and anxieties of the central characters; it is a source of media over-absorption, cultural stasis, psychic stress, and environmental distress (White 2004, 109-113). Gradually—and in an oscillating manner between sincerity and irony—it is revealed that both Albert and Brad experience genuine existential anxiety due to an inability to connect with their families, and yearn for a more general form of human connection. In the case of Albert, this revelation is expressed through an unwanted confrontation with his parents regarding the death of his childhood cat as a microcosmic symbol for his

parental disconnection. During this exchange, humour is derived from musical interruptions of Shania Twain due to a faulty stereo system, and the overstatements made by Vauban who bombastically declares that Albert, like the Sudanese refugee at the centre of his stated case, has been 'orphaned by indifference'. These claims are noted as hyper-dialogue, as the core, emotional impact of the event described silences Albert. Albert quietly pleads, 'I don't want to talk about this' as he holds back tears. From this interaction it is evident that the death of Albert's cat and lack of parental support during childhood grieving is symbolic of Albert's sincere existential anxiety—his ongoing sense of familial disconnection and parental disappointment. As the scene reveals this sincere anxious core, Russell self-reflexively distracts his audience with the humorously overblown discussion of a single childhood event. The effect of this is doubled-sided, in that it reveals both Albert's anxieties and the technique of performed hyper-dialogue used to distance them from the audience on the film's surface.

3.3 Hyper-dialogue as Dramatic Function

Tommy, like Albert, exhibits genuine existential anxiety in relation to a perceived lack of connection within the universe. However, Tommy's intense anxiety over the state of the planet, his obligations and responsibility to the human race, and the possibility that the universe is structured on a metaphysical nothingness that denies connectivity, is precisely what paralyses him. Throughout *I Heart Huckabees* Russell invites the audience to consider the global issues behind the philosophically inflected hyper-dialogue regarding the effects of petroleum usage, third world dictatorships, civil wars, refugeeism, child labour, and the consequences of suburban sprawl on the environment. In this way, the hyper-dialogue appears to be masking the existential questions of individual culpability and purpose. However, each of these characters reveals a fundamental familial alienation and

dislocation as the foundation of their sincere anxiety. Thus, Russell also deploys these global and metaphysical issues within a hyper-dialogic framework in order to reveal the individual and emotional concerns founded upon a deeper sense of familial alienation. In one of the film's most amusing and complex sequences, Tommy, in a dishevelled and ideologically perplexed state, implores his wife and daughter: 'I need you guys…I don't know if nothingness matters, or somethingness matters. I'm trying to figure that out and I want you to help me.' The family home is depicted in a state of disarray, with the yard covered in family belongings, and with Tommy's firefighter co-workers helping to pack the car for his distressed wife. Rather than attempting to make amends with his wife, Tommy turns to his existential detective Bernard for an explanation.

> **Tommy**: She won't stay and share this with me! It's important to me. I see it so clearly. You use petroleum, you're a murderer. That's a fact. One, killing the ozone and all the creatures that it's hurting. Two, killing Arabs in oil-producing dictatorships where everybody is poor, that's cruelty and it's inhumane … Alright, so if this world is temporary, and identity is an illusion, then everything is meaningless and it doesn't matter if you use petroleum and that's got me very confused.

In an attempt to placate Tommy, Bernard explains the existential detectives' conception of the connectedness of the universe—the philosophy that 'everything is connected and everything matters'. Against the background commotion of the packing by the firefighters and emptying the house for his wife's departure, Tommy focuses solely on Bernard, producing a book by 'rival' theorist, Caterine Vauban to highlight his confusion:

> **Tommy**: She says nothing's connected. It doesn't matter what you do. You can drive a car. You can burn up gas, which would explain the way things actually are where people do destructive things like it doesn't even matter… less than 5% of the cosmos is composed of the same elements that compose human life. There you go, that means we're all alone and we're miserable and isolated.

As is the case throughout *I Heart Huckabees*, this moment of philosophical banter is an amusing source of entertainment for the audience. The intensity of the performance by Wahlberg's Tommy is in stark contrast to the calm intellectualism of Hoffman's Bernard. However, if we consider the aesthetic function (and affective import) of this philosophical speech its role as hyper-dialogue is apparent. During this exchange, Bernard appeals to Tommy's wife, beseeching her not to leave him before he has completely dismantled his personality and accepted the connectedness of the universe. This is presented not as an emotional plea on the premise of marital love, or as a campaign for the benefit of the child, but rather 'if you leave him before he gets done dismantling, he will never make it to the other side.' Importantly, the protest that his wife 'just wants to live her life' is met with further ideological contentions, rather than practical consideration.

> **Tommy**: You don't want to ask these questions? What is that life, baby? Who are we? Look at this (*picks up his wife's shoe*), look at this, do you know where these come from? Indonesia. Baby (*addressing his daughter*), this is the truth, okay, little girls they have to work in dark factories where they go blind for a dollar 60 a month just to make Mommy her pretty shoes. Can you even imagine that, Caitlin?

Figure 65 Tommy's wife leaves him before he's finished dismantling

This sequence illustrates the use of hyper-dialogue in the form of oscillation described by Vermeulen and van den Akker. The use of hyper-dialogue separates two thematic planes that are simultaneously introduced to the audience. On one plane, the audience is introduced to Tommy Corn, a central character; his reason for requiring existential detectives sets an ironic tone to this introduction. On the other plane, it is revealed that while Tommy is obsessed with connectedness and the consequences of action, he is incapable of recognising the impact of his inability to connect with his wife and child. The oscillation between Tommy's ironic hyper-dialogue and his wife's sincere, emotional distress highlights both the humorous absurdity and sincere gravity of this domestic situation. Tommy is incapable of reacting to the domestic connection he requires due to his inability to reconcile the connectedness of global issues. The use of hyper-dialogue here demonstrates that Tommy's anxiety—which is made almost ridiculous through his dichotomous explanation—is centred on issues of individual culpability and obligation. However, it is through the expressions of these concerns that it is revealed that Tommy is incapable of fulfilling his paternal, marital, and employment obligations on a local and personal level. As in other films in the American Eccentric mode, this occurs without the immediate recognition of the viewer, although the slipperiness of this dual positioning may be retrospectively revealed.

The same can be said of hyper-dialogue as a characterising technique. While hyper-dialogue stems from an anxious concern that cannot be directly accessed through naturalistic *plain speaking* it is not contingent on the audience's recognition of its distancing function at the time of its utterance. The disparity between what is said—the dialogue—and what is felt—the anxiety—may be pointedly revealed later; it may require the viewer to retrospectively acknowledge a previous utterance as a moment of hyper-dialogue. In Chapter One I noted Francis' admission of attempted suicide to his mother, Patricia in *The Darjeeling Limited* as a temporary reconciliation of ironic expression and the film's sincere thematic concerns as a road film.

Revisiting this poignant sequence, it is evident that this temporary reconciliation is achieved through hyper-dialogue. Francis originally explains that the impulse for a cross-country journey of India arose from a reassessment of life following a near-fatal motorcycle accident:

> **Francis**: It was raining. I was going about 50 miles an hour as I went into a corner. Did some wrong steering. Wheels went out from under me. I suddenly skidded off the road and slammed into a ditch and got catapulted 50 feet through the air. The little particles of glass and debris were stinging my face as I flew. And for a second there was just total silence, then… Bam! Bike crashed to the ground, exploded and caught on fire and I smashed into the side of a hill with my face.

Despite the drama of the story, Francis narrates this account with a deadpan delivery and the moment passes as an explanation of the bourgeoning visual metaphor for emotional injury presented by Anderson through Francis' bandages. The audience is at this point emotionally invested in the brothers, including the endearing, yet irritatingly controlling Francis. While the validity of Francis' account may not be verifiable, it is accepted, and the slightly incongruous tone of delivery is assigned to typical Andersonian character idiosyncrasy. It is assumed that Anderson is utilising a storytelling function (Kozloff, 55) in order to reveal the source of Francis' injuries, and connect the incident with the film story. These assumptions are maintained until the brothers confront Patricia regarding her sudden, and unexplained departure from America prior to their father's funeral. Upon greeting her sons, Patricia turns swiftly toward Francis to directly inquire 'What happened to your face?' In response, Francis states, 'I smashed into a hill, on purpose, on my motorcycle.' The frank nature of Francis' admission is shocking, and reveals that his previous explanation to have been hyper-dialogue. The amusing irony involved in Francis' original deadpan story is retrospectively uncovered as his depression, and desperation to reconnect with this family emerges and demonstrates his vulnerability. After this second, sincere explanation, the audience is made aware that the initial explanation provided by Francis was a performance. As American Eccentric characterisation incorporates

performance in its construction, this first instance is taken as operating within the mode. In the initial sequence, Peter (Adrien Brody) asks Francis about his injuries as an aware intermediary for the spectator's curiosity. However, Anderson doubles the role of American Eccentric performance in the second instance as it is revealed that Francis performed his first explanation not only for the spectator within the American Eccentric mode, but also in hyper-dialogic manner in order to distance his sincere emotions from his brothers. The parallel nature of this situation necessarily compels the audience to recall and reconsider the initial explanation offered to the brothers and the audience, as well as all other declarations made by Francis to this point. At this moment, Francis' understated and naturalistic actions replace hyper-dialogue, as the previously asymptotic tension between ironic expression and sincere anxiety is reconciled in the presence of his previously absent mother.

3.4 Hyper-dialogue and Sincerity

The transition between hyper-dialogue and sincerity is inherently slippery. In *The Darjeeling Limited* it is not until this utterance that Francis' performative nature is revealed as double-sided: in addition to a knowing (meta-cinematic) Andersonian character model (Peberdy 2012) the moment of reconciliation between irony and sincerity signals that Francis, until this point, has also been performing a character role for his brothers.[132] Consider a similar dramatic confrontation between parent and child in the New Hollywood, in which character and situation are played for a naturalistic identification, and indeed, pathos. The transition from the aesthetic naturalism of the New Hollywood[133] to this performed ironic deference is clearly illustrated when this scene between Patricia and Francis Whitman is compared to

[132] The Andersonian character is the most obvious articulation of American Eccentric characterisation in their quirky, yet sincere attributes and their recognisability, not as peers, but as cinematic elements.
[133]This is with the exception of Woody Allen who conversely is a direct precursor to this style of characterisation and exegesis.

the seminal moment of Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* in which Bobby Dupea (Jack Nicholson) confronts his once patriarchal father (William Challee). Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* is primarily concerned with the existential anxiety of its protagonist, Bobby, in the face of familial (particularly patriarchal) disconnection and personal duty. The confrontation scene between Bobby and his father highlights the generation wars of the counter-cultural 1960s and 1970s in America, relationships between authority and individuals, and the interplay between perceptions of high and low art cultures on a symbolic level. However, on a personal, character-specific level, this scene expresses an inability to communicate between an elusive son and his catatonic father. *I Heart Huckabees*, *The Darjeeling Limited*, and *Five Easy Pieces* all focus on an existential loss resulting from the absence of one, or both parents, be it emotionally and supportively as in the case of Albert Markovski,[134] emotionally and geographically as in the case of the Whitmans, or communicatively and generationally as in the case of Nicholas Dupea's (Challee) literal paralysis.

Just as the parental confrontation in *The Darjeeling Limited* requires Francis to speak plainly, demonstrating that the hyper-dialogue previously deployed throughout the film can no longer defer anxiety, in *Five Easy Pieces*, Bobby's confrontation provides a moment of insight into his otherwise elusive character as an explanation for his actions through accessible dialogue. Where Francis provides constant (albeit masked) justification for his actions, Bobby's silences leave his actions unexplained. Until this point in the film, Bobby has been depicted as a contradictory character, at once repelled by his bourgeois heritage yet seemingly embarrassed and unfulfilled by the simplicity of his chosen blue-collar life and partner. In this scene he attempts a redemptive monologue. Rafelson frames this monologue in a four-minute sequence against a still seaside landscape. Bobby, silhouetted in dusklight, wheels his father's chair across the expanse of the shot.

[134] Interestingly, Albert's parents have a different surname to him. This is never explained in the film, however, it does serve the purpose of highlighting the distance felt between Albert and his parents.

Aside from the natural scenery and the two men, the frame is empty. All that is heard is the distant barking of a dog and a continuous sea breeze. These natural, diegetic sounds heighten the symbolic isolation of the Dupeas, and create a hushed vocal tension (Chion, 57) that is not broken until Bobby tenderly asks his father 'Are you cold?' This spoken line occurs 20 seconds into the scene. The impossibility of a dialogue between father and son is established with this first question. The silence of the mute father heightens the fraught tension of the sequence (Kozloff, 77). The shot emphasises Bobby's cold, nervous, heavy breathing on the soundtrack in the absence of a reply. The lack of response to Bobby's practical, and sadly non-rhetorical, inquiry signifies that no reconciliation between father and son can be achieved, and furthermore, that the once patriarchal father is now acknowledged by Bobby as incapable of being held to account. With this knowledge digested, and the unattainable response recognised as not forthcoming, Bobby begins his honest and explanatory monologue,[135] as the camera closes in on his face settling in a close-up.

> **Bobby**: I don't know if you'd be particularly interested in hearing anything about me. My life, I mean, most of it doesn't add up to much that I could relay it as a way of life that you'd approve of…I move around a lot. Not because I'm looking for anything really, but, 'cause, I'm getting away from things that get bad if I stay.

This admission, although ultimately selfish, is both an articulation of the personal inadequacies felt by Bobby and an explanation—to himself, his father, and the audience—for his noncommittal actions and continued avoidances. Throughout the monologue Bobby poses questions to his father, who, in reverse-close-up shots, eerily lingers on screen in his paralysed silence. These pregnant silences are acknowledged by Bobby as he continues: 'I am trying to imagine your half of this conversation. My feeling is that—I don't know—that if you could talk we wouldn't

[135] Kozloff writes that monologues (inherited from theatre) are often employed in film where a character talks to someone who cannot respond—the dead, an animal, a mirror—in a way that connotes absolute honesty. In this way, monologues 'assume the guise of a clear window into the soul. [They are] occasions where the audience feels it has been given privileged access to the character's innermost feelings' (70-71).

be talking.' In this statement, the audience is made aware of a continuing lack of communication; this silence existed between Bobby and his father long before his father's stroke. Yet, despite Bobby's previous forced acknowledgement of the lack of reply from his father, he goes on to voice his fundamental concern—a feeling of individual inauthenticity as a result of perceived failure. 'Best I can do is apologise…we both know that I was never really that good at it anyway'.[136] The camera again lingers on the father, while Bobby stifles his tears. It is this declaration of failure that Bobby wishes to have acknowledged, and refuted by his father in order to fulfil a cathartic reconciliation between expectation and result. However, the father's paralysis denies the cathartic response for Bobby. In the place of an articulated reconciliation, the father's silence reinstates and reinforces Bobby's own harsh silence to those around him, perpetuating generational discordance. From this silent moment, the film's conclusion is assured: Bobby abandons his pregnant girlfriend, Rayette (Karen Black), at a truck stop and covertly hitches a ride to Alaska. His father's silent absence is, for Bobby's unborn child, now to be a complete paternal absence.

[136] Bobby refers to the life of a professional, upper-class pianist. The designed trajectory for Bobby's life is signalled through his middle name 'Eroica'—a reference Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No.3* (1804).

Figure 66 Bobby's direct monologue to his father

Despite the moral reprehensibility of his final act of avoidance in *Five Easy Pieces*, Bobby remains an identifiable and recognisable character. This profound emotional identification associated with dialogue, silence, and character is not absent in the American Eccentric mode, but has shifted toward a slippery fluctuation

between distancing ironic address and sincere moments of revelation. It is the formulation of an underlying anxiety that is blanketed by variably ironic dialogue that forms the basis of hyper-dialogue. Although there are superficial similarities with the stylistic loquacity of contemporary American films like *Juno*—hyper-dialogue is not a stylistic characteristic of film but rather a dramatic function. In this sense, hyper-dialogue relates inversely, but appropriately, to the dramatics of silence in the New Hollywood cinema. The increasingly common stylistic trend toward verbose characterisation in contemporary American film affords hyper-dialogue a nuanced thematic situation in its association with this loquacious quirky, self-referential, indie aesthetic. Hyper-dialogue, however, as present in the American Eccentric mode is not merely an aesthetic choice; it stems from an anxiety that cannot be directly accessed. Hyper-dialogue is always talking away from its anxious core.

Chapter Four: Eccentric Worlds

In Chapters Two and Three I analysed the function of pure cinematic characters and hyper-dialogue as distinctive elements of the American Eccentric mode. I positioned these traits in contrast to the idealised peer and naturalistic dialogue evident in the New Hollywood era. I argued that although both pure cinematic characters and hyper-dialogue demonstrate their own formal construction, these strategies nevertheless encourage genuine alignment through their sincerity. This alignment and access to sincere anxieties is limited, however, to the film's narrative and thus necessarily ends with the closing credits. Despite their artificiality, pure cinematic characters are not incompatible with cinematic worlds of American Eccentric films. Rather, American Eccentric films present narrative worlds that both reveal their nature as constructs and facilitate deeply affecting narrative trajectories. These film spaces are impossible Eccentric worlds: where many New Hollywood films frame their idealised peers within cinematic worlds that aim to reflect either (or both) an objective or subjective reality, American Eccentric films present cinematic worlds that are recognisable, yet impossible, realities.

All films are constructions, and thus all film worlds are invariably artificial spaces. As Ara Osterweil writes, 'by fabricating place out of the abstract contours of a soundstage or studio set, or by instrumentalizing one place to serve the representational function of another, Hollywood routinely effaces the "localness" of location' (2011, 186).[137] That is, all narratives, those filmed on location or on a set, necessarily, and to varying degrees, artificially configure their sense of 'place.' American Eccentric films, however, recognise and overtly incorporate the artifice of

[137] Osterweil writes this in an introduction to the problems of shooting Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie* (1971) in Peru. She goes on to write 'the implications of this are multifold. Saturating particular locations with mythic meaning entails the evacuation of the specific, local meanings that are contested and negotiated by inhabitants. Using the particular to stand in for the universal paradoxically often renders the particular location and its inhabitants mute. Silenced by its compulsive figuration as mythic trope, places become unable to speak their own history' (186).

their film worlds into their narratives and narrative structures. Eccentric film worlds do not attempt to capture real or known locations—instead these worlds are born from cinema. They incorporate open allusion and parody, reflexivity, subversions of genre convention, and visual and spatio-temporal incongruity into their narrative structures. Despite often appearing as anachronistic, aesthetically artificial assemblages, Eccentric worlds are not merely a matter of unusual, or unexpected, *mise-en-scène*. The strategies employed in the construction of impossible Eccentric worlds are varied and idiosyncratic. *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Anderson 2001)[138] and *Marie Antoinette* (Coppola 2006) are deliberately anachronistic, whereas Whit Stillman's *Metropolitan* (1990), *Barcelona* (1994), and *The Last Days of Disco* (1998) portray sustained socio-chronological distortions. P.T. Anderson creates an impossible diegesis in *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) through the use of hyper-saturated primary colours and the prominence of Jon Brion's erratic and unconventional score, while Richard Linklater inserts recognisable actors (Keanu Reeves, Winona Ryder, Robert Downey Jnr. and Ethan Hawke) into various states of perception through digital rotoscoping in *Waking Life* (2001) and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006). While all American Eccentric films display their constructed nature, some feature their construction in both the *syuzhet* and *fabula* (in David Bordwell's terms [1985]),[139] such

[138] Elena Gorfinkel writes that the film world of *The Royal Tenenbaums* is constructed from 'referents… drawn attention to as singular and irreconcilable, at the same time that a hermetic and enclosed world is cobbled together from them, in their repetition and accumulation… [This creates] a sensation of time suspended through the consistent organization of objects in space…this juxtaposition [of the singular referents] and fetishistic almost collector-orientated accumulation of signs and objects creates a narrative world which becomes in some sense "timeless." New York is constructed as a mythical location, where landmarks are intentionally invisible, where the expanse of the city stretches all the way up to 375th Street and is overrun by gypsy cabs. The fantasy construction of the storybook reinforces this notion of "timelessness" at the same time that it poses a question to what Anderson's relationship to history might be…Anachronistic detail, while still recognised as such, is repeated and collected visually to the point of a break with a position of historical specificity, as it becomes a fully fledged plastic space of fantasy, placed outside of time because it is irreconcilable with any one moment or period'(163-165).

[139] David Bordwell incorporates these terms from Russian Formalism to refer to narrative construction. Loosely defined, the *syuzhet* is the narrative or story, and the *fabula* is the chronological arrangement of narrative events—or the plot. Bordwell writes 'In classical fabula construction, causality is the prime unifying principle. Analogies between characters, settings, and situations are certainly present, but at the denotative level any parallelism is subordinated to the movement of

as *Adaptation* (Jonze 2002), *Far From Heaven* (Haynes 2002), and *I'm Not There* (Haynes 2007). In other American Eccentric films bizarre components are implanted as eccentric deviations from otherwise conceivable narrative diegeses —such as *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze 1999), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry 2004), *Synechdoche, New York* (Kaufman 2008), and *Magnolia* (Anderson 1999).

I do not use the concept 'impossible place' in the manner proposed by Stephen Heath in his influential work on narrative space whereby narration questions its own origins in moments where an 'impossible place' is signified in relation to the possible positions of an observer (1981, 49-51).[140] Instead, I argue that Eccentric film worlds are created as part of a narrative strategy that works to create a space that is only possible on-screen within a specific diegesis and is thus unable to be imagined as a possible shared reality with the audience. While Eccentric worlds display their artifice as anachronistic or ornamental assemblages, they are not merely a matter of unusual *mise-en-scène*. Rather an Eccentric world foregrounds its spatio-temporal construction in relation to narrative structure and characterisation. Jill Nelmes writes that mainstream cinema

> aspires to verisimilitude by making the audience feel they are part of the action and encouraging identification with the characters in the film. Screenplay dialogue heightens the appearance of realism by making the language used seem appropriate for the setting while at the same time

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cause and effect. Spatial configurations are motivated by realism (a newspaper office must contain desks, typewriters, phones) and, chiefly, by compositional necessity (the desk and typewriter will be used to write causally significant news stories; the phones form crucial links among characters). Causality also motivates temporal principles of organization: the syuzhet represents the order, frequency, and duration of fabula events in ways which bring out the salient causal relations. This process is especially evident in a device highly characteristic of classical narration — the deadline. Usually the classical syuzhet presents a double causal structure, two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance (boy/girl, husband/wife), the other line involving another sphere —work, war, a mission or quest, other personal relationships. Each line will possess a goal, obstacles, and a climax' (Bordwell 1985b, 157).

[140] Heath writes that the impossible place is a disturbance to possible positions —weak examples of impossible places could be those where extreme angles are used that cannot be attached to the point-of-view of a character, or are attached to a character that differ greatly from accepted norms, or where the camera assumes positions that are proven to be impossible from previous spatial framing (49-51).

> developing the film story… The sense of realism... is a construct and, guided by conventions the audience have learned to understand, accept the film world as being lifelike in some way. (2010b, 217)

Eccentric film worlds are consciously fictional yet deeply affecting spaces. These spaces are assembled such that they are congruous with pure cinematic characters and the deployment of hyper-dialogue. Unlike films in which offbeat characters are emphasised in contrast to the regularity of their naturalistic film worlds, such as *Withnail and I* (Robinson 1987) or *Clerks* (Smith 1994), Eccentric film worlds are, like their characters, overtly designed and as such signal their own narrative construction. By drawing attention to their artificiality, these film worlds cohere with the characters to form a congruent and self-contained film world. These worlds are impossible simulations of reality that encourage the audience to immerse themselves in their affective qualities while simultaneously participating in their referential game-play. In this sense, American Eccentricity employs textual strategies that approximate Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekte.* American Eccentricity echoes the *V-effekt* in that metacinematic, and reflexive techniques are used to remind and reinforce the spectator's awareness of the film as a construct, however these techniques are employed for different purposes. Where Brecht's *V-effekt* seeks to intellectually challenge the spectator, to shake them from their perception of reality in the theatre in order to promote critical socio-political reflection, the referential game-play tactics employed in the American Eccentric mode remind the spectator of the parameters of the film's diegesis in order to facilitate temporary emotional investment in the film's narrative elements and thematic concerns. By reassuring the spectator of the limits and confines of the Eccentric film world, the film encourages her to engage with its narrative intricacies, and align herself with the characters and their existential anxieties, at a safe, mediated distance.

4.1 Naturalistic Worlds in the New Hollywood

In the introduction to their collection *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (2011) John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel write,

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

Disregarding the specificity of the celluloid medium for the purpose of this thesis, this statement suggests that all films 'take place'—that is, all films present their narratives as occurring *somewhere*.[141] New York is the stated setting for *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze 1999), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry 2004), *Synecdoche, New York* (Kaufman 2008), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Anderson 2001), and *Metropolitan* (Stillman 1990), yet, none of these films provide the impression of actually occurring or *taking place* within the real location of New York City. The Los Angeles of *Cisco Pike* (Norton 1972), the Brooklyn tenement houses of *The Landlord*

[141] Rhodes and Gorfinkel go on to state that cinematic place also has to do with exhibition sites. The ongoing, and important, debate regarding the ontological implication of switching between celluloid (as a medium that captures something essential of a world) and digital (which has the ability to construct a place without a pro-filmic space) is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this thesis. See the work of Bruce Isaacs (2013), Lev Manovich (2001), and David Norman Rodowick (2007).

(Ashby 1970), and the Nashville, Tennessee setting of Altman's *Nashville* (1975), on the other hand, are presented as distinctly recognisable settings, where socio-cultural and economic factors are tied to specific locations and contexts. Where New Hollywood films often depict locales that carry significant social, political, and geographic authenticity, American Eccentric worlds are nearer to simulacra.

The New Hollywood filmmakers employed a naturalistic approach to filmmaking that blended subjective and objective realism in order to present a cinematic world that resonated with the audience as a relatable reality (Biskind 1999, 277).[142] Peter Biskind writes that the advent of 'new, lightweight equipment meant that they could just get on the road and look for the "real" America, shooting real stories about real people' (90). The New Hollywood incorporated the practices of art cinema through the influence of European art cinema (particularly Italian neorealism and the 'street style' of the French New Wave) (Schatz 1993, 14).[143] There was also a focus on the depiction of realism through the influence of direct cinema documentary and *cinéma vérité* filmmakers like D.A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and John Cassavetes,[144] as well as the advent of new, lightweight technologies. Therefore, many New Hollywood works demonstrate a blend of art cinema, realism and classical Hollywood conventions. Place, in many of these films, is constructed as a recognisable and imaginable reality, while often imbued with strong ideological

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[142] Biskind writes particularly of Martin Scorsese's time at New York University and his interaction with Haig Manoogian as being influential in his approach to naturalistic filmmaking. Biskind writes 'Manoogian taught his students to make films about their own lives, what they knew. He'd say, "Suppose what you know is eating an apple. Try to make a five-to-six minute picture on that. Very hard to do." Influenced by Italian neorealism and the American documentary movement of the '30s, he taught the films of Paul Strand. Leo Hurwitz, and Pare Lorentz' (277).

[143] Schatz writes about the 1960s Hollywood as a time where 'the industry saw a period of widespread and unprecedented innovation' with a new generation of filmmakers 'who were turning out films that had as much in common with the European art cinema as with classical Hollywood' (14). Biskind also waxes, 'Every day, after lunch, the Warners executive screened "art" films. They [the young filmmakers] watched all the Kurosawa they could get their hands on, as well as the Fellini, Truffaut, Renoir, Ermanno Olmi, René Clair' (1999, 84).

[144] Peter Biskind writes 'Like Hopper and Fonda, Coppola and Lucas realised movies no longer had to be shot and edited in Hollywood [studios]'(1999,90).

significance—as in the representation of the South in *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969) and the Northeast Coast in *Five Easy Pieces* (Rafelson 1970).

Authentic space and place in the New Hollywood is further complemented by psychologically complex character construction. David Bordwell states that unlike art cinema, classical Hollywood cinema is formulated around narratives based on cause-effect logic. Rather than motivating narrative by cause-effect linkages, art films govern narrative by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity. Realist art films depict real locations and real problems with psychologically complex characters.[145] Psychological motivation is central to characters and their relationships to one another for both classical Hollywood and art cinema. In art cinema, however, this motivation might not form clear goal objectives or personalised consistent traits. The lack of consistency in the art film may result in the narrative having an 'episodic drifting quality' in which characters might slide 'passively from one situation to another' (Bordwell, 59). While 'characters may wander out and never reappear' and 'events may lead to nothing' the art film drifter 'traces an itinerary, an encyclopedic survey of the film's world…the art film's thematic of *la condition humaine*…proceeds from its formal needs: had the characters a goal, life would no longer seem so meaningless' (Bordwell, 59). These characters, like Benjamin Braddock in the first half of *The Graduate*, do not so much act as react—demonstrating what Bordwell describes as 'a cinema of psychological effects in search of their causes' (59).

In addition to thematic concerns and characterisation, realism is also portrayed in the spatio-temporal construction in a range of forms, from documentary factuality to deep psychological subjectivity. These two forms may also be deployed in combination to create an illusion/reality bifurcation within a single film. The different approaches to the presentation of time and space enable

[145] Bordwell states that in 1979 'alienation' and 'lack of communication' were contemporary socio-cultural issues. He also notes that part of the realism presented in art cinema is explored sexually in that these films often violate the classical Hollywood production code in terms of their aesthetic depiction of eroticism (1979, 59).

deviations from the classic representation of spatio-temporality (for instance, use of *temps mort* or location shooting) to be explained as intrusions of 'unpredictable and contingent daily reality' or be attributed to character subjectivity, or be indicative of character development. Art cinema can therefore be distinguished from classical narrative cinema by its 'commitment to both objective and subjective verisimilitude' (Bordwell 1979, 60).[146] The influence of art cinema on the New Hollywood can be seen in the way in which the diegeses portray a naturalism that does not just imitate real life, but rather evokes a film space that can be imaginatively inhabited by the audience—such as in the LSD sequence of *Easy Rider* or the depiction of temporal subjectivity as Travis Bickle is immersed in watching an Alka-Selzer dissolve in a glass of water in *Taxi Driver*.[147] The naturalistic approach to cinematic world construction identifies the audience with character, diegeses, and action isomorphic to their own everyday experience.

Many filmmakers of the New Hollywood era combined conventional generic codes while diverging from the 'invisible style' of the classical Hollywood through the overt use of 'stylistic and technical devices—telephoto lenses, zooms,

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[146] Authorial expressivity, on the other hand refers to 'the *author* as a structure in the film's system' as a formal component that constructs the narrative for audience comprehension (Bordwell, 60 emphasis in original). While the concept of authorship is undeniably pertinent to art cinema, and indeed to the New Hollywood, discussion of the particulars of independent filmmakers as auteurs is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is nevertheless important to note that in the art film, and in the New Hollywood, formal strategies are deployed as 'recurrent violations of the classical norm' of Hollywood filmmaking that invite audience recognition as being an authorial commentary and 'shaping narrative intelligence' (Bordwell, 61). Bordwell notes that the two principles of the art film, realism and authorial expressivity are difficult to reconcile. The art film attempts to ameliorate this issue through the device of ambiguity—gaps or deviations from classic representation are taken first as possible realities. However, if this logic falls short the deviations can be read as authorial intent for the purpose of signification (61).

[147] Sydney Pollack states in the documentary *A Decade Under the Influence* (LaGravenese 2003) that 'Hollywood hadn't changed for a long, long time. You measured in many ways your pleasure at movies from the distance they lived from your own life. You know, you could watch Ingrid Bergman walking up a fog-enshrouded ramp to a plane and Bogart and waving goodbye, and you knew this was never going to happen to you, ever. That started to change, again, with these revolutions that happened in the '60s. People wanted something that they recognised, that was part of them. It wasn't the distance from your life that was the appealing thing. In many ways it was the recognition that that was a part of your life.'

unmotivated pans, oblique camera set-ups, complex editing patterns of both image and sound—all to create a look which is simultaneously more naturalistic and more stylised than dominant cinema's norm' (Keathley 2004, 299). The classical style can be described as a narrative-dominant form. Particularly, writes Bordwell:

> cause-effect logic and narrative parallelism generate a narrative which projects its action through psychologically-defined, goal orientated characters. Narrative time and space are constructed to present the cause-effect chain. To this end, cinematic representation has recourse to fixed figures of cutting (e.g., 180° continuity, crosscutting, "montage sequences"), mise-en-scène (e.g., three-point lighting, perspective sets), and sound (e.g., modulation, voice-over narration). More important than these devices themselves are their functions in advancing the narrative. The viewer makes sense of the classical film through the criteria of verisimilitude (is x plausible?), or generic appropriateness (is x characteristic of this sort of film?) and of compositional unity (does x advance the story?). (Bordwell 1979, 58)

The formal qualities of art cinema and documentary modes enabled New Hollywood filmmakers, such as Mike Nichols, Dennis Hopper, and Robert Altman, to deviate from the classic 'invisible style' of Hollywood in favour of a form of cinema that could engage both thematically and aesthetically with the subject matter. Christian Keathley argues that many films in the New Hollywood both deployed the

> formal codes associated with documentary filmmaking that were disseminated largely by television news; at the time, these codes functioned quite powerfully to evoke an almost wholly unmediated representation of reality, much like the Americans encountered in nightly news coverage of Vietnam. On the other hand, the films often also reflected the complex, contradictory, fragmented nature of accounts of trauma regularly offered by those who have suffered it. (299)

Chapter Two identified both New Hollywood's cinematised peer (based on Elsaesser's unmotivated hero) and the American Eccentric pure cinematic character as deviations from the classic goal-orientated protagonist. As Bordwell states, the time and space of a conventional narrative—that is the film world—is presented as

cause-effect narrative logic within which the classical protagonist acts. However, if the protagonist is unmotivated or purely cinematic, how are their respective film worlds presented such that these characters integrate with their milieux?

Robert T. Self writes:

> films such as *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Ugetsu* (1953), *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), *8 ½* (1963), *Viridiana* (1961), *L'Avventura* (1960), *Breathless* (1959), and *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960) reflected a cinematic energy of innovation, despair, and dark humour that flowed aggressively into American cinema at the end of the 1960s amid the social upheaval of the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jnr. (2002, x)[148]

One such film is Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* (Nichols 1967), whose central character, Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) like much of the youth of the 1960s, finds himself worried about his future. He is at odds with the ideology of the older generation, however, with the Berkeley university clashes of 1964–65[149] over, and the social codes of his own generation unanchored, for Benjamin the generational conflict has become an uncomfortable bedfellow. Benjamin Braddock, like other New Hollywood characters such as Bobby Dupea or Alice Hyatt (Ellen Burstyn, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*), is a relatable and recognisable figure that reflected, embodied and informed a generational zeitgeist concerned with existential and

[148] Mark Harris includes similar influences in his recount of the emergence of the New Hollywood but with the addition of Akira Kurosawa, and English social-realist films of Tony Richardson and Karel Reisz (2008, 8).

[149] Kellie Crawford Sorey and Dennis Gregory explain in their article 'Protests in the Sixties' that although student protests were not new to the countercultural 1960s generation, the technological advancements in media made wide-spread socio-political awareness possible and enabled widespread participation. The Berkeley revolt is significant in relation to counterculture ideology in that the protests were based on three key issues: civil rights, civil liberties (in particular, the right to free speech), and the right to organise and conduct political activities on university campuses (2010, 194). The protests for free speech saw university administration under a newly appointed Chancellor Meyerson concede to allowing political and religious advocacy. However due to restrictions placed on these amendments, the victory was taken by the both the administration and the protesters as satisfying demands, but with a degree of mutual distrust. As Edward Dyanand Asregadoo writes, although an agreement had been met, the protests continued (with the focus shifted toward anti-authoritarianism and anti-war sentiments) as they had before the agreement (2000, 225-26).

cultural interrogation. Throughout *The Graduate*, Benjamin reacts on-screen to the real-life frustrations of the youth audience as cinematised peers; that is, Benjamin is a figure imaginable in a real-world context.

Figure 67 Benjamin 'just drifting' in the pool

In the opening scene of the film, Benjamin, a young and successful graduate, returns home to Pasadena from a Northeast Coast college. Benjamin is a morally complex and an awkward protagonist—he is not admirable, or particularly charismatic. Although it is his father's business partner's wife, Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) who ferociously pursues an inappropriate sexual relationship with him (in an almost predatory manner),[150] Benjamin is also unable to be characterised as a victim. This is not because, as Stephen Farber and Estelle Changas argue,

> We're supposed to like Ben because he's victimized by all of those nasty, aging country clubbers. In the face of their boozing and their twaddle, he has a chunky innocence that is to endear him to us…[However] he's only a beer-drinking *Time* magazine type…rather harmlessly stupid and awkward, but tricked up with a suffering face and an *Angst*-ridden song intent on persuading us that he's an alienated generational hero. (1968, 38)

[150] In her initial attempt at seduction, Mrs. Robinson behaves with both brazen sexual cajolery while simultaneously enacting a disciplinary and instructional maternal role. This is evident in the moments in which Mrs. Robinson (while undressed) states to Benjamin 'Don't be nervous,' and 'do you understand what I just said?'

But Benjamin does not simply succumb to the advances of an older woman (and by extension the older generation); instead he contemplates Mrs. Robinson's offer —'If you won't sleep with me this time, I want you to know that you can call me up anytime you want and we'll make some kind of arrangement' —but acts on it largely as an ideological retaliation after he is humiliated at his twenty-first birthday by his boastful, materialistic parents.[151] Benjamin's acceptance of Mrs. Robinson's offer demonstrates his rejection of societal norms of propriety—he rejects the older generation, yet agrees to a taboo intimacy with its one of its more complex and conflicted members. It is Benjamin who places the (clumsy) phone call from the Taft Hotel to initiate a tryst with Mrs. Robinson. During the repetitious trajectory of their covert relationship it becomes apparent that Benjamin is not a victimised youth, but the dominant participant in the affair. Mrs. Robinson, on the other hand, is revealed to be both predatory and insecure. Benjamin learns that her loveless marriage was the necessary outcome of adolescent recklessness, and has resulted in depression and alcohol-dependence. However, rather than exhibiting sensitivity to her situation, Benjamin taunts Mrs. Robinson's vulnerability by requesting the details of her daughter's conception on the backseat of a Ford, denigrates her by exclaiming 'do you think I'm proud that I spend my time with a broken-down alcoholic?', and describes their rendezvous as 'sick and perverted'. Through Benjamin's actions, as in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) and John G. Avildsen's *Joe (1970)*, the New

[151] This sequence most clearly demonstrates the audience alignment with Benjamin's point of view. Benjamin is seen as a reluctant centrepiece of the party with his father attempting to coax Benjamin out of the house and parade him (and the expensiveness of his gift) in front of their friends. As Reni Celeste writes, 'Ben's resistance is met with his father's insistence, and he emerges from the house to the cheers of the adults. This pained walk from the house to the bottom of the pool transpires from what can only be called a sonic point of view, or a point of experience. The camera reveals Benjamin's point-of-view blocked by his facemask. He sees the hysterical adults waving in support but, because of the gear, all that can be heard is the sound of his internal breath. The distance between him and the adults is an immense canyon seen from the claustrophobic interior of Benjamin's body and subjectivity. When he descends into the swimming pool and takes up a position at the very bottom, the camera pans away to a long shot that resembles the first man on the moon inserting his stake in the ground, the victor of infinite space and nothingness' (2005, 122).

Hollywood present the generational wars as duplicitous and dubious—with non-innocent victims reacting to mutual distrust.

The Graduate is specifically American in its geographic locations, and chronologically identifiable through its popular music soundtrack. Thus, the cinematic world depicted is a readily locatable time and place. The use of 'real-life' spatio-temporal referents—such as the manicured lawns of 1960s suburban Pasadena, Simon and Garfunkel's music, the University of Berkeley's Sproul Plaza (a site connected to the Free Speech Movement protests)—allow the audience to emotionally infiltrate the film-world, and in turn, incorporate the film world into their lived experiences. Jason Davids Scott describes the shift in the presence of 'real life' objects and referents into film diegeses in the 1970s as a way of making diegetic worlds 'more permeable' and further '[encouraging] narrative verisimilitude' (80).[152]

In *The Graduate*, spaces and locations are both naturalistic and imbued with ideological significance. John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel write, 'as an irreducible plenum, the image of place might seem to stand only for itself. To stand for itself: this would be the condition of a literal image, an image in which signifier and referent would threaten to converge or collapse in identity…The image of place oscillates between standing for itself and a standing in for other entities, abstractions, or values' (2011, xviii). The naturalistic depiction of Pasadena, Los Angeles Airport, and Northern California presented in *The Graduate* are recognisable and imaginably inhabitable locations because they signify themselves. These sites, however, also figure ideologically in concert with the use of naturalism and subjective alignment with Benjamin, and by extension the youth demographic of which he is representative. Pasadena is the site of the older, decadent, materialistic generation who fix their future stability to the plastics industry. By contrast, Northern

[152] Davids Scott does not make this assertion only of the New Hollywood, but as a means of discussing things like product placement and popular culture on the whole, including in television shows such as *The Brady Bunch* (Schwartz 1969-1974).

California, and the University of Berkeley attended by Elaine Robinson (Katharine Ross), is a youthful site where intellectual challenges and engagement are possible. It is not until Benjamin makes the problematic decision to go North in a 'half-baked' (as his father claims) bid to marry Elaine that he rejects the ideology represented by Los Angeles/Pasadena, Mrs. Robinson, and his parents. At this point the film shifts pace. The meandering passing-of-time narration of the first half of the film is transformed into a clearly demarcated goal driven narrative, flawed as that goal may be.

Benjamin reacts to his environment and situation, but does not appear to operate from any internal motivation or toward a specific goal—he is fundamentally aimless. Until Elaine Robinson's appearance over halfway through the film, Benjamin is the sole youth depicted within the Pasadena context. This demonstrates his (and by extension the younger generation's) social and interpersonal alienation. From the opening sequence the film's framing visually mirrors these themes. The film opens on a tight close-up of Benjamin, framed in solitude on an aeroplane. His face displays an anxious, empty expression. The camera pulls back to reveal a full aircraft, mirroring Ben's emotional isolation within the crowds of others. This loneliness is echoed on the extra-diegetic soundtrack through the melancholic lyrics of Simon and Garfunkel's 'The Sound of Silence' (1965).

Figure 68 Visual portrayal of Benjamin's isolation

The Graduate is presented entirely from Ben's perspective. This is from our first interaction with him, landing at Los Angeles Airport. The audience is encouraged to closely examine Benjamin's measured movements through the relationship (the 'added value' in Michel Chion's terms)[153] of Simon and Garfunkel's music to the image. 'The Sound of Silence' crescendos until it almost drowns out the ambient sounds of the scene. The combination of melancholic lyrics, the sorrowful tone evoked by the song's minor key and the simplicity of the melody sonically enhance Benjamin's isolation and alienation. The audiovisual contract formed in this sequence encourages the audience to focus keenly on Benjamin's movements, which affords the sense of time passing slowly, with subjective trepidation. This measured pacing is contrasted with the quick cuts and overlapping dialogue in the films first

[153] Chion writes that 'added value' is 'the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression "naturally" comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself. Added value is what gives the (eminently incorrect) impression that sound is unnecessary, that sound merely duplicates a meaning which in reality it brings about, either all on its own or by discrepancies between it and the image' (1994a, 112).

party scene. The fast paced, aurally frantic sequence establishes that time and space in this film are subjective and aligned with Benjamin's personal experience. Jonathan Rosenbaum notes that the subjective chaos of *The Graduate*'s party scenes pay homage to both the party scenes of Cassavates' *Shadows* (1959) and the mobile close-ups of Fellini's *8½* (2004, 139). Indeed it is worth comparing Nichols' Benjamin with Cassavetes' Ben, as the manner in which *The Graduate* demonstrates subjectivity has its distinct parallel in *Shadows*. The sense of isolation Nichol's Benjamin experiences in social situations parallels two distinct scenes in *Shadows*—the opening sequence in which Ben (Benito Carruthers) positions himself so that he removed from the crowd at a rock'n'roll party and a scene in which Lelia (Lelia Goldoni) is separated from other women at a literary gathering.

In the opening sequence of *Shadows*, Cassavetes frames the collective movement of a group of party-goers in opposition to Ben's individual movement. A sense of kinetic energy is created by swiftly cutting between mid-shots and close-ups of the diverse group of party-goers dancing. This dynamic action is placed in contrast with Ben, who—with an expressionless face—moves against their active bodies to an isolated space in the corner. Lelia, in the literary gathering sequence, is framed as inhabiting a liminal position in which she is neither included, nor wholly excluded, from the social interactions. The camera cuts between a 'high-brow' confrontational conversation between two women to Lelia objecting to David's criticism of her literary work. By cutting between the two lines of action, Cassavetes juxtaposes Lelia's youthful, flirtatious behaviour with the serious intellectual rigour and aggression of the other women in order to create a space in which Lelia neither belongs nor is ostracised.

Figure 69 Ben framed against the partying crowd in *Shadows*

The depiction of marginality and alienation among perceived peers resonates with the opening celebration in *The Graduate* (a party hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Braddock in Benjamin's honour). However, as Benjamin is the sole protagonist (as opposed to the tri-protagonist structure of *Shadows*), Nichols integrates subjective experience and character alignment more overtly. In a paralleled, but more understated manner than Fellini's representation of Guido's (Marcello Mastroianni) experience in *8½* (1963), Nichols blends Benjamin's subjective experience and the presentation of an objective reality. Rosenbaum also astutely connects the use of the mobile frame and innovative camera work borrowed from the French New Wave in the formation of a distinctly subjective alignment between the spectator and the character's point-of-view. This subjective alignment is foregrounded in the initial seduction sequence in which Mrs. Robinson, having coaxed Benjamin into her daughter's bedroom under the guise of appreciating Elaine's newly-painted portrait, appears as a naked figure in the reflection of the artwork's glass covering. Rosenbaum writes—

> When Benjamin spins around to face her, this single gesture is broken up by the editing into four separate dovetailing shots, each filmed from a different angle, all but the last of which is so brief that the effect is mainly subliminal. (The successive lengths of the four shots are fifteen frames, thirteen frames, one single frame, and then, as Benjamin says 'Oh. God!', seventy frames.) Insofar as the early features of Godard and Truffaut can be said to have visual tropes, this is clearly one of them, though the use of it here is more pointedly and exclusively tied to the viewer's identification with the subjectivity of a single character than it would have been in the French originals. This is followed by other shots of Benjamin's frantic responses to Mrs. Robinson, punctuated by other near-subliminal shots of her nude body – ten frames of her midriff, four frames of one of her breasts, and five frames of her navel – which effectively suggests the sources of his panic without spelling them out. (139)

Figure 70 Subjective alignment with Benjamin

From these subjective technical gestures, *The Graduate*, like other films from the New Hollywood (and unlike the films of the French New Wave), aims to generate a link between the on-screen characters as cinematised peers and the audience through shared ideology and experience.[154] These characters exist within locatable spaces and contexts that are relatable because of (rather than in spite of) their presentation through ideologically imbued subjective lenses. As Benjamin's subjectivity is

[154] Rosenbaum writes—'If the stylistic play of *Breathless* and *Shoot the Piano Player* generally had the effect of making the viewer identify with the filmmakers, the stylistic play of *The Graduate* and many comparable Hollywood movies was more generally motivated by a desire to make the viewer identify with the screen characters, and even if a greater awareness of the director's role ensued from this process, this was mainly a surplus factor rather than the central one' (140).

intertwined with the representation of locatable spaces within a contextualised moment in history, the audience is encouraged to engage with Benjamin's perspective through shared experience. In the first half of the film, Nichols incorporates repetition through matches-on-action and form cuts to demonstrate the subjective passing of time without narrative change—this is best demonstrated by a 'passing of time' montage played over Simon and Garfunkel's 'The Sound of Silence' and 'April Come She Will' (1965), which presents the sensation of inertia experienced by Benjamin in his unfulfilling sexual relationship and 'drifting' lifestyle.

Figure 71 Passage of time montage in *The Graduate*

While these cuts depict Benjamin's (and therefore the viewer's) experience of passing time as monotonous and stagnant, it is nonetheless certain that time passes in a single forward trajectory, along a chronological continuum. This is confirmed in Mr. Braddock's irritated declaration, 'Now listen, Ben! Look, I think it's a very good thing that a young man after he's done some very good work should have a chance to relax and enjoy himself, and lie around and drink beer, and so on. But after a few weeks, I believe that person would want to take some stock in himself and his situation and start to think about getting off his ass!' This declaration informs the audience that although the affair is depicted from Benjamin's position of malaise, which in turn designates a subjective temporality, events within the film occur within an objective, consistent temporality. Therefore 'The Sound of Silence' played as a bookend to Benjamin's plight does not designate that the film's conclusion is in fact a return to its beginning (unlike the bookending technique in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) but rather reveals that although Benjamin is no longer alone, and has fulfilled his goal (acquiring the companionship of Elaine Robinson) in a narratological sense, the gravity of his and Elaine's act of defiance is not entirely victorious—nor is it ironically qualified.

In the film's final sequence Benjamin arrives at the chapel just as Elaine is married to Carl (Brian Avery). Benjamin's arrival initially appears to follow Linda Williams' dialectic of pathos and action in the melodramatic mode (1998, 69).[155] As Benjamin arrives *after* Elaine is wed, it appears that Benjamin has arrived 'too late' to afford a 'happy-ending' for Elaine and himself. This narrative resolution is reinforced by Mrs. Robinson's reaction to Benjamin's sudden and dramatic appearance. Mrs. Robinson displays a triumphant wry smile, and comforts her husband by declaring that 'He's too late.' However, this triumphant statement is inverted when Elaine responds to Benjamin. Elaine's decision to react to Benjamin

[155] Linda Williams describes the narrative conclusions of melodramas as 'a give and take of "too late" and "in the nick of time"' (69).

signals the reversal of the 'too late' melodrama denouement, and reinstates the possibility of an 'in the nick of time' resolution. This possibility is reinforced when Mrs. Robinson apprehends Elaine and desperately informs her 'it's too late!' to which Elaine responds 'not for me!' With the 'in the nick of time' melodramatic resolution re-established, Elaine and Benjamin flee the church with rebellious joy. However, like the opening 'looking for America' sequence of *Easy Rider*, this 'happy-ending' is a seduction. The film's final frame—a tight close up on the couple, with the 'The Sound of Silence' bookending song foregrounded—affirms that despite the action of the film these characters remain emotionally isolated. Benjamin's and Elaine's exuberant smiles fade as 'they look out the back window at those they have left in the dust, at each other, and then stare straight ahead awkwardly as they drive into their uncertain future' (Celeste 2005, 122). The collision of both classical denouements of the melodrama signals they may have escaped the society against which they have rallied 'in the nick of time' but it is already 'too late' to begin a life untainted by their own hypocrisies and actions. The devastation of this final moment is not in the belief that this is the end of these characters' plights, but rather the audience's recognition that this is likely to be the start of a new, failed journey out of the frame that they no longer witness.

Figure 72 Elaine's and Benjamin's creeping realisation

4.2 Eccentricity and the Film-Born World

Where characters like Benjamin Braddock were emblematic of an alienated generation concerned about its future in the face of societal and generational uncertainty, Todd Haynes analyses existential anxiety in *I'm Not There* (2007) through the deconstruction of six fictionalised, multifaceted personas of Bob Dylan, a figure central to the countercultural movement of the 1960s. *I'm Not There* depicts anxiety and character plights in a manner that no longer directly relates to authentic lived experiences—these characters are purely cinematic, and as such are inherently bound to their on-screen context. This is because the audience is not only presented with overtly constructed characters, but also film worlds and situations that are recognisable (often only within the context of cinematic convention) but with which they cannot identify as possible shared actualities. Where *The Graduate* presents possibilities for character identification and alignment in the recognisable experiences of Benjamin's plight, Haynes highlights the assemblage of identity within consciously and creatively constructed film worlds. If, as Rhodes and Gorfinkel suggest,

> identity is constructed in and through place, whether by our embrace of a place, or inhabitation of a particular point in space, or by our rejection of and

> departure from a given place and our movement toward, adoption and inhabitation of, another (ix),

then the impossible Eccentric world is a required creation in relation to the pure cinematic character. The congruous integration of the pure cinematic character with the Eccentric world as an on-screen context both aids temporary character alignment and empathetic engagement, and engages the audience in intertextual, reflexive game-play, thereby creating a distance between the surface and core to be negotiated by the spectator.

Figure 73 Cate Blanchet as Jude Quinn

Following the opening title sequence, *I'm Not There* begins with an aerial shot of an iconic Dylan haircut and hooded eyes. Kris Kristofferson's voice-over begins 'There he lies. God rest his soul… and his rudeness. A devouring public can now share the remains of his sickness, and his phone numbers'. As these humorous, Dylanesque words are spoken, the camera shifts upward to expose the dead body of Cate Blanchett costumed as Dylan being prepared for examination by two pathologists. As a scalpel cuts into the flesh, the narrator prepares the audience for the autopsy of character. A succession of abrupt cuts (punctuated by non-diegetic gunshots) show the fictional personas who will not only inhabit but create the film's world; as Kristofferson's narration introduces the six figures: 'There he lay. Poet. Prophet. Outlaw. Fake. Star of Electricity'.

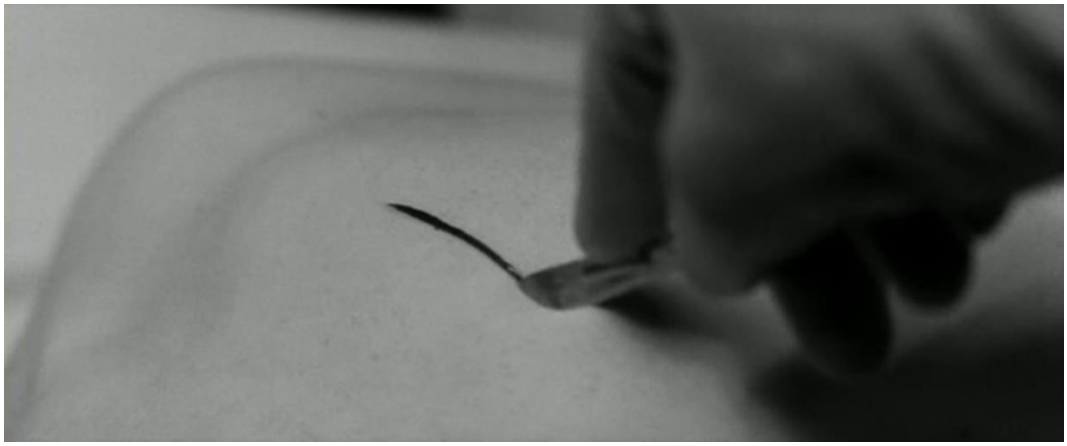

Figure 74 The introduction of the faces of an identity

The camera cuts back to the autopsy bed, where the naked corpse has been replaced by a Ray-Ban and suit adorned Blanchett-Dylan in an open funeral casket. In this transition, what began as the promise of an analytical, systematic exhumation of character has been replaced with a pluralised eulogy of multiple sites of subjectivity and myth. The idea of recreating or capturing an identity posthumously from the subjective recounts of multiple characters immediately places this film in dialogue with Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941)[156]—mirrored in the narrator's assertion 'even the ghost is more than one person'. However, where the audience arrives together with the investigating journalist, Jerry Thompson, at the final realisation that Kane's identity (like all identities) cannot be fixed or resolutely understood, Haynes presents a film in which (as the title suggests) this exhumation of character is based on an openly false premise from the film's first frame.

James Morrison describes Todd Haynes' films as:

> an art built on pastiche, on the concerted assemblage of reference, allusion, free-form parody and floating signifiers, [his] cinema feeds on the

[156] Marcia Landy also draws a comparison between *Citizen Kane* and Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998). Landy comments on the latter film's structure as an investigation into the rise and fall of an individual, Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), investigated by a reporter (played by Christian Bale)—where through the multiple perspectives of various characters and the investigator's own participation in the glam scene—it eventuates that no version of Slade can ever be considered definitive (2007, 19).

> Hollywood tradition as rabidly as it does on a host of other forms and styles—the European art-film, punk, grunge, glam, camp, cult, the cultural underground and the putative mainstream, pop art and pulp fiction—while making a show of casually discarding, or holding in gleeful contempt, the basic premises of the Hollywood model. (2007, 2)

I'm Not There is a film 'inspired by the music and many lives' of Dylan, however, none of the six characters presented as aspects of the Dylan persona offer the possibility of further engagement beyond the screen as they, and their constructed world, rely on the cinema itself.

Each of the film's six characters illustrate or allude to an aspect of the Bob Dylan myth. Haynes presents both a 19 year-old poet named Arthur Rimbaud (Ben Whishaw) and a young boy named Woody Guthrie (Marcus Carl Franklin) in this film. It is well documented that the poetry and persona of Arthur Rimbaud has been a significant influence on Dylan's writing, however, this is not that Rimbaud.[157] Rimbaud here is not the French 19th Century poet but a character by the same name created by Haynes who shares enough biographical details to be recognised by the audience as a connection (both have retired from writing poetry before the age of twenty, and allusions to a capricious and unsettled libertine persona).[158] Yet—Haynes' Rimbaud quotes Bob Dylan lyrics, poetry, and interview responses, and therefore, as an actual biographical figure he is a contextually and chronological impossible evocation. Similarly, Haynes' Woody Guthrie is not the Depression era folksinger that inspired Dylan in his early years as a musician, but rather an eleven-year-old African American boy living in 1959. Haynes' Woody, like the real Guthrie,

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[157] Todd Haynes, like Dylan, shares a fascination with the poet Rimbaud. While finishing his undergraduate degree at Brown University, Haynes made *Assassins: A Film Concerning Rimbaud* (1985). Like *I'm Not There*'s Dylan(s), *Assassins*, writes Joan Hawkins 'is less about Arthur Rimbaud the real boy-pet than it is about 'Rimbaud', a character we have largely constructed from his writings and from the legends and myths that have grown up around him' (2007, 25).

[158] Haynes explicitly links the young Woody Guthrie to his real-life namesake in the conversation held between Woody and the two other stowaway hobos on the railroad train, in which one man notes that his name is 'just like the singer'—however, Haynes' Woody does not respond to this observation in any way.

plays a guitar painted with the slogan 'this machine kills fascists.' However, this Woody also recreates the scene from Arthur Penn's *Alice's Restaurant* (1969) in which Arlo Guthrie[159] visits his dying father, Woody, in hospital (although Haynes does not biologically connect his Woody to the ailing 'Mr. Guthrie' in his sequence), and quotes extensively from Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957).

Figure 75 Arlo Guthrie and Pete Seeger sing to Woody in *Alice's Restaurant*

Figure 76 Woody sings to Mr. Guthrie in *I'm Not There*

[159] *Alice's Restaurant* was adapted from Arlo Guthrie's folk song 'Alice's Restaurant's Massacree' (1967). Arlo Guthrie (playing himself) is the son of Woody Guthrie (played by in the film Joseph Boley). The film is concerned with issues of the Vietnam War, with Arlo and others attempting to avoid the draft, the problems of hippie and bohemian lifestyles, drug use, and societal norms.

In Woody's first interaction with some stow-away drifters on a train, he embodies the role of the travelling folk storyteller and explains his experiences:

> You got hobos, nobos, gentlemen loafers. One or all-time losers. Call us what you will. Deep down, we're all getting ready to tuck our heads under our wings for sleep. We of the Pullman side-car and the sunburned thumb. We ain't kidding ourselves. It's a lonesome roads we shall walk.

This oddly romantic dialogue directly recalls (and references) the personal experience offered by Kazan's charismatic drifter, Lonesome Rhodes (Andy Griffith) in his interview with radio journalist Marcia Jeffries (Patricia Neale):

> Whenever a bunch of fellas like us…outcasts, hobos, nobodies, gentlemen loafers… one time or all time losers, call us what you want to... Whenever we get together, we tell funny stories... me and Beanie and the rest of these... hand-to-mouth tumbleweed boys like you see in here. If whisky don't get us, then women must... and it looks like… I'm never gonna cease… my wandering. But, deep down, when we get ready...to tuck our heads under our wings and go to sleep... we ain't kidding ourselves.

Woody similarly explains his personal history of growing up in a fictionalised 'composite' town called 'Riddle' through this exchange:

> **Hobo**: Uh, is there really a town called Riddle?
>
> **Woody**: Tell you the flat truth, that's sort of a... a whatchamacallit.
>
> **Hobo**: A, uh...A composite.
>
> **Woody**: A compost heap is more like it

by again directly quoting Lonesome's conversation with Marcia:

> **Marcia**: Is there really a town called Riddle?
>
> **Lonesome**: To tell you the flat truth it's just sort of a what do you call it...
>
> **Marcia**: Composite?
>
> **Lonesome**: Compost heap is more like it.

It is not merely that Haynes' Woody quotes lines from Kazan, but rather that he recites the dialogue from the film in a manner that is almost, but not exactly,

identical—as though Woody's identity is pieced together from imperfect recollections, rather than straight quotations, of past texts. Both Rimbaud and Woody are characters who indicate and mimic Dylan's influences without embodying them. They are out of time with their namesakes. Arthur Rimbaud quotes Bob Dylan. Woody sings about the boxcar,[160] claims to have learned the blues from a *woman* called Arvella Gray in Chicago,[161] played with Bobby Vee, succumbed to alcoholism during his career as the 'Tiny Troubadour' in a carnival that resembles that of *Nightmare Alley* (Goulding 1947), and to have found purpose again when he joined the Union cause—events that he, eleven in 1959, could not possibly have experienced. Where Benjamin Braddock is a character to whom the audience can relate through his subjective accounts of a recognisable world, Woody is a character genealogically constructed from various sites of popular culture and cinema.[162] As John David Rhodes argues, for Haynes 'film history is not just an archive of images, but rather an arsenal of aesthetic and epistemological strategies' (2007, 70).

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[160] Early in the film a woman who has taken Woody in for a meal exclaims, 'Tell you what I think. I think it's 1959 and this boy's singing songs about the boxcar? Hmm. What a boxcar gonna mean to him? Right here, we got race riots, folks with no food. Why ain't he out there singing about that?'

[161] Blind Arvella Gray was a male blues and folk musician from Texas.

[162] Marcia Landy writes (comparing Haynes' narratives to Walter Benjamin's concept of storytelling and information) that 'through forms of theatricality—not conventional realism—Haynes' films exceed stable and conventional forms of representation, mindful as they are of the role that media have played in the transformation of knowledge' (2007, 9).
John David Rhodes makes a similar point in relation to Haynes' *Safe* (1995), stating 'Very often when we look at an image or shot from Haynes' film…we are also looking (or being asked to look) through them: either to shots from other films by other directors, or else to other fields of reference' (2007, 68). Rhodes, in his work eschews the term 'intertextuality' (which he states is engaged in consumption), and rather writes of Haynes as engaged in the mode of allegory. In his formulation, the allegorical text 'that models itself on an antecedent text is paying homage and declaring a debt to this earlier text, but also attempting to supersede it in some way as well. Allegory makes use of an earlier text that is no longer sufficient but nonetheless necessary –necessary for pointing out the text's insufficiency and the nature of that insufficiency. Furthermore, allegory is a mode of both transparency (seeing through the earlier text) and transformation (taking what that text did and doing something else with it) and therefore is not about one-to-one correspondences. Instead, allegories can open onto multiple layers of meaning, and may even, in their dense multilayered-ness, challenge the very activity of meaning making, of interpretation'(69-70). While this notion is interesting and valid in terms of many of Haynes' films, in relation to the American Eccentric mode, Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody is more instructive as it does not necessitate a value-based approach to intertextuality.

Haynes incorporates the 'composite' town of Riddle in *I'm Not There* as the frontier setting of the film's 'Outlaw' section. In this section Billy the Kid (played by Richard Gere) returns home to find that he is almost unknown to the townsfolk, who are consciously costumed for a Halloween festival (as the narration states, 'No town ever loved Halloween quite as much as the town of Riddle, so who a fella really was never really mattered') and greet him by various names. A man dressed as a lobby boy calls Billy 'Mr. Gladstone', the pseudonym Benjamin Braddock assumes in his Taft Hotel rendezvous with Mrs. Robinson, while a young boy dressed as Charlie Chaplin's tramp (played, like Woody, by Marcus Carl Franklin) begs Billy to help him escape from 'this here chicken town'.

Figure 77 The residents of 'Riddle'

Using the same palette as Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), this section recalls revisionist westerns, in particular Dylan's role as Alias (and soundtrack composer) in Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). Haynes complicates this reference to Peckinpah through the maturation of 'the Kid' character. *I'm Not There*'s narrator, Kris Kristofferson, played 'the Kid' in Peckinpah's film at the age of 36 whereas Gere's Billy is shown as a weary, bespectacled man, plagued by visions of war, approaching his sixties. It is not, as the historical context of the Western genre would suggest, memories of the Civil War that torment Billy. Where Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* deconstructed the Western to present

> a country full of men without a future, whose way of life is being replaced by the evil forces of eastern business interests...[a Western] about people just waiting around to die…. [where violence] is shown to be a pointless, inconclusive (with the notable exception of the Kid's death), comparatively unspectacular act carried out almost from a force of habit (Le Cain 2001, par 5),

Haynes' 'Outlaw' section reconstructs the Western setting, with visions of the Vietnam War literally infiltrating the film frame. Billy's scenic view of tree-covered hills on his approach to Riddle is overlayed with memories of war through the gradual introduction of sonic disruptions before cutting between televised war footage, the serene vista, Billy's thousand-yard stare, and shifting spatio-temporal planes to show Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), watching the televised war from her bedroom as her marriage breaks down, before returning to Billy.

Figure 78 Billy's and Claire's visions of Vietnam

Haynes presents 'Riddle' as not only a composite Western town, but an obviously assembled film set where giraffes emerge from barns behind the power-lines as Calexico and Jim James perform Dylan's 'Goin' to Acapulco' (1975) in front of the open casket of a young suicided woman whose appearance recalls John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851–1852). Riddle is a composite, anachronistic set upon which the mythology of national conflicts collide and intermingle—the frontier, metacinematic evocations of the Western, the Vietnam War, and the mass dispossession of family homes through the self-interested power of eminent domain by government officials. This form of anachronism corresponds to Elena Gorfinkel's formulation in which 'there is both a historicist and fabulist strain in the creative marshalling' of the film world's construction 'which hinges on sly misuses and creative revisions of historical and film historical referents' (156).

Rather than presenting a dynamic, plot-driven Western, Maximillian Le Cain writes that Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*

> is practically plotless. Instead, Peckinpah presents us with a loose series of poetic vignettes pointing towards the moment when Garrett shoots the Kid and then his own reflection in a mirror. Rather than leading up to this action, the film seems simply to wait for it. (par 5)

Haynes' film may appear as a series of interwoven vignettes, however, rather than these moments culminating in a violent act of destruction they simply reflect the film's original existential crisis—the identity being investigated does not add up to an understanding of place and self through anachronistic references, but a myriad of deferrals and blockades. Haynes not only resists naturalism, but as Rob White writes, his film is 'a tapestry woven from the threads of other films—strands of dialogue, character, mise-en-scène…[its] environment is a patchwork world, with no true identity' (2013, 2).[163] Pat Garrett (Bruce Greenwood) here is no longer a (problematic) lawman out to betray an old friend, rather he is the man who has sold the town of Riddle (and with it, the composite site of American mythology)[164] to make way for a five-lane interstate highway. Pat Garrett does not need to shoot Billy

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[163] White here is describing Haynes' *Far From Heaven*, however, the statement is equally true of *I'm Not There*, and *Velvet Goldmine* (Haynes 1998).
Haynes expresses individual longing and loneliness beneath the glam culture of *Velvet Goldmine* through Roxy Music songs (such as 'A Song for Europe' [1973]), allusions to fictitious identities (Ziggy Stardust), and the combination of homosexual history (through Oscar Wilde) and futuristic fantasies (the presence of UFOs) (White, 61). Like *I'm Not There* and *Far From Heaven*, *Velvet Goldmine* blends allusions to cinema (for instance to Max Ophüls' *Lola Montès* [1955] and *The Earrings of Madame de…*[1953]), history, and popular culture in order to construct a film that morphs and moves between reality, fantasy, and memory (White, 70-73).
White writes that *Far From Heaven* is a melodrama that quotes and alludes (and reflects on) Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Imitation of Life* (1959), *The Reckless Moment* (Ophüls 1949), and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*) (1974) among others. The film is 'even briefly ornamented…by an actual piece of scenery from Douglas Sirk's melodrama *Written on the Wind* (1956)' (2, 74-80). White continues 'Since it is socially regimented and hostile too, the film might as well be called an ingenious dungeon…strange though it may seem, given that the setting is Connecticut in 1957-58'(2).
[164] A newspaper man is shown pedalling an edition with the headline 'Now You See it Now You Don't: The Rise and Fall of Township Riddle' and calling 'buy it here, read it there! An epic tale of blunder and despair! A withering saga of mystery unveiled, a swansong to America before Chaplin sets sail or the children of dawn in crazy duress ever watched the red sun without bothering to dress!'

(or his own reflection) at the section's conclusion, as he and much of Riddle have forgotten Billy exists. Through this, Haynes portrays these American myths and their incarnations during the tumultuous 1960s as slipping into an achronological and porous retirement—as images and instances that are removed from original contexts and placed in overlapping cinematic recyclability.

I'm Not There does not present six separate stories with distinct spatio-temporal logics, but one layered, cross-spatio temporal, achronological film world based on an assemblage of references within film history. The stories and characters bleed into, and overlap with, one another. Haynes allows film allusions to cross the narrative's six sections, Dylan's song lyrics are repeated as dialogue, and actors reappear in new locations in different roles. Bruce Greenwood plays both Pat Garrett and Time Magazine reporter Keenan Jones in the Jude Quinn (Cate Blanchett) section of the film. Keenan, here, is the 'Mr. Jones' of Dylan's 'Ballad of a Thin Man' (1965a), a figure whose continual inquiry into that which he cannot understand leads only to more befuddlement. Although *I'm Not There* provides the illusion of focusing on the labyrinthine persona of Dylan as a musical figure, 'Ballad of a Thin Man' is the only song presented in style of a music-video. The song is played while the visuals cut between Quinn performing, and a series of illogical, impressionistic and bizarre images focusing on Keenan. Haynes complicates this moment by mirroring the lyrics (You hand in your ticket / And you go watch the geek / Who immediately walks up to you / When he hears you speak / And says, "How does it feel / To be such a freak?"/ And you say, "Impossible"/ As he hands you a bone / Because something is happening here / But you don't know what it is / Do you / Mister Jones) in visual allusions to the 1947 film *Nightmare Alley* (Goulding 1947), which documents the fall of a successful conman to a drunkard, who by the film's conclusion is only able to play a carnival geek.

Figure 79 *I'm Not There*'s 'Mr Jones'

Figure 80 *Nightmare Alley*'s geek

The representation of Cate Blanchett as Jude Quinn is immediately recognisable as the enigmatic electric Dylan. Much of this section is appropriated from D.A. Pennebaker's documentary *Dont Look Back* (1967), and as such Keenan Jones is recognisable as an inverted fictionalisation of Time Magazine reporter Horace Freeland Judson, at whom Dylan levels a (perhaps) contrived tirade of abuse on the nature of knowledge, obligation, and media representation. Although Pennebaker's direct cinema style provides the illusion of unfettered access to the 'star' of Dylan, many criticisms have been levelled at the film around the issue of self-performance perpetuating the Dylan myth.[165] In directly quoting scenes and appropriating dialogue from Pennebaker's film within an openly fictionalised construct, Haynes problematizes the notion of unfettered access to identity through

[165] The recreation and distanciation of the Dylan myth has more recently been employed by the Coen brothers in their film *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013). Interestingly, the Coen brothers do not use a Dylan figure as the protagonist of their film, but the Dylan myth lingers in a complicated, and not entirely celebratory, manner as a shadow to their narrative.

layers of performance and allusion.[166] The use of high-contrast black and white in this section also recalls Federico Fellini's poetic realism. The fluidity between dream and reality in *8½* (1963) is reflected in a moment where, like Guido, Quinn is shot floating in the sky as a human balloon.[167] The suffocating sense of individual alienation Fellini presents in Guido's driving-dream sequence is similarly evoked as a distraught Quinn has his blood pressure taken in a limousine, while the sound of his heartbeat overpowers the soundtrack.[168] The sense of alienation and existential anxiety present throughout *I'm Not There* is reflected in a sequence where Quinn attends a Warholesque party.[169] Alone and anesthetised by barbiturates, Quinn collapses as a large tarantula is projected onto the walls around him. In biographical terms, this references Dylan's prose poetry collection *Tarantula* (1971), however Haynes' slippery cinematic construction pluralises this allusion. The image of a tarantula equally quotes Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966)—a film concerned with identity where, again, reality and dream states are blurred beyond recognition, and televised images of global atrocities like the Holocaust and Vietnam War haunt the characters.

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[166] The notion of celebrity and star power on screen is further complicated in Haynes' film in a sequence in which Quinn emerges (from a literal puff of smoke) with The Beatles, and together they roll about on the lawn in intoxicated states. During Quinn's interview with Keenan Jones The Beatles are shown in the background running from a crowd of crazed fans in fast-motion, referencing the opening sequence of *A Hard Day's Night* (Lester 1964).

[167] Haynes further quotes *8½* in a sequence following Jude Quinn's first performance of 'Maggie's Farm' (Dylan 1965b) using electric guitars and a band, Haynes shows a series of (mostly) disgruntled audience members talking to the camera about their feelings of betrayal. These figures are then shot arranged in a single line, facing the camera.

[168] In addition to these instances, music from *Il Casanova di Federico Fellini* (Fellini's Casanova) (Fellini 1976) is played during an exchange between Coco and Quinn. The dialogue of this sequence borrows lines from Dylan's 'She's Your Lover Now' (1966).

[169] The character Coco Rivington (Michelle Williams) is an assemblage of the Warhol world, and, more directly Edie Sedgwick.

Figure 81 Jude Quinn in *I'm Not There*

Figure 82 Guido's dream

Figure 83 Tarantula in *Persona*

Figure 84 Tarantula in *I'm Not There*

As dream states and reality blur in both Fellini's and Bergman's work, cinematic allusion and biography here meld to fix identity within film history. The indexical nature of experience lived through the film image is most evident in Robbie (Heath Ledger) and Claire's (Charlotte Gainsbourg) section.

Robbie is an actor who has risen to fame for a role in the film *A Grain of Sand*,[170] a biopic of Jack Rollins (the title character of the section played by Christian Bale). Where the Jack Rollins section within *I'm Not There* is presented as an expository documentary (in contrast to Pennebaker's approach),[171] quoting

[170] This title is taken from Dylan's 1981 release *Every Grain of Sand*.

[171] I use Bill Nichols' terms here in order to differentiate between the two types of documentary quoted by Haynes. Nichols identifies six documentary modes in his book *Introduction to Documentary (Second Edition)* (2010)—the poetic, expository, observational, reflexive, and performative. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* can be described in these terms as an observational, or fly-on-the-wall style of documentary (although the nature of Dylan's performance does prove problematic in this demarcation) whereas Scorsese's *No Direction Home* can be categorised as expository due to its use of voice-over narration, interviews, and found footage.

significantly from Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home* (2005), *A Grain of Sand* positions Haynes' film in contrast to audience expectations of a more conventional biopic. In this section, the presenter promises to bring her audience face to face with the real 'Jack Rollins.' This, of course, can never occur.

Figure 85 Julianne Moore as Alice Fabian (based on Joan Baez) in *A Grain of Sand*

Figure 86 Joan Baez in *No Direction Home*

Figure 87 Henry Rollins (Christian Bale) in *A Grain of Sand*

Figure 88 Found footage of Dylan in *No Direction Home*

Figure 89 Claire learns of the end of the Vietnam War

The collapse of Robbie and Claire's marriage presents the most conventional narrative of the film, incorporating a falling-in-love montage, and a 'dear John' divorce letter sequence. The sequence begins with the narration:

> That's when she knew it was over for good. The longest running war in television history. The war that hung like a shadow over the same nine years as her marriage. So why was it suddenly so hard to breathe?

Robbie and Claire meet in a Greenwich Village café in the 1960s. During this meeting Robbie learns that Claire is a French artist, to which he exclaims 'that's perfect!' This

utterance, rather than merely signalling the commencement of a conventional boy-meets-girl storyline, alludes to the section's homage to Jean-Luc Godard. Haynes visually alludes to *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*) (Godard 1963), *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (*2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*) (Godard 1967a), *La Chinoise* (Godard 1967b), with scenes and dialogue directly quoted from *Masculin Féminin* (Godard 1966). In their first encounter Claire quotes Godard's Madeleine (from *Masculin Féminin*) by asking Robbie 'what is at the centre of your world?' To which Robbie responds by offering an approximation of Madeleine's answer ('Me'). He responds with 'Well, I'm 22. I guess I would say, me.' The construction of Claire and Robbie's relationship is thus not based on the ideal of two characters genuinely falling in love after their first meeting, as occurs throughout the romance genre (*Titanic* [Cameron 1997], *Say Anything…* [Crowe 1989], *The Notebook* [Cassavetes 2004]), but rather based on, and born out of, romantic entanglement as presented by cinema. Haynes reinforces this position through the incorporation of Godard-esque intertitles accompanied by the sound of gunshots, which, in contrast to the most mainstream interpersonal narrative of the film, disrupts the plot in a form that approaches a Brechtian distanciation.

Masculin Féminin is again quoted in the premiere of *Grain of Sand*. The narrator explains Claire's disappointment in the film and ultimately in their failed vision of the future, stating:

> The more they tried to make it youthful, the more the images on the screen seemed out of date. It wasn't the film they had dreamed, the film they had imaged and discussed. The film they each wanted to live.

Taken alone, this sentiment could be said to speak for the inability of direct address to convey the existential anxiety of our contemporary society; however, in deriving this profound statement from Godard, Haynes creates a double play in his use of the utterance. Not only does the statement directly convey the difficulty of expressing existential anxiety in contemporary cinema, but in the context of *I'm Not There*, a film

fundamentally concerned with recreating and understanding identity (not just of the counter-cultural figure Bob Dylan, but identity *per se*) Haynes' statement of sincerity is appropriated from another film source—the anxieties are sincere, but they are no longer representable in any direct manner. The film's final moments end with a series of these recognitions—Claire's section acknowledges the limitations of cinema, Quinn's section demonstrates the construction of character, and Billy formally addresses the film's anachronistic structure. Following a rant about the rejection of his new electric recordings, Quinn matter-of-factly states 'Everybody knows I'm not a folk singer,' before turning to smile at the camera. White states that this is a moment in which Quinn acts 'serenely, smugly, with a camera-loves-me complacency that takes the audience's approval for granted' (94), however, given Haynes' deliberate focus on identity and construction, this moment is more accurately read as the reinstatement of Cate Blanchett within the film. Here, the gradual smile is knowing. Without the Ray-Ban sunglasses, and relaxing the hardened and exhausted expression held throughout the film, the audience is forced to recognise Blanchett as an actor who has inhabited a role. The overtly recognisable Dylan of the Quinn section is, in this reflexive smile, over. If, as Rhodes and Gorfinkel suggest, 'identity is constructed in and through place, whether by our embrace of a place, or inhabitation of a particular point in space, or by our rejection of and departure from a given place and our movement toward, adoption and inhabitation of, another' (ix) then the impossible Eccentric world is a required creation in relation to the pure cinematic character.

Haynes actively articulates the parameters of the achronological, impossible film world he has created with Kristofferson's final lines:

> I can change during the course of a day. I wake and I'm one person and when I go to sleep I know for certain I'm somebody else. I don't know who I am most of the time. It's like you've got yesterday, today, and tomorrow all in the same room. There's no telling what can happen.

Figure 90 Disappointment in *I'm Not There*

Figure 91 Disappointment in *Masculin, Féminin*

Figure 92 Blanchett's reflexive smile

I'm Not There does not provide access to any characters in a manner that facilitates audience identification that may infiltrate the screen world, as there is no locatable film world in which these characters can be situated. The real-world referents of *The Graduate* are replaced with something more simulacral.

4.3 Eccentric Worlds and the Quirky

American Eccentric worlds are, like the characters that inhabit them, both familiar and inauthentic representations of reality. Sofia Coppola's American Eccentric film *Marie Antoinette* (2006) does not (as its title suggests) reimagine the known history of the 18th Century Queen of France, but rather presents a synthesis of period drama, teen-flick, and high-school drama. Marie Antoinette (Kirsten Dunst) in Coppola's film is not a stand-in for the historical figure, but a teen-queen (both in terms of royalty and in the sense applied to the head of any teen-clique) presented through mythology and celebrity culture. *Marie Antoinette*, writes Mayshark, is less a narrative than 'a series of riffs on the idea of Marie Antoinette, refracted through various prisms: fairy-tale princess clichés, feminist historicism, Hollywood celebrity gossip, post 9/11 tension' (177). Mayshark asserts that Coppola is more concerned with various lavish, and behavioural surfaces and their darker undercurrents than

adhering to historical accuracy, but that historical detail is not *Marie Antoinette*'s primary concern (169-181). Rather, in keeping with Coppola's *oeuvre Marie Antoinette* is concerned with emptiness and the isolating nature of celebrity culture, exhibited through the plight of a young woman. Like *Lost in Translation*'s (Coppola 2003) Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) and *Somewhere*'s (Coppola 2010) Cleo (Elle Fanning), Marie Antoinette (Kirsten Dunst) is a young, privileged, but ultimately isolated woman, whose fate, like that of *The Virgin Suicides*' (Coppola 1999) Lisbon girls, is doomed from the film's outset. Unlike these other young women, Coppola's Marie Antoinette is always viewed as a fictional character within a real, yet cinematically re-imagined Versailles location.

Figure 93 Kirsten Dunst plays Marie Antoinette

The opening credits begin with Kirsten Dunst lavishly costumed as Marie Antoinette. Dunst, seductively reclined in her undergarments on a cabriole lounge, turns her head and smiles knowingly at the camera—an acknowledgment of her performance to come, and her previous teen roles in films like *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (Jann 1999), *Bring It On* (Reed 2000), *Spider-Man* (Raimi 2002), and (importantly but

to different effect) *The Virgin Suicides*.[172] Coppola's Versailles is populated with Dunst's playful teenage persona and distinct Californian accent, the presence of highly recognisable celebrities (Steve Coogan, Jason Schwartzman, Asia Argento, Marianne Faithful, Judy Davis etc.), contemporary music by Aphex Twin, Bow Wow Wow, and The Strokes, fashion items such as Manolo Blahnik high heels and (briefly) Converse high-top shoes (Brevik-Zender 2011, 13-14).[173]

Figure 94 Footwear in *Marie Antoinette*

Elena Gorfinkel writes of the historical definition of anachronism that:

> within a contemporary vernacular and in its commonplace meaning, to mark something, a cultural object or figure, as anachronistic is to suggest that it is out of place, misplaced from another time. It is often seen as a slight – anachronism is after all understood as a type of mistake in the practice of historical representation. (2005, 156)

[172] Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young also note Dunst's reflexive acknowledgment in this moment, however they write that this gesture invites the spectators to view themselves as confidantes rather than signalling Marie Antoinette's cinematic construction as a character (2010, 100).
[173] Heidi Brevik-Zender explains that while a contemporary audience may associate Converse shoes with recent fashions, were invented in 1917 as basketball shoes and enjoyed their first wave of popularity in the 1920s when Chuck Taylor attached his name to the brand (13).

However, this criticism only holds up if one assumes that the intent of a text is to represent history. It is important that these anachronistic elements are not taken to be naïve in Thomas Greene's sense ('in which the anachronist takes on a relation to "proper" history, a relationship which must either be excused, justified or condemned') (Gorfinkel, 156).[174] The merging of diffuse historical, contemporary, and futuristic contexts promotes identification, nostalgia and projections that are unable to be specifically placed in a chronological context that is wholly contemporary, retrospective or speculative. American Eccentric films like *Marie Antoinette* occupy a chronological and geographical space imagined by the filmmakers. The assemblage of Eccentric worlds has been likened to Joseph Cornell's boxes, in that disparate objects are placed in concert with each other to create a world as atemporal, achronological, and porous.

In his work on Wes Anderson's construction of cinematic worlds, Michael Chabon states that the comparison to Joseph Cornell is useful

> as long as one bears in mind that the crucial element, in a Cornell box, is neither the imagery and objects it deploys, nor the Romantic narratives it incorporates and undermines, nor the playfulness and precision with which its objects and narratives have been arranged. The important thing, in a Cornell box, is the *box*. (2013a, 22)

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[174] Elena Gorfinkel also notes the connection and dialogue between the New Hollywood and filmmakers like Wes and P.T. Anderson, and Haynes in terms of the use of allusion. While Gorfinkel describes the New Hollywood filmmakers as making use of seamless allusion in terms of recycling devices that showcase 'professional virtuosity and technical skill', these later filmmakers 'utilize allusion, but also eclipse it, in their preference for a kind of overt aesthetic and temporal disjunction, creating an intended rift between the constitutive aspects of their filmic worlds. The viewer always inevitably becomes aware of his or her own position, caught between different periods, in a region of illegible temporality and mobile film historical space'(155).
Gorfinkel argues that these films (those of Todd Haynes, P.T. Anderson and Wes Anderson) position the viewer such that they are 'actually invested in imaging an audience from the past, in a desire to reinstate a more earnest mode of film reception. Employing a *film historical imaginary*, these directors' aesthetics capitalize on the visibility of anachronism as a means of highlighting the pathos of historical difference. The poignancy of the irrecoverable gap between past and present – between the 1950s, the 1970s and today, and between childhood and adulthood – becomes the subject of these films'(153)— *Far From Heaven*, *Boogie Nights*, and *The Royal Tenenbaums* are as much about anachronism as they use it as an aesthetic structure (155).

As Chabon notes, it is not the various intricacies of the American Eccentric world that are individually important, but rather their relationship to one another in constructing a whole film's diegesis—the box, in Chabon's terms. Chabon continues

> Cornell always took pains to construct his boxes himself; indeed the box is the only part of a Cornell work literally "made" by the artist. The box, to Cornell, is a *gesture*—it draws a boundary around the things it contains, and forces them into a defined relationship, not merely with one another, but with everything on the far side of the box. The box sets out the scale of a ratio; it mediates the halves of a metaphor. It makes explicit, in plain, hand-crafted wood and glass, the yearning of a model-maker to analogize the world, and at the same time it frankly emphasizes the limitations, the confines, of his or her ability to do so. (22-23)

Chabon's assertions regarding Anderson can, for my purpose, be extended to films in the American Eccentric mode in that they present worlds in which found, and often disparate, objects are placed in relation to each other within the confines of an openly created and overtly constructed world. In Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), J.D. Salinger's Glass Family stories, Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), Peter Bogdanovich's *Paper Moon* (1973), Louis Malle's *Le Feu Follet* (*The Fire Within*) (1963), the music of the British Invasion, the antecedent roles of the film's title actors, and New York—are placed in relation to one another within the confines of a delineated fictional world. Jason Davids Scott correctly suggests that Wes Anderson's filmic spaces are

> not only timeless in a sense, but placeless, defined by familiar but wholly fictional spaces…It is no great difficulty for even the most casual viewer to quickly translate these settings into their real life equivalences, but Anderson constantly forces his viewers to engage and reckon with the tension between the settings of his films and what they are intended to represent. (2014, 77)[175]

[175] Davids Scott writes that although we have ascertained through extra-textual means that Anderson's *Rushmore* was filmed in Houston, Texas, with Anderson's own alma mater, St John's School providing the physical set for the school itself, beyond these facts there is nothing within the film that allows the audience to identify a specific geographic location for the film's diegesis—nor are there any accurate chronological markers, beyond the suggestion of sometime in the 'present' of the films production, the late 1990s. Davids Scott writes that in direct contrast to the dates presented to

This formulation can again be extended to the American Eccentric mode more broadly. Just as Anderson compiles objects and references within each frame to form a new, wholly fictional yet familiar space, Haynes assembles Bob Dylan's songs, the genre conventions of romance and western films, Godard's, Bergman's, Kazan's, and Fellini's films, and the myth of celebrity in *I'm Not There* into recognisable figures that are entirely constructed by the cinema. In this sense, Chabon is correct in his assertion that these films outwardly exhibit their own artificiality. He writes that these films

> understand and demonstrate that the magic of art, which renders beauty out of brokenness, disappointment, failure, decay, even ugliness and violence –is authentic only to the degree that it attempts to conceal neither the bleak facts nor the tricks employed in pulling off the presto change-o. It is honest only to the degree that it builds its precise and inescapable box around its maker's x:y scale version of the world… the hand-built, model-kit artifice on display behind the pane of an Anderson box is a guarantor of authenticity; indeed I would argue that artifice, openly expressed, is the only true "authenticity" an artist can lay claim to. (2013b, par 11 and 10)

Indeed, the open artifice of films in the American Eccentric mode does not preclude their authentic relationship to sincere issues of alienation and existential anxiety. Rather, these film world 'boxes' function to contain these issues, and provide critical, ironic distance between the sincere and troubling thematic elements of these films and the reflexive artificiality of their diegeses. Davids Scott claims throughout his work on Anderson that at a fundamental level the relationship between spectator and film is undermined by disallowing the audience to imaginatively bridge the gap between reality and the presented film world. Instead, these films force 'the viewer to constantly shift attention from the story and characters to the visual and aural

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the audience, such as the engraved date of death on Max's mother's headstone (1989), the inscription on Max's Swiss Army Knife (1985-1997), and other contextual markers, such as the use of a mobile phone, 'the explicit cultural references…seem to deliberately obfuscate the film's temporal setting' — Max adapts the 1973 film *Serpico* (Lumet 1973) for a school stage play, the school dressing rooms are adorned with Playboy pinups from the 1970s, the upper-class school still uses film projectors to view material, and Herman Blume's company communicates via pneumatic tubes (78).

"stuff" of the film, challenging audiences to not merely receive, but actively interpret and engage with Anderson's imagined and constructed reality' (78).[176] While Davids Scott's comment on the separation of the film world from reality in Anderson's work is apt, the artifice associated with American Eccentricity does not preclude authenticity nor does it necessarily force audiences into positions of recognition. Rather, the outward constructed nature of the world in these films' diegeses functions beyond mere aestheticism as a means of indirectly expressing genuine issues of existential anxiety in a manner that enables, and encourages, audience engagement to be both temporary and confined to each distinct film's world.

The openly created, and overtly constructed, nature of the American Eccentric film world recalls James MacDowell's formulation of the quirky sensibility in contemporary indie cinema. MacDowell positions the quirky within a number of other present cinematic tendencies that are engaged in 'navigating the terrain between irony and sincerity' (Rombes 2005a, 85)—specifically, Mayshark's Post-Pop cinema, Elena Gorfinkel's contemporary historical anachronism, and Nicholas Rombes' New Punk cinema.[177] MacDowell writes that rather than framing these tendencies as separate from one another and comprising wholly individual tonal preoccupations, these tendencies are better conceived as 'individual iterations of a

[176] Davids Scott writes that Anderson's worlds are never entirely imagined due to the explicit references to some aspects or elements of popular culture. These pop cultural references are not merely used 'anachronistically to illustrate the emotionally arrested world of the characters: they offer astute viewers a glimpse into an aesthetic modality that governs narrative and visual structure. They help to tell the story, not merely to set the stage' (2014, 85).

[177] Rombes writes that the New Punk cinema is a tendency that began in the mid-1990s with films that significantly challenged or revised the narrative and aesthetic norms of the mainstream American cinema. Where American Eccentricity is, at its core, concerned with its own 'Americanness', Rombes does not limit his work to American film, and cites films by Tom Twyker, Harmony Korine, Lars von Trier, Darren Aronofsky, and David Fincher among those he sees as part of this tendency. Like the French New Wave, Italian Neorealism, and cinéma vérité, Punk cinema mixes experimental techniques associated with the avant-garde with mainstream traditions such as genre (2). While there are clear overlaps in Rombes' tendency and American Eccentricity, such as the focus on non-linear narratives and, most importantly the employment of irony with sincerity, there are also clear distinctions, particularly in his focus on the raw, 'do-it-yourself' quality of these films (enabled by digital technologies) and their relationship to the punk aesthetic of the 1970s, and a desire (albeit suspicious) for the Real (Rombes 2005b, 2-3, 11-18).

broader 'structure of feeling' in the millennial and postmillennial culture' (160). All of these iterations within the broader structure of feeling function—as Lee Konstantinou writes in defence of his term 'postirony'—such that 'the use of ironic and self-consciously experimental means [work] towards sincere or sentimental ends'(2009, 12).[178] MacDowell's adoption of Konstantinou's approach to irony places the quirky in a similar position as American Eccentricity in regard to Sconce's smart cinema. Like my delineation of American Eccentricity from smart cinema, MacDowell places quirky cinema in dialogue with, and yet distinct from, Sconce's work on the basis that the quirky does not focus on ironic apathy and cynicism (2014, 155). As MacDowell writes, unlike the form of irony that Sconce sees as characterising smart cinema—that is as a mode of address that 'sees everything in "quotation marks",' and is opposed to '"sincerity", "positivity"… "engagement", "passion", "affect", and so on' (2010, 11)—the quirky engages with a more complex form of irony. To this end, MacDowell states:

> In characterizations of postmodern irony that associate the discourse with detachment, cynicism, pessimism, or even nihilism, we begin to see potential horizons of a competing structure of feeling that might be concerned to move beyond (or in an alternative direction than) its forebear—towards a contemporary approach that incorporates the possibility of both critical distance *and* enthusiastic engagement, sceptical cynicism *and* affirmation, irony *and* sincerity. (2014, 161)

MacDowell writes that quirky can 'serve productively as an umbrella term for a particular, but widespread strain of comedy and comedic drama that emerged during the last two decades of American indie filmmaking' (2014, 154) and encompasses such names as 'Michel Gondry, Jared Hess, Spike Jonze, Miranda July, Charlie Kaufman, and Mike Mills, as well as films like *Punch-Drunk Love* (Anderson 2002), *I Heart Huckabees* (Russell 2004), *Lars and the Real Girl* (Gillespie 2007), *Juno*

[178] MacDowell situates Konstantinou's work on postirony within this structure of feeling. Konstantinou focuses on a classification of writers as postironists that urged to move beyond postmodern irony by way of incorporating a neutralised irony in its place (7).

(Reitman 2008), *Paper Heart* (Jasenovec 2009), and so forth' (154). These films exhibit a distinguishing tone in the perspective taken toward their characters, world, and conventions, and the relationship between the film and the spectator (MacDowell 2010, 1). Like American Eccentricity, the quirky is not a genre nor can it be wholly accounted for within discussions of indie cinema. MacDowell writes that his classification differs from Geoff King's indiewood (2009) or Newman's indie where inclusion of an individual film into the category is not contingent on their deviation from mainstream cinematic convention, but rather 'the similarities it fosters among its members' (2011b, 6-8),[179] because the quirky is a sensibility with certain repeated conventions. In order for a work or filmmaker to be considered quirky, one or a number, of the following conventions must be present:

> a modal combination of the melodramatic with the comedic; a mixing of comedic styles such as bathetic deadpan, comedy of embarrassment, and slapstick; a visual and aural style that frequently courts a fastidious and simplified sense of artificiality; and a thematic interest in childhood and innocence. Most pervasive, however, is a tone that balances ironic "detachment" from sincere "engagement" with the films' fictional world and their characters. (MacDowell 2014, 154)

The tonal balance of irony and sincerity functions in this formulation of the sensibility as a way of looking at the world in which it is possible to 'view characters' schemes and achievements as comically absurd or potentially bound for failure – and thus open to a certain amount of ridicule – *at the same time as* they are treated with degrees of sympathy' (2013, 55 emphasis in original). Humour in the quirky is often rendered uncomfortable and painful in that it results from a 'character's emotional distress being situated as simultaneously pathetic and poignant' (3) which induces a dual, awkward emotional response. The approach taken to comedy in the quirky is largely deadpan and perfunctory (almost to the point of absurdity in the

[179] For an extended discussion on the divergence between the quirky and 'indiewood' see James MacDowell's 'Quirky: Buzzword or Sensibility' in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond* (King, Molloy, and Tzioumakis 2013, 53-54).

incongruous juxtaposition of flat execution and ostentatious utterances), aiding an intimate marriage of melodramatic and comedic registers (MacDowell 2010, 3). Importantly for the conceptualisation of the Eccentric cinematic world, the mixture of comic registers in the quirky sensibility allows the spectator to find the deadpan delivery of dramatic scenes humorous, while simultaneously being affected by the characters' misfortunes because she can treat the fictional film world 'partly unbelievable' (2011b, 9). The notion of a world that is 'partly' unbelievable due to its overt artificiality inhabited by off-beat characters aligns with the constructed worlds and pure cinematic characters of the American Eccentric mode. Indeed, many of the films identified as 'quirky' can also be identified as American Eccentric works—there can be no doubt that the quirky and American Eccentricity occupy corresponding and overlapping territory.

Although there are many similarities between MacDowell's quirky and the American Eccentric mode that enable a rich discussion of textual elements, it is impossible to confine American Eccentricity to comedic, or even melancomic registers (Thomas 2012). Chapter One explored the incorporation of genre in the American Eccentric mode as subversive and transgressive, yet nonetheless prevalent through *The Darjeeling Limited* and *Being John Malkovich* as American Eccentric road films. In the same manner, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Her* (Jonze 2013) are American Eccentric romance films, and *Far From Heaven* (Haynes 2002) is an American Eccentric melodrama—these films certainly employ moments of humour, however discussing either as examples of comedy or as melancomic in the manner that may be attributed to Wes Anderson, Kaufman and Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002), or *I Heart Huckabees*, is entirely inappropriate. American Eccentricity and the quirky undeniably share a focus on tension between irony and sincerity, and the creation of ironic distance for critical commentary, yet this ironic distance does not function in respect to taking evaluative positions against the character (as pathetic or awkward), but rather in recognising the cinematic reflexivity of situations, utterances and scenes

in a elasticised relationship (in MacDowell's terms) with the poignancy of their anxiety. MacDowell provides an excellent description of the often impossible visual artifice of Wes Anderson's films as a means of inviting the viewer

> to register not merely their patent unnaturalism and self-consciousness, but their resolute exquisite distillation as well. This particular stylistic foregrounding of artificiality is not necessarily concerned to create a sense of critical 'distanciation' in the Brechtian sense (in the manner of Godard, or, say Lars von Trier's *Dogville* [2003]), nor to imply the kind of detached "clinical observation" associated with the smart film. (2014,158)

Anderson offers the spectator highly stylised worlds that are, in some ways, oversimplifications of lived reality. These worlds deal with the realities in an acutely discriminate manner and fashion them to be mapped onto, and congruent with, the Eccentric film world. These are worlds that entice engagement through recognition and relatability, while simultaneously distancing the audience through their conscious construction of cinematic references, impossible spatio-temporal arrangements, and anachronistic structures. American Eccentric cinematic worlds do not offer the possibility of further engagement with their characters beyond the screen; as the film concludes, so do these worlds and all that they entail.

4.4 Impossible Cities

I have argued through Haynes' *I'm Not There* that the Eccentric world is a film-born impossible space. In connection with Haynes' anachronistic work this position may appear obvious. However, I posit further that the constructed worlds need not be as overt as Haynes' tight quotation, naming, or casting. Many films in the American Eccentric mode present impossible virtual versions of real locations and historical contexts. Charlie Kaufman's New York films are less concerned with a subjective or objective depiction of the city than they are with spaces in which the inclusion of bizarre elements elucidate existential anxiety within mundane everyday

life. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* operates in a space that is distinctly locatable as New York, where real-world referents are completely entwined with a nonlinear, subjective narrative of a failed relationship. The constructed world is atemporal and spatially fluid in that location and time is layered with memory, and these recollections are subject to alteration in the present moment. Similarly, *Being John Malkovich* blends an identifiable New York setting with dark apartments housing dozens of exotic pets, office buildings with half-floors and ludicrous background stories, and a portal into the mind of actor, John Malkovich. *Synecdoche, New York* plays with the real location Schenectady, New York and the concept of synecdoche, where playwright Caden Cotard (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) attempts to reconstruct his broken life through a theatrical celebration of the mundane. This results in an exponential on-stage reconstruction of his life and a peculiar New York (where people can buy houses that are eternally ablaze) within a warehouse in Manhattan's Theater District. The construction of these three distinct 'New Yorks' have less to do with the city itself than they do with the form of phantasmagoric cityscape presented in Arthur Penn's *Mickey One* (1965). Penn's Chicago is less a depiction of the actual Midwest city, than a Kafkaesque, looming composition presented through Mickey One's (Warren Beatty) subjective loneliness and fear as he desperately tries to evade the mob.

Figure 95 Penn's Chicago

However, where *Mickey One*'s cityscapes are imbued with overt paranoia and fatalism, Kaufman's New Yorks are presented as though they are sites that are brimming with hope. Hope is promised in these New Yorks through the presence of fantastic vehicles for liberation from anxiety (the Malkovich portal, Lacuna's memory erasure machine, the synecdochical theatre-space), yet, the presence of these vehicles delineates these locations as Eccentric worlds. Through these fantastic aberrations to otherwise realistic spaces, the protagonists are presented with the promise of liberation from existential concerns, and simultaneously denied the ability to move beyond their anxieties—these characters are confined to their Eccentric worlds by the very vehicles that promise liberation.

The promise of 'being someone else' in *Being John Malkovich* results in Craig Schwartz' complete disappearance from the frame and non-existence within the film world as he is subsumed by the larval vessel of his wife's and lover's daughter.

Eternal Sunshine's Clementine (Kate Winslet) and Joel's (Jim Carey) relationship is not—as may initially appear—salvaged by facing their past failure through access to Lacuna's client erasure files. Joel's plea for Clementine to 'wait' because despite both having heard the embittered post-separation complaints about one another he 'can't see anything he doesn't like' about her, is accurately rebutted by Clementine's exclamation, 'but you will! You will think of things, and I'll get bored with you and feel trapped because that's what happens with me.' *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* allows the spectator to believe that Joel and Clementine have reached a conventional 'happy-ending' through the structure of its conclusion. *Eternal Sunshine* plays on Stanley Cavell's 'comedy of remarriage' tradition (1981), in which a separated (or, more traditionally, divorced) couple overcome a series of (often human) obstacles in order to romantically reunite at the film's conclusion. Unlike the conventional romantic reunions of Garson Kanin's *My Favorite Wife* (1940), Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday* (1940), or George Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), Kaufman and Gondry present Clementine and Joel's 'reunion' in a manner that only superficially fulfils conventional expectations (and largely, audience desire) of a 'remarriage' denouement.[180] Yet, when considered closely, this 'remarriage' subverts the traditional happy resolution. Their mutual acceptance of the circumstance (both concede that this situation is 'okay') is not a romantic gesture, but rather an acknowledgement of their repetitious doomed failure.[181] The final sequence in which

[180] Film critics A.O Scott (2004) and David Edelstein (2004) have both connected *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* to the comedy of remarriage tradition; however, both see the connection in rather straight terms rather than as a narrative device that is, eventually, subverted.

[181] This doomed failure is foreshadowed in an early sequence in which Joel and Clementine meet (unbeknownst to the audience) for the second time, and Joel claims, to Clementine's disbelief to have never heard the folk song 'Oh My Darling, Clementine.' Joel's ignorance is later revealed to be the product of memory erasure—however, in this initial instance Clementine exclamation 'Huckleberry Hound! What are you nuts?! Oh my darling, oh my darling, oh my darling, Clementine…you were lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry Clementine…' signals the fate of the two lovers. While they cannot lose each other, each moment is simultaneously present and 'gone forever.'
The name 'Clementine', and Clementine's brief recitation of the folk song recalls Ford's Western *My Darling Clementine* (Ford 1946) (for which the folk song features as the title track). In this film the besotted hero, Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda), can never truly romantically unite with his love Clementine Carter (Cathy Downs)—as, once his job of restoring order to the frontier is completed, he

Clementine and Joel run hand-in-hand along a snow-white beach does not demonstrate, as would be the case in more mainstream narratives, that the love between the two has created their own magical world. Rather, this moment is presented in three looped jump-cuts, and a gradual fade to white. Through this gesture it is clear that Joel is doomed to constantly relive the downward spiral portrayed on-screen—an endless unhappy repetition.[182]

must leave. In the final moments of the film, Earp informs Clementine that he 'might come East again', however, despite the slight sense of hope for a romantic union between the two, the spectator is aware that with his return, Wyatt and Clementine will simply repeat their previous actions, as Wyatt is a Western hero, he cannot remain in Tombstone.

[182] In his book 'The Orientation of Future Cinema' (2013) Bruce Isaacs offers a brilliant reading of this sequence, and the cyclical function of the jump-cut in relation to the object of cinematic space. Isaacs writes that what initially appears as an optimistic, romantic ending 'is undermined by the burden of Joel and Clementine's experience, renewed each time for each other but always merely the same for the spectator. A series of subtle jump cuts in the final sequence of the film (1:40:06-1:40:14) reveals the eternal return of Joel and Clementine to a particular setting: the beach at Montauk in winter. In this closing shot (though merely the next iteration of the itinerary of eternal return), accompanied by Beck's "Everybody's Gotta Learn Sometime", Joel and Clementine not only inhabit the beach at Montauk, but they are shown to return to it in perpetuity. They embark upon the same narrative journey each time *as if for the first time*…How is the spectator to experience this love story if it concludes in an eternal return in which the lovers (and the spectator) can find no conclusive fulfilment?...The spectator must actively contemplate the disturbance of that space in this strange progression – its immersion in the present (filled with optimism) contains the fullness of the tragedy of the past' (56-57).

Figure 96 The endless repetition in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

Synechdoche, New York similarly concludes with the reflexive gesture that signals both the conclusion of the film and narrative plight. The final sequence shows Caden Cotard as an old man, utterly consumed by his play's unsustainable exponential growth. With his head resting on the shoulder of the last remaining cast member Caden begins 'I know how to do this play now…' as the colour gradually drains from the scene and fades to white.[183] Caden's gentle revelation ends abruptly with the stage direction 'die'. Kaufman thus concludes his films with the conscious completion of their worlds; he leaves no possibility to imagine his characters beyond their final frames.

While Kaufman's New Yorks are each made strange by the inclusion of an impossible element, other Eccentric film worlds are manufactured in less tangibly absurd manners. P.T. Anderson's *Magnolia* presents a complex and more understated version of the Eccentric world in his construction of Los Angeles. Los Angeles is a recognisable site of cinematic representation—not only as the real site of production in Hollywood, but also as a film setting. *Magnolia*'s film world begins with a semi-

[183] This conclusion is in direct dialogue with Kaufman and Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002), in which the screenwriter Charlie (Nicolas Cage) is shown in a deliberately contrived moment of revelation exclaiming (again, via voiceover) 'I have to go right home. I know how to finish the script now. It ends with Kaufman driving home after his lunch with Amelia, thinking he knows how to finish the script. Shit, that's voice-over. McKee would not approve. How else can I show his thoughts? I don't know. Oh, who cares what McKee says? It feels right. Conclusive. I wonder who's gonna play me. Someone not too fat. I liked that Gerard Depardieu, but can he not do the accent? Anyway it's done. And that's something. So: "Kaufman drives off from his encounter with Amelia, filled for the first time with hope." I like this. This is good.' The film concludes with a cyclical time-lapse of a busy street shot from behind a flowering bush over many days, again visually paralleling the artifice of the film world, in reverse Fibonacci series. The importance of the Fibonacci number series to conclude the film exemplifies the film's constructed nature. As Joshua Landy writes 'The flowers sequence covers a period of exactly a week (the seven days of creation, perhaps?), beginning and ending in the middle of a day. As we move through the week, the rate of change increases exponentially: it takes eighteen seconds until night falls on day one, five and a half on day two, two on day three. The relative length of the last five days—5, 3, 2, 1, 1—forms a reverse Fibonacci series. (That series controls all kinds of botanical phenomena; if you count the petals on a daisy, for example, you will almost always find yourself with a Fibonacci number.) After that, the last day slows to what feels like a luxurious 2.7 seconds of almost steady flowers as the song's final, wordless harmony is heard. Then we fade to black' (2011, 508).

translucent magnolia bulb bursting open to the rhythm of Aimee Mann singing 'One' (Nillson 1968) over a road map of Los Angeles.

Figure 97 The title sequence of *Magnolia*

From this opening, *Magnolia* creates a relationship to the city of Los Angeles as a real location, a pre-existing filmic site, and the location for this distinct film's diegesis. Los Angeles is a city that is deeply tied to the film industry through its reality as the geographic site of production in Hollywood and its representation on-film since the early 1920s. Colin McArthur writes 'with regard solely to the representation of cities, there must hardly be a major city in the world which…is not known primarily by way of Hollywood' (1997, 34). In this sense, Los Angeles is what Nezar AlSayyad refers to as a cinematic city; a city that is 'not only that which appears on screen, but also the mental city made by the medium of cinema, and subsequently re-experienced in the real private and public spaces of the city' (2006, 2).[184] This notion is further articulated by David B. Clarke's assertion that the American cityscape can be conceptualised as a *screenscape* (1997, 1 emphasis in original).[185] Films like *Pretty Woman* (Marshall 1990) and *Clueless* (Heckerling 1995) have presented the wealthy,

[184] AlSayyad argues that the boundaries between the real city and the reel city are, in postmodern films and the time of postmodernity, no longer useful to maintain—rather he sees the line between the real and reel as now fundamentally eroded, with the two notions mutually constitutive (3-4).
[185] Clarke argues that 'cinematic space cannot be simply equated with a perspectival representation of (another) space, its dynamism contained by its narrative form' (9).

upmarket Beverly Hills locations (and the sort of ideology questioned in *The Graduate*), while *Echo Park* (Dornhelm 1986), *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton 1991), and *Mi Vida Loca* (Anders 1994) have depicted low socio-economic locations. The city's long, wide, desolate 'mean' streets where underhanded business dealings take place between Victorian homes and run-down boarding houses are readily associated with films noir of the 1940s and 1950s such as *Double Indemnity* (Wilder 1944) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich 1955), later *Chinatown* (Polanski 1974), and more recently *Drive* (Refn 2011). Conversely, the glamour—the illusion and reality—of Hollywood (as both place and as lifestyle) has been reflected in Backstudio[186] films such as *A Star is Born* (Wellman 1937), *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder 1950), and *The Player* (Altman 1992). Through its tapestry ensemble structure *Magnolia*'s Los Angeles is a recognisable media-centric and celebrity-consumed location. Its plotlines feature the secrets of wealthy television personalities and executives— one with an unfaithful, guilt-ridden (second)wife and an estranged son who has become a misogynistic self-help guru, the other an adulterer who molested his now drug addicted daughter—two lonely and emotionally exploited (ex and current) child-stars, a struggling actor, a bumbling and incompetent policeman, and a hardworking palliative carer.[187] This Los Angeles is comprised of upscale mansions, middle class homes, dingy apartment complexes, bars and diners, studio sets and backlots, lawyers' and doctors' offices, and wide streets lined with Googie-inspired structures[188] and palm trees, seen from secluded spaces of car interiors. P.T. Anderson presents this Los Angeles naturalistically in terms of colour palette and *mise-en-scène*. Claudia Wilson's (Melora Walters) small apartment is modest, homely, and imperfect; the

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

[187] Anderson's formal construction of the American Eccentric cinematic world is further elucidated in consideration of the specificities and recurrences in character casting noted in Chapter Two.

[188] Googie architecture refers to a style that incorporated space-age and futuristic elements with neon lights, and geometric shapes. A notable example of this style is the 'Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas, Nevada' sign designed by Betty Willis (1959). For more information on Googie architecture see Alan Hess' *Googie Redux: Ultramodern Roadside Architecture* (2004a).

backstage green room of the *Quiz Kid Challenge* is a sparse, unglamorous space inhabited by exploitative guardians; Earl Partridge's (Jason Robards) 'Contemporary style' villa is an example of 1950s-1970s Angeleno luxury architecture;[189] and the film's title refers to the east-west Magnolia Boulevard in North Hollywood's San Fernando Valley.

Figure 98 Earl Partridge's home

Figure 99 A San Fernando Valley street

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

Figure 100 Claudia's apartment

Thus, the locations are presented in order to be recognisable as naturalistic, inhabited, and familiar spaces. Anderson's *Magnolia* in part employs cinematic realism, while at other times effaces the realist illusion through open acknowledgement of the world's constructed nature. In his introduction to *The Question of Realism*, Robert Stam writes:

> the most conventional definitions of realism make claims about verisimilitude, the putative adequation of a fiction to the brute facticity of the world. These definitions assume that realism is not only possible (and empirically verifiable) but also desirable… Another psychoanalytically inclined definition of realism involves spectatorial belief; a realism of subjective response, rooted less in a mimetic accuracy than in spectatorial credence. A purely formalist definition of realism, finally, emphasizes the conventional nature of all fictional codes, seeing realism simply as a constellation of stylistic devices, a set of conventions that at a given moment in the history of an art, manages, through the fine-tuning of illusionistic technique, to crystallize a strong *feeling* of authenticity. (2000b, 224)[190]

[190] Stam also writes 'Other definitions stress the differential aspirations of an author or school to mold what is seen as a *relatively* more truthful representation, seen as a corrective to the falseness of antecedent cinema styles or protocols of representation. This corrective can be stylistic – as in the French New Wave attack on the artificiality of the "tradition of quality" – or social – Italian neo-realism aiming to show postwar Italy its true face – or both at once – Brazilian Cinema Novo revolutionizing both the social thematics and the cinema procedures of antecedent Brazilian cinema.

Cinematic realism, considered in Colin McArthur's terms, is not an actuality, but rather a discourse or convention of representation better described as 'the realist effect' (35). In this sense the *mise-en-scène* of *Magnolia*'s film world partially adheres to the principles of realism—the world presented is conceivable as one city depicted via a series of simultaneously occurring events through multiple interconnected, yet disparate characters. This construction could be seen as an extreme articulation of Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community (1991), or Genette's notion of simultaneity (1983). That is, it could simply be a matter of narrative construction in an otherwise realistic film that is thematically concerned with fate and chance. However, *Magnolia*'s concern with fate and chance is not thematic, but rather it is its narrative strategy.

In the film's introductory sequence the narrator describes three bizarrely coincidental deaths—a murder, a suicide, and an unsuccessful suicide turned successful murder—before concluding:

> ... in the humble opinion of this narrator that this is not just "Something That Happened." This cannot be "One of those things..." This, please, cannot be that. And for what I would like to say, I can't. This Was Not Just A Matter Of Chance. (Anderson 1998a)

The self-identified narrator's pleas for 'this not to be that' (a matter of chance), are of course, answered within his calm, measured delivery. This is not that; the events cited did not occur. The newsreel appearance of the events depicting the Edmund Berry Godfrey murder,[191] the naming of the Reno Gazette in the publication of the

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Still other definitions acknowledge a certain conventionality within realism, seeing realism as having to do with a text's degree of conformity to widely disseminated cultural models of "believable stories" and "coherent characters." Plausibility also correlates with *generic* codes. The crusty conservative father who resists his show-crazed daughter's entrance into show-business, can "realistically" be expected, in a backstage musical, to applaud her on-stage apotheosis at the end of the film' (224, emphasis in original).

[191] The actual murder of Edmund Berry Godfrey in 1678 has been the subject of many books due to its unsolved nature, with the event sparking widespread anti-Catholic sentiment in England at the time. Anderson's use of the actual murder is secondary to his playful re-enactment of its apparent reportage in 'The New York Herald, November 26th, year 1911' focussing on the fictionalised element

Dorian Delmer/Craig Hansen case in June, 1983 (alongside the men's detailed personal histories),[192] and the contextualisation of the suicide/murder of 'Sydney Barringer' as an account relayed by Dr Donald Harper (the president of the American Association of Forensic Science at the 1961 awards dinner)[193] encourage the viewer to engage, as the narrator suggests, in the belief that 'These strange things happen all the time'. However, as none of these reported 'facts' occurred in the manner depicted, the fictionalisation and subversion of real world referents into a cinematic prologue figures as the establishment of Anderson's formal world in which notions of simultaneity, chance, plausibility, and actuality are intertwined with practices of deliberate temporal contrivance and narrative manipulation for both thematic effect and narrative construction. Here, Anderson establishes the narrative grounds of complex relational interconnectivity in isolated empathetic but fictionalised individuals.

Taken at face value, *Magnolia* presents a fairly conventional narrative structure from which the viewer is seemingly able to determine an intelligible story taking place within a particular time and place—an ensemble plot spatio-temporally

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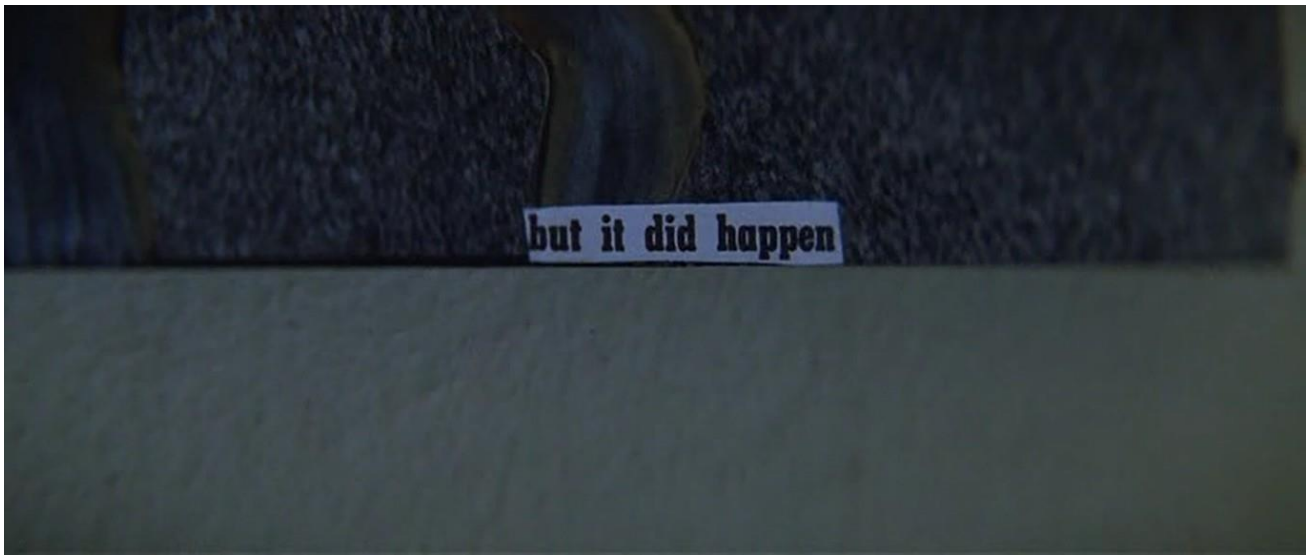
of the murderers being coincidentally named 'Green', 'Berry', and 'Hill', and Godfrey being a resident of Greenberry Hill in London. In actuality, the suburb of 'Primrose Hill' was temporarily named 'Greenberry Hill' after the hanging of the three men for the murder of Godfrey. Green, Berry, and Hill were later found innocent due to false evidence given at trial. See *The Strange Death of Edmund Godfrey: Plots and Politics in Restoration London* (1999), by Alan Marshall for more information.

[192] The Delmer/Hansen deaths portrayed in *Magnolia* is the retelling of an urban legend (sometimes referred to as the Char-Broiled Scuba Diver, or The Scuba Diver in the Tree) in which a scuba diver is accidentally scooped up from a lake (or the ocean depending on the reiteration of the tale) during forest firefighting procedures, and thus found dead, hanging from a tree in full scuba diving suit, and with equipment. There is no evidence that this event has ever occurred. The myth has been investigated by *MythBusters* (Rees 2014), and the online fact-checker *Snopes.com* (2007).

[193] Like the Edmund Berry Godfrey murder, Anderson here combines fact and fiction. The story of 'Sydney Barringer' is based on a fictional account told by Dr Donald Harper Mills in a speech at an American Academy of Forensic Sciences function in 1987. Harper Mills told the story of 'Donald Opus' in order to demonstrate the complexities of legal practice in relation to homicide investigations. The speech has since gained the status of an urban legend (Mikkelson 2011).

determined by simultaneous events occurring during one night in Los Angeles.[194] *Magnolia*, like many of Anderson's films,[195] focuses on parent-child relationships poisoned by abandonment, abuse, and neglect. In this film, characters are loosely connected to one another, and have unwitting impacts on one another's lives. Two of the abusive fathers (Earl Partridge and Jimmy Gator [Phillip Baker Hall]) are presented at their most vulnerable — dying and weak — and at a point at which, in order to reconcile themselves with their past, they must face their wronged children. However, while they desperately attempt to come to a resolution with their children, both simultaneously recognise that redemption is impossible. Jimmy is incapable of responding to his wife when pressed on whether or not he molested their daughter, despite the film's narration visually confirming his guilt through a piece of text inserted into a picture frame in Claudia's house. Earl only decides to connect with his son, Frank (Tom Cruise), once he is no longer physically able to respond to his questions and anger.



[194] For a detailed explanation of conventional narrative structure and the construction of intelligible time and space see David Bordwell's 'Narrative Comprehension' section in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985 33-40).

[195] These themes can be seen in all of Anderson's films.

Figure 101 Attempts at redemption and connection thwarted

Magnolia's film world—a cinematic representation of a night in Los Angeles – could be seen to conform to the 'realism effect.' The events presented are recognisable character plights portrayed by known actors. These plights centre on universal themes of familial breakdown, distrust, death, and the (im)possibility of redemption. Anderson does not break with continuity editing, or the classical style outlined by Bordwell at the outset of this chapter. Within *Magnolia*'s incorporation of the realism effect, the condensed time frame of the *fabula* functions such that coincidence, chance, and fate are taken as thematic preoccupations rather than elements of narrative construction. Yet the constructed on-screen world of *Magnolia* does not conform with Rhodes and Gorfinkel's notion of mainstream film spectatorship. Rhodes and Gorfinkel write:

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

> rather so that we find a way of finding in the world's manifold particularity a universality worth sharing—everywhere. (2011, xxi)

In accordance with other films in the American Eccentric mode, this is partly attributable to Anderson's deployment of self-reflexive cinematic allusions and pop-culture references that work to both locate the film's diegesis as a recognisable and relatable place and simultaneously remove it from any completely comprehensible and immersive reality. Throughout *Magnolia*, footage from existing television programs *Entertainment Tonight* (1981-), *Cops* (1989-), and *The Quiz Kids Challenge* (Choderker 1990) present a verisimilitude that is incongruous with other allusions—the stylistic quotation of Martin Scorsese's tracking shots and focus on the problem of masculinity in father-child relationships,[196] Robert Altman's ensemble narratives, a literal rain of frogs, and the bizarre, and arresting use of Aimee Mann's music as a Greek chorus.

Anderson's creation of an intricate convergence of internal narrative and formal cinematic spaces find apposite depiction in a montage sequence in which the film's nine interrelated, yet narratively and physically isolated, protagonists sing Mann's 'Wise Up' (1996) from various states of consciousness, and disparate

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[196] As many reviewers noted, Anderson's cinematic style is notably influenced by Scorsese and Altman. Throughout Anderson's work, there is a focus on maleness; on underlying male violence, male solitude and a focus on relationships between male characters. Anderson's focus on masculine anxiety directly recalls Scorsese's recurring DeNiro characters Johnny Boy (*Mean Streets* [1973]), Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver* [1976]), and Jake LaMotta (*Raging Bull* [1980]), as clear examples of masculinity as a thematic preoccupation. In Anderson's work the problem of masculinity is often manifested in father/son tensions, be they surrogate or biological. See the *Boogie Nights* example presented in Chapter Three for an example of Anderson's intertextual quotation of Scorsese. Another clear example is the three minute tracking shot of the opening sequence of *Boogie Nights* provides a direct linkage to Scorsese's work. The camera opens on a square shot of the film's title lit up on a neon sign adorning a club on Van Nuys Blvd, the location recalling the 1979 film of the same name. The camera then pivots across the road, focusing on Jack Horner's car, as he and his wife Amber Waves enter the club Hot Traxx. The Andersonian trope of a locating caption situates the film in the San Fernando Valley, 1977. The camera follows Horner and Waves through the club, introducing all the key players of the film before landing on Eddie Adams, the teenager who will become Dirk Diggler. This scene, in shot formulation, directly recalls the Copacabana club sequence in Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990), in which similarly, a three minute tracking shot, coupled with narration by Karen, the wife of key protagonist Henry Hill, sequentially introduces the film's main characters as they move around the club.

locations throughout the city. The opening piano chords begin softly as Phil Parma (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a palliative care nurse, prepares to euthanize the terminally ill patriarch, Earl Partridge. Anderson then systematically cuts between the nine ensemble characters, establishing a linkage between their plights through Mann's lyrics and the affective tenor of the melancholic music. This linkage is not only produced through the mechanisms of conventional narrative montage, but rather interacts with the internal cinematic space and temporality of the narrative world, and the viewer's position. As the screenplay reads:

INT. EARL'S HOUSE - THAT MOMENT/NIGHT

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

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

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

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

CUT TO:

INT. CLAUDIA'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT/NIGHT

She looks at the coke in front of her. She hesitates. Her stereo is playing a song....it plays softly, then gets a bit louder....

She leans down and SNORTS the fat line of COKE. HOLD on her....she

starts to sing along with the song....

CLAUDIA

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

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

CUT TO:

INT. JIM KURRING'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT

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

JIM KURRING

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

CUT TO:

INT. JIMMY'S HOUSE - OFFICE - THAT MOMENT

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

JIMMY GATOR

"You're sure there's a cure and you

have finally found it"

CUT TO:

INT. DONNIE'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT

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

DONNIE SMITH

"You think....one drink...will shrink

'till you're underground and living down,

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

CUT TO:

INT. EARL'S HOUSE - THAT MOMENT

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

PHIL

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

going to stop...."

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

EARL

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

you wise up..."

CUT

TO:

INT. EMPTY PARKING LOT - THAT MOMENT

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

LINDA

"...prepare a list of what you need

before you sign away the deed, 'cause

it's not going to stop..."

CUT

TO:

INT. FRANK'S CAR - PARKED - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA pushes in a bit on Frank, singing along.

FRANK

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

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL LIBRARY - THAT MOMENT

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

STANLEY

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

PULL BACK.

(Anderson 1998a)

Despite Anderson's careful indications that the events of *Magnolia* are occurring concurrently within Los Angeles, until this moment there is no suggestion that the characters are aware of one another's existence (although their personal histories intertwine) or immediate actions. The chorus problematizes the previously assumed naturalism in regard to cinematic space, as the characters appear to react to each other within the film's diegetic world and beyond that world's construction in the actor's performed roles. In this moment it becomes clear that unlike other films which stress 'the interconnectedness of places within the city via networks of transportation, communication, circulation and exchange' (AlSayyad, 39), such as *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis)* (Ruttmann 1927), or

Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (Linklater 1991), *Magnolia* does not present Los Angeles as a protagonist itself, but rather as a series of pre-formed frames within which characters and action may be placed. Rather than being connected by an organic, living city which forces characters to interact with one another, these disparate characters are connected by Anderson's placing them within the frame and the formal construction of a written screenplay. *Magnolia*'s Los Angeles is a spatio-temporal location that is constructed around character connections, rather than a city that contains and perpetuates connections by virtue of its urban networks.

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

> space constructed in film is exactly *a filmic construction*… The filmic construction of space is recognized in its difference but that difference is the term of an ultimate similarity (indeed, a final 'illusion'); the space is 'unlike' but at the same time 'reconstitutes', using the elements lifted from real space. In fact, we are back in the realm of 'composition', where composition is now the laying out of a succession of images in order to give the picture, to produce the implication of a coherent ('real') space; in short, to create continuity. (1981, 40-1 emphasis in original)

Heath argues that the 'invisibility,' or in his terms 'transparency' of the classical form of narrativisation should be reconsidered as a form in which the off-screen is not a hidden or discounted space, but rather a contained element of narrativisation. Movement between the on-screen and the off-screen 'defines the rules of continuity and the fiction of space they serve to construct, the whole functioning according to a kind of metonymic lock in which off-screen space becomes on-screen space and is replaced in turn by the space it holds off, each joining over the next' (45). Conventional joins are meticulously selected such that

> the off-screen space recaptured must be 'called for', must be 'logically consequential', must arrive as 'answer', 'fulfillment of promise' or whatever (and not as difference or contradiction) – must be narrativized. Classical continuity, in other words, is an order of the pregnancy of space in frame; one of the narrative acts of a film is the creation of space but what gives the moving space its coherence in time, decides the metonymy as 'taking place', is here 'the narrative itself', and above all as it crystallizes round character as look and point of view. The fundamental role of these is exactly their pivotal use as a mode of organization and organicization, the joining of a film's constructions, the stitching together of the overlaying metonymies. (Heath 45-46)

Although the formation of a chorus of nine disconnected, damaged protagonists in their isolated states (and from various states of consciousness), in response to one another as well as to Mann's song is in actuality impossible, *Magnolia*'s 'Wise-Up' scene does not break with Heath's notion of continuity. Rather, what is confronting about this sequence is its over-fulfilment of these criteria. As Bordwell notes, rather than rejecting the continuity techniques of conventional cinema in order to depict incoherent or fragmentary narratives, many contemporary films employ an intensification of continuity techniques (2006, 120). *Magnolia* in part signals its film world's artifice by fulfilling continuity expectations to excess. The contrivance of a chain of action between these spatially isolated characters is created by cutting between what would normally function as eye-line matches. Each character is seen, alone, singing a line from the song that seemingly speaks for their personal (and collective) situation. As the individual lines of the lyrics sung by each character follow on from one another (rather than accumulate or build to an actual chorus), they are framed as though they could be in dialogue with one another. The visual and lyrical matches spill over a naturalistic diegesis and the sequence serves as an aberration that exists, like Mann's music, neither wholly in or out of frame.

Gorfinkel describes the deeply affecting nature of Mann's 'Wise Up' in *Magnolia* as a 'sing-along effect' that 'invites the audience towards a measure of self-reflexivity but also back into a mode of affective absorption, almost as a function of

their incredulity…This performed synchronicity between characters paradoxically threatens to disrupt narrative cohesion and continuity, as the overarching melodramatic realism of the film is suddenly made 'implausible'(162). This moment undoubtedly situates the viewer in order to encourage the recognition of their own position in relation to popular cultural memory and film history through the noted 'implausibility' of this moment, however, as Gorfinkel suggests, this contrived moment of unification is simultaneously affecting and cathartic. However, the affective quality of *Magnolia* is always intertwined with its reflexivity that demonstrates to the audience the construction of the film's world and, within it, the narrative and characters.

The reflexivity of the narration in *Magnolia* is apparent at a number of moments within the film. The film's strongest moment of visual absurdity within its predominantly naturalistic *mise-en-scène* comes at its climax—a literal rain of frogs, which undoubtedly serves as a reference to the Plagues of Egypt in the book of Exodus (Ex 8:1-15).[197] The moment occurs shortly after the deeply affective 'Wise Up' sequence, when each character experiences their deepest moment of despair. Phil Pharma has aided the euthanasia of Earl. Earl's adulterous wife, Linda (Julianne Moore) has attempted to commit suicide. Claudia has denied herself the chance of genuine connection with Jim after he has revealed his embarrassment at his inadequacies as a policeman. Quizkid Donnie (William H. Macy) embarks on a larcenous act against his ex-employer in a bid for financial gain that he hopes will

[197] The Plagues of Egypt are detailed in the book of Exodus. In this book God inflicts ten plagues (water into blood, frogs, gnats, flies, death of animals, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and death of the firstborn) on Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to free the Israelites, and liberate these enslaved people so that they could form a faithful nation for the future. Exodus 8;1-5 reads 'And the Lord spoke to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: "Let My people go, that they may serve Me. But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all your territory with frogs. So the river shall bring forth frogs abundantly, which shall go up and come into your house, into your bedroom, on your bed, into the houses of your servants, on your people, into your ovens, and into your kneading bowls. And the frogs shall come up on you, on your people, and on all your servants."' "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your hand with your rod over the streams, over the rivers, and over the ponds, and cause frogs to come up on the land of Egypt".'

result in a romantic connection, and Jimmy Gator prepares to shoot himself for his sins against Claudia. The narrative form of *Magnolia* draws clear links to Altman's *Short Cuts* (Altman 1993), which similarly focuses on a collection of intersecting stories set in Los Angeles over a condensed period of time. Like *Magnolia*'s rain of frogs, *Short Cuts* features a catastrophic 'act of nature' at its climax; an earthquake. However, *Short Cuts* is more judgemental and misanthropic, with its ensemble structure highlighting bad interpersonal connections, whereas *Magnolia* empathetically depicts fraught attempts to rectify lost and missed interpersonal connections. Within this framework, as *Short Cut*'s earthquake coincides with a double murder, the 'natural disaster' acts as a biblical condemnation.

Figure 102 The rain of frogs

Mangolia's rain of frogs, on the other hand is a deluge that provides revelation for its characters. Most obviously, a falling frog knocks Jimmy Gator's gun from his

hand just as he reaches for the trigger. Another frog collides with Donnie as he scales a wall in order to commit his crime, knocking him to the ground. With Jim Curring (John C. Reilly) witness to Donnie's attempted felony, he is able to aid the injured Donnie and reinstate his position as a competent and compassionate officer of the law.

Figure 103 Altman's earthquake in *Short Cuts*

Figure 104 Anderson's redemptive rain of frogs

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

Figure 105 Stanley explains to the spectator, 'this is something that actually happens'

This line foregrounds Anderson's narrative structure as one that is not simply thematically concerned with chance, purpose, and fate, but that has these elements written into the diegesis in order to highlight the sincere concerns about death, family, obligation, guilt, and forgiveness. The narrative strategy and thematic concern is perhaps most evident in a telephone conversation in a scene in which Phil Parma attempts to reconnect Frank Mackey with his estranged, dying father, Earl. In that scene, Phil pleads with Frank's employee to aid him in this undertaking:

> I know this sounds silly, and I know that I might sound ridiculous, like this is the scene in the movie where the guy is trying to get a hold of the long lost son. You know, but, this is that scene. This is that scene. And I think they have those scenes in movies because they're true. You know, because they really happen. And you gotta believe me, this is really happening.

If, as Jill Nelmes asserts, dialogue functions in the screenplay 'first to make the storyworld more believable, to create a world in which the characters talk, have voices, real people; and second, to provide narrative information as the film characters express themselves in their fictional world' (2010b, 217), then articulations such as this must serve as hyper-dialogue, presenting pure cinematic characters, and highlighting the impossible Eccentric world that has been constructed to house the genuinely affective narrative presented. The address of this statement engages the

audience in an interplay between cinematic imagining and plausible representation without requisite emotional detachment. This may indeed be happening, the affective qualities of films in the American Eccentric mode are real, however, it is only on-screen that these events take place.

Magnolia signals its denouement with an intertitle. This intertitle reads: 'So Now Then'. The shot cuts back to the three separate events that commenced the film. We are again presented with impossible footage—the newsreel, the shot of the scuba diver in a tree, and the suicide while the narrator begins, 'and there is the account of the hanging of three men; and the scuba-diver; and the suicide'

Figure 106 The three deaths that bookend *Magnolia*

The narration is then layered over a montage sequence of the Earl's dead body being removed from his home after the deluge—

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

As moving and revealing as this narration is—it comes after the impossible events of the film have concluded. The events presented *within the movie* were, indeed, *unbelievable*, and yet narrative and characters are deeply moving. The rain of frogs has finished, and with it the protagonists are shown in a state of emotional reconciliation, understanding, and recognition. On-screen we see Jim first consoling Quizkid Donnie, then escorting him to return his stolen goods. In the place of Jim's diegetic dialogue with Donnie,[198] we hear his voice-over narration 'summing up' the film's thematic concerns, through his personal reaffirmation of purpose in his role as a police officer. Anderson, however, again combines the diegetic and extra-diegetic planes of *Magnolia* by cutting back to Jim, who, having rectified Donnie's situation, is

[198] This dialogue is heard faintly below the voiceover, however the words are unable to be distinguished.

shot sitting in his car reflecting on the narrative's events. Jim's diegetic dialogue in this moment is no longer inaudible, but becomes that which is heard as voice-over. He continues 'if you can forgive someone, well, that's the tough part. What can we forgive? Tough part of the job. Tough part of walking down the street.' The convergence of diegetic and extra-diegetic planes in this final thematic summation signifies the affective function of the Eccentric film world's impossible spatio-temporal organisation. These lines are spoken with sincere intent and carry a poignant, affective charge. Jim's monologue concludes with slow, piquant guitar strumming of Aimee Mann's 'Save Me' (1999) as he resolves to connect with Claudia.

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

Figure 107 Claudia's reflexive smile

Bordwell suggests that, 'at the level of extrinsic norms… the most coherent possible epilogue remains the standard' (1985, 159). The coherent epilogue is a brief sequence that depicts a clear end to the narrative in which significant story motifs are reinforced and protagonists are presented in a stable state that has been achieved through the resolution of narrative crises (Bordwell, 157-159). Bordwell notes that the high degree of narrative neatness and unity in the epilogue format is a contrivance that promotes the impression of closure, despite the fact that some secondary or tertiary narrative elements may remain unresolved. Thus, 'instead of "closure," it would be better to speak of a "closure effect," or even, if the strain of resolved and unresolved issues seems strong, of "pseudoclosure"'(1985, 159).

Magnolia employs the epilogue format—in the denouement each narrative strain is revisited, and the characters are presented as though they have begun the process of resolving their individual crises. This conventional strategy provides the spectator with the impression of narrative, and emotional closure. However, American Eccentricity enacts the 'closure effect' to excess—resolutions are *too* neat, they are unified to the point of reflexive contrivance. The reflexivity of the films' epilogues signal to the spectator that the Eccentric worlds are insular cinematic constructions, and as such, it is not that the narrative crises are resolved in the

epilogue— but rather that the entire diegesis is contained between the films' first and final frames. The insularity of these diegeses reminds the spectator of the disconnection of between the Eccentric world and the pro-filmic space, which in turn enables her 'close off' any emotional engagement with the characters and their narrative plights. Yet—this reflexive 'closing off' in the narrative endings does not actually resolve thematic problems presented within the films' stories—the sincere anxieties remain. The employment of the epilogue as a conventional narrative strategy gives the *appearance* of 'closure' as the narrative arcs are neatly resolved. However, in the American Eccentric mode it is the *thematic arcs* that remain unresolved—films are not open-ended in such a way that the spectator is unsure what a character will *do*, but rather the existential concerns presented as themes are not, and cannot be, reconciled. Thus, in signalling the film worlds' insularity, the safe, mediated access to the films' thematic preoccupations is reinforced. The spectator is reminded that the affecting forces of the narrative are contained. Bordwell's 'closure effect' therefore is used in the American Eccentric mode to provide the illusion of an emotionally satisfying ending—but these endings always are winking back at the spectator and reassure her of their knowing construction.

Unlike films with open endings—such as *The Graduate*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Midnight Cowboy* (Schlesinger 1969), and as Bordwell suggests, the psychological ambiguity of *Klute* (Pakula 1971), *3 Women* (Altman 1977), or *The Conversation* (Coppola 1974) in the New Hollywood—films in the American Eccentric mode do not enable their stories and characters to permeate the spectator's imagination, and by extension the broader cultural consciousness. These films from the New Hollywood import from arthouse cinema the lack of a clear-cut resolution in order to reaffirm 'ambiguity as the dominant principle of intelligibility'; 'life lacks the neatness of art, and *this art knows it*' (Bordwell 2006, 61-63). Thus, while films in the New Hollywood end, for the spectator, their worlds do not. *Midnight Cowboy* does not conclude with the ritual of a funeral; instead the poignancy of the film's ending

resides in the permanence of Ratso Rizzo's dead body on-screen as Joe approaches Miami. The audience is aware that Joe will have to part with Ratso outside of screen time. Elaine and Benjamin are daunted by the problems of the future in their final on-screen moments because it is implied and imagined that a future, for them, *exists*.

Films in the American Eccentric mode do not just end; they resolutely conclude their stories and enclose their diegeses. Claudia's smile is not a signal that 'everything will be alright' in the form of a classical Hollywood resolution, but rather an acknowledgement that the classical Hollywood narrative structure has been enacted to ensure that everything *appears* alright; that despite the numerous unresolved issues (including Claudia's anxieties), the film must conclude, and so performs its resolution reflexively. Just as Haynes signals the end of *I'm Not There*, and both Wes Anderson's and Charlie Kaufman's films consciously conclude, *Magnolia*'s final frame reinforces the artificiality of the Eccentric world, their pure cinematic inhabitants, and their relationship to cinema. This affirmation of the constructed nature of the film's world—the box and its parameters—does not preclude the emotional attachment or investment that may have been elicited by its contents. It does, however, contain them.

Conclusion

At the outset of this thesis, I discussed Jesse Fox Mayshark's work the American Eccentric filmmakers who emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Mayshark writes that their works react to the pervasive cultural tone of irony and cynicism in the late postmodern moment. Mayshark sees the role of irony in the 1980s and 1990s through David Foster Wallace's description of the milieu, as a mode of expression that had 'gone from liberating to enslaving'. Rather than providing a means of social, cultural, and political analysis and critique, Wallace laments that irony had become 'an end in itself' (quoted in Burn 2012, 48). The pervasiveness of irony and cynicism in the 1980s and early 1990s led to concerns that sincere expression would be received as naïve or lacking sophistication.[199] Jim Collins writes that the problematic relationship between the cynicism, sarcasm, and irony associated with 1980s postmodern films resulted in 1990s genre films either overtly incorporating or rejecting irony. Those films that incorporated postmodern irony, such as *Back to the Future III* (Zemeckis 1990) or *Scream* (Craven 1996), are classified by their 'hyperconscious intertextuality', whereas films such as *Field of Dreams* (Robinson 1989) or *Dances with Wolves* (Costner 1990) express a New Sincerity. Films in the New Sincerity mode rejected postmodern irony and intertextuality in favour of a return to sincere expression. The problem with Collins' formulation, as Warren Buckland notes, is that the 'New' Sincerity does not account for a *new* structure of feeling, but rather a return to a pre-existing form of sincerity. New Sincerity is

[199] Wallace does not mean to suggest that irony is necessarily a negative means of expression, but rather at the time of this interview, irony had become a means of stifling sincerity. Wallace states 'Irony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for. That's what made the early postmodernist great artists. The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicates. The virtuous always triumph? Ward Cleaver the prototypical fifties father? *Sure*. Sarcasm, parody, absurdism, and irony are great ways to strip off stuff's mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it. The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, *then* what do we do? Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone. Once everybody knows that equality of opportunity is bunk and Mike Brady is bunk and Just Say No is bunk, now what do we do? All we seem to want to do is keep ridiculing the stuff' (emphasis in original, 48).

simply a rejection of postmodern irony. The sincerity of *Dances With Wolves* is no different to that exhibited in *Casablanca* (Curtiz 1942) or *It's A Wonderful Life* (Capra 1946). American Eccentricity has a different relationship to sincerity—it is not a rejection of irony, but rather a hybridised form of expression.

In the American Eccentric mode, irony is not 'an end in itself,' nor is it devoid of sincerity. Rather, irony is employed *with* sincerity: the balance of emphasis may shift between the two positions, however, ironic articulation is always conjoined with sincere meaning. Nicholas Rombes makes a similar assertion in relation to New Punk cinema's ability both to 'evoke a sincere emotional response while, at the same time, to create the possibilities for the audience to see through the very mechanisms that elicit this response' (2005a, 74). In contrast to Mayshark's reading of American Eccentricity as an auteurist phenomenon, I argue that American Eccentricity is a mode. As a mode, American Eccentricity differs from, but overlaps with, New Punk cinema, particularly in Rombes' notion of the interaction between irony and sincerity. The coexistence of irony and sincerity that pervades the American Eccentric mode is not limited to the cinema, as Jerry Saltz identified in his 2010 review for New York Magazine:

> I'm noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows…It's an attitude that says, *I know that the art I'm creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn't mean this isn't serious*. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind. (Saltz 2010)

Vermeulen and van den Akker recognise Saltz' description of contemporary artmaking as part of the metamodern structure of feeling. The metamodern is a sensibility that relates to a broad range of tendencies across contemporary aesthetics and cultural practices that oscillate between modern sincerity and postmodern irony.

Importantly, rather than resting on either ironic or sincere positions, Vermeulen and van den Akker write:

> Both the metamodern epistemology (*as if*) and its ontology (*between*) should thus be conceived of as a ''both-neither'' dynamic. They are each at once modern and postmodern and neither of them. (5-6)

American Eccentric films parallel metamodernism in that they portray the search or pursuit for meaning and resolutions that can never be obtained. The pursuit for unattainable meaning is clearly seen in the plights of the Whitman brothers in *The Darjeeling Limited*, and Violet's aims in *Damsels in Distress* (Stillman 2011). Violet's ambitions to cure adolescent depression through musical theatre productions, and to start a dance craze that will 'enhance and elevate the human experience' by bringing together 'millions of people in a celebration of our God-given faculties', reflect the condition that

> metamodernsim moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of it's inevitable failure; it seeks forever a truth that it never expects to find... the metamodern thus wilfully adopts a kind of donkey- and-carrot double-bind. Like a donkey it chases a carrot that it never manages to eat because the carrot is always just beyond its reach. But precisely because it never manages to eat the carrot, it never ends its chase, setting foot in moral realms the modern donkey (having eaten its carrot elsewhere) will never encounter, entering political domains the postmodern donkey (having abandoned the chase) will never come across. (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 5)

The desire to abate essentially unresolvable, continuous existential anxiety articulated by Vermuelen and van den Akker strongly resonates with the American Eccentric mode. The Whitman brothers do not resolve their respective anxieties by the film's end. The brothers simply decide, as they did at their journey's beginning, to get a drink and smoke a cigarette. Violet does assemble students to perform Fred Astaire's and Joan Fontaine's 'Things Are Looking Up' routine from the 1937 film *A Damsel in Distress* (Stevens 1937),[200] and launches her dance craze, the *Sambola!*.

[200] From which Whitman's film ironically appropriates its name.

However, at the film's conclusion she is no closer to resolving her own identity issues, and remains an unhappy, intellectual construct of her own making. Stillman indicates this by contrasting Violet's to-camera smile, and epilogue stating 'the Sambola! later became the "*Sambola!* International Dance Craze"' with a subsequent intertitle reading, 'footnotes to come.'

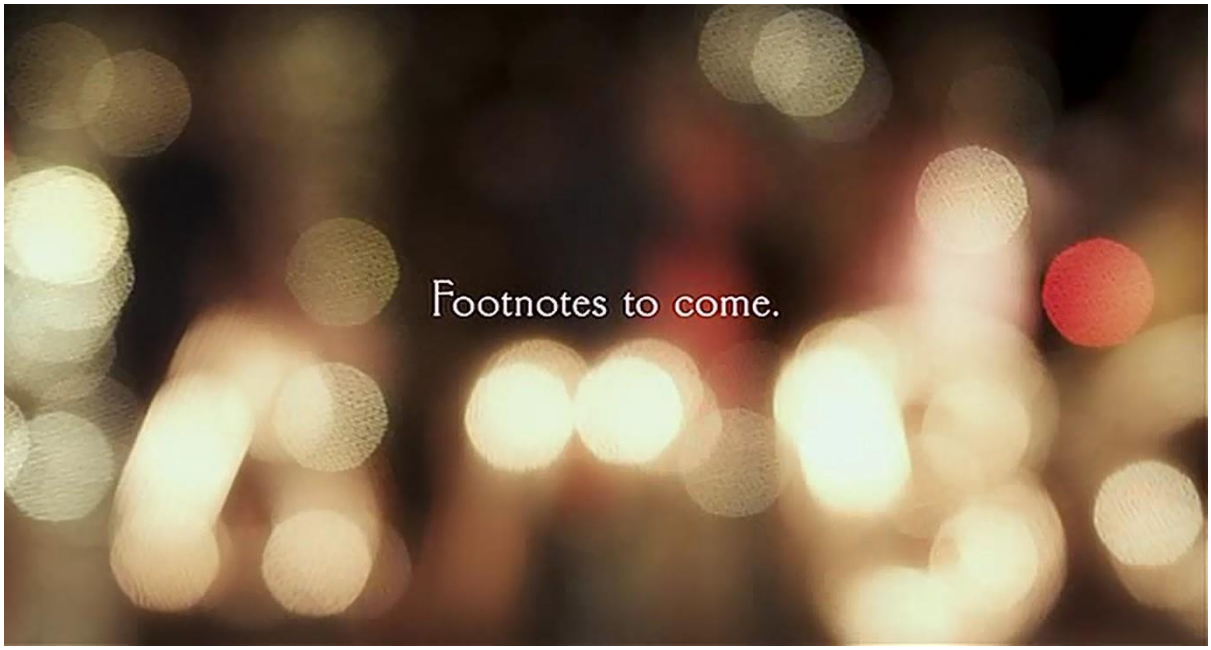

Figure 108 *Damsels in Distress*' epilogue

James MacDowell writes that the benefit of understanding the metamodern

> as a structure of feeling (and not necessarily, say, a philosophical position) is that it acknowledges the extent to which it will be expressed culturally in terms of an *emotional* logic as much as by any other means. Specifically, a structure of feeling is liable to manifest itself in the form of several *sensibilities* (just as happened for the postmodern as a structure of feeling, with its attendant 'nostalgia film', 'smart film', and so on).(2011, emphasis in original)

As a particular mode of cinema that portrays sincerity in concert with irony, it could be argued that American Eccentricity is a part of the metamodern structure of feeling alongside James MacDowell's quirky, Mayshark's Post-Pop cinema, Elena Gorfinkel's contemporary historical anachronism, Nicholas Rombes' New Punk cinema, and Lee Konstantinou's postirony, among others. Thus, I do not contend that American Eccentricity is wholly separate from the existing formulations put forth by the critics and theorists named, instead I posit that American Eccentricity is best conceptualised as a distinct cinematic mode, rather than a tendency or sensibility, that propels an essentially objectless form of anxiety concerned with 'being in the world' as a recurrent thematic position through a familiar, yet complex balance of ironic and sincere delivery.

In Chapter Two I differentiated between smart cinema and American Eccentricity. I recognised the importance of Jeffrey Sconce's initial formulation of a smart sensibility and Claire Perkins' subsequent work on smart cinema in relation to American Eccentricity in terms of the use of popular cultural references, irony, and intertextual quotation. Smart films use postmodern techniques and aesthetics in order to create an apathetic, blank tone, and ironic detachment. American Eccentric films, on the other hand, employ parody, irony, allusion, and intertextuality to facilitate a mediated access to existential anxiety as a thematic preoccupation of these films. The American Eccentric mode differs from Sconce and Perkins' smart cinema in terms of thematic and textual function, but further contrasts are evident in the ways in which these areas of film have been categorised. For Sconce, smart cinema is a sensibility that is mobilised through experimentation with tone, rather than form. Sconce uses the term 'sensibility', as its vagueness indicates that its 'objects cannot be reduced to finite stylistic or sociological terms' but rather manifest within a specific historical moment (Perkins 2012, 5). Perkins notes the 'ineffability implied in Sconce's use of the term sensibility' and builds on the aspects and aesthetics he outlined as tendencies within an affective force; perhaps best understood as a nebulous *tendency*' (4, emphasis in original) mobilised at the level of critical aesthetics. Perkins does not see smart cinema as a fixed type but rather aligns her formulation with Rick Altman's notion of a genre cycle—a recurring type of film that has not yet been established by the industry as a genre (Altman 1999, 82). The smart cycle is described as a nebulous tendency that lacks exactitude—a cycle in which films 'participate without membership' (16), yet all films identified by Perkins as participating in the cycle 'give rise to a formally and thematically self-conscious tone' (16). As discussed in Chapter Two, American Eccentricity and smart cinema are distinct areas of cinema that occupy overlapping theoretical and practical cinematic territory.[201] Where smart cinema is conceptualised as a tone of affect

[201] By virtue of recurrent discussion of works by filmmakers such as Wes Anderson, Hal Hartley, and Whit Stillman.

(rather than a set of cinematic elements), American Eccentricity is a mode that is recognisable in the recurrence of specific cinematic traits and strategies. Where Perkins' work seeks 'to release the notion of smart cinema from a fixed textual type to a constellation of forces and affects' (18), American Eccentricity as a textually identifiable mode, is a far more specific formulation.

American Eccentric films portray four notable textual characteristics: transgressions, subversions, and ironic play with genre; the use of hyper-dialogue as a dramatic device that functions to mediate sincere underlying thematic concerns for the viewer through ironic, reflexive speech; the shift toward pure cinematic characterisation; and the formulation of Eccentric cinematic worlds. These four textual elements present in the American Eccentric mode function in order to mediate genuine existential anxiety for the spectator. Mediation, in the American Eccentric mode, is in dialogue with Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekte* in that the mode employs reflexive postmodern techniques that remind the spectator of the confinements of the film's diegesis. Reflexive, metacinematic moments and techniques in the American Eccentric mode explicitly tell the viewer that what they are watching *is not real*, and thereby create a space for the spectator in which it is safe to engage with the thematic content of the film during screen-time, precisely because of her awareness that the film *will end*. This awareness enables the spectator to emotionally invest in pure cinematic characters and their Eccentric worlds, while intellectually distancing their plights from her lived experiences—the existential anxiety presented within each film is depicted as sincere, but manageable, because it is contained within the film itself.

As films in the American Eccentric mode are thematically occupied with familial breakdown, moral and ethical uncertainty, individual obligation, and above all, anxiety associated with alienation and dislocation, these works take the cultural and ideological imprints of the New Hollywood. The connection to the New

Hollywood has led some critics and theorists to conclude that a film movement, or loose auteurist grouping of Eccentrics, has emerged. Writers like *Variety*'s Charles Lyons herald David O. Russell, Kimberly Peirce, Paul Thomas Anderson, Alexander Payne, Spike Jonze, and Wes Anderson as a new breed of filmmakers who 'are less interested in fat, long-term studio pacts than in creating movies with resonance' (2001, par 1). The form of perceived industry rebellion identified by Lyons serves largely to mythologise this group of filmmakers as 'new-millennium helmers [who] are looking increasingly like the filmmakers of the counter-cultural '70s. Like their predecessors, they have little interest in listening to anything the multinational corporations have to say' (2001, par 13). The connection between the American Eccentric mode and the New Hollywood is significant; however, statements like Lyon's erroneously conflate the two different forms of filmmaking. American Eccentricity is a contemporary cinematic mode that reiterates and contemporises the anxieties of the New Hollywood through a prism of contemporary cinematic, industry, socio-cultural, and technological practices. The direct, un-complicated comparison to the New Hollywood as a re-emergence of style, ideology and practice, rather than the result of cinematic progeny, has undoubtedly spurred the desire to conceptualise this 'new breed' as a film movement (notwithstanding the complications with the classification of the New Hollywood as a film movement itself).

In his book, *Charlie Kaufman and Hollywood's Merry Band of Pranksters* (2008), Derek Hill considers Richard Linklater, David O. Russell, Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze, Sofia Coppola, Michel Gondry, and a series of 'single excursions'[202] as

[202] By Steven Soderbergh (*Schizopolis* [1996]), Roman Coppola (*CQ* [2001]), Richard Kelly (*Donnie Darko* [2001]), Paul Thomas Anderson (*Punch-Drunk Love* [2002]), and George Clooney (*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* [2003]).
Charlie Kaufman wrote the screenplay for *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, however, unlike his collaborations with Spike Jonze, and Michel Gondry this film is less distinctively 'Kaufmanesque'. Hill writes that this is in large part due to Clooney's lack of desire to meet with Kaufman, and his active rewriting of large sections of the script, despite openly expressing admiration for the original (Hill 169).

comprising the first American film movement to arise since the New Hollywood. Hill names this 'new wave' of filmmaking the (New) American Wave. As the evocative name suggests, Hill links the (New) American New Wave to both the French New Wave of the late 1950s and 1960s, and the anti-establishment New Hollywood film movement of the late 1960s and 1970s (although perhaps only as the New Hollywood cannot be discussed in isolation from the French New Wave). Bordwell and Thompson assert that within film movements,

> filmmakers typically operate within a common production structure and share certain assumptions about filmmaking. Above all, they share a certain approach to form, style, and theme that sets them somewhat apart from the usual practice. They innovate. Movements, then, are *un*traditional in some ways. They press filmmakers to make unusual formal and stylistic choices. (2012, 462)

The criteria outlined by Bordwell and Thompson can be mapped onto established film movements, such as Italian Neorealism, the French New Wave, and British Free Cinema.[203] However, Hill writes that unlike these other 'new waves' (the French New Wave, and the New Hollywood) the filmmakers that he includes in this (New) American New Wave category are 'not bound by any conscious aesthetic, philosophical, or political outlook,' but rather their works are 'highly idiosyncratic yet intricately realised, accessible yet always grounded in human emotions. [This new breed of film] captures the angst of its characters and the times in which we live, but with a wryness, imagination, earnestness, irony, and stylish wit' (35). The employment of earnestness and irony to capture the angst of characters certainly coalesces with my notion of an American Eccentric mode. However, the absence (in Hill's view) of an aesthetic, philosophical, or political motivation for (New) American New Wave Hill contradicts his own definition of a film movement as a

[203] Vivian and Thomas Sobchack write that Italian Neorealism eschewed neatly packed narratives in favour of more open-ended imitations of everyday life, the French New Wave rejected conventional stories adapted from literary texts and focussed on contemporary concerns told through similarly contemporary means, and the British Free Cinema advocated sincere depictions of the experiences of the middle and lower class Britons through gritty realism (1980, 218-220).

'group of filmmakers intentionally attempting to spark a revolution within their cameras…[the film movement is a] genuine, conscious, aesthetic movement – with or without manifesto – determined to subvert the mainstream culture' (11). American Eccentricity cannot be considered in auteurist terms, or as a 'new wave' as not all filmmakers operate solely within the American Eccentric mode through a unified approach to filmmaking, nor do all films within this form necessarily operate within the same production structure. Many (though notably not all) films within the American Eccentric mode have been produced through the specialty divisions of larger conglomerates (e.g. Fox Searchlight, Sony Pictures Classics) where budgets typically range between $25-35 million (before marketing) (Schatz 2009, 49), or other 'indie' producers or distributors (previously Miramax, New Line etc.). While these production models have, to date, been the most prominent, they are not uniform nor do they necessarily facilitate similar production conditions. I therefore discriminate American Eccentricity specifically as a mode of cinematic expression rather than a cinematic or auteurist 'movement'.

In order to discuss American Eccentricity as a film movement, or an auteurist phenomenon, a clear set of criteria for the inclusion, and subsequent exclusion, of filmmakers must be established. Mayshark notes that in his formulation, the American Eccentrics are 'an odd bunch, and not even obviously identifiable *as* a bunch' (5 emphasis in original), however, they are connected by certain (somewhat superficial) biographical connections—each being a white, (mostly) heterosexual, American male from middle-class or upper middle class backgrounds, (mostly) born in the 1960s (8).[204] These biographical similarities, even if we acknowledge (as Mayshark does) their relative superficiality, remain problematic criteria, as

[204] Mayshark does concede that all groupings of artists are somewhat arbitrary.
There are some minor exceptions to Mayshark's criteria. Mayshark notes that Michel Gondry (who is only considered in collaboration with Kaufman), is French. Todd Haynes is openly homosexual, and the female director Sofia Coppola is included as a 'Fellow Traveller' to the American Eccentrics (rather than a key member). Also, David O. Russell was born in 1958, Coppola in 1971, and 'Fellow Traveller' Richard Kelly was born in 1975.

recognising these aspects in any capacity excludes serious consideration of a number of filmmakers, such as Miranda July, Hal Hartley, and Whit Stillman who fall outside these categories.[205] An auteurist approach similarly denies the inclusion of single films, such as Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006), or Mike Mills' *Thumbsucker* (2005), within the category.[206] Just as Mayshark recognises that any grouping of directors is necessarily problematic in its criteria, Hill acknowledges that discussions around film movements embrace various factual distortions and careful selectivity in order to maintain their position in the history of cinema (25). Despite these definitional caveats, both Mayshark and Hill continue to use the categorisations they concede to be flawed. Approaching American Eccentricity as an auteurist phenomenon or as a movement privileges the commonalities between filmmaker's *oeuvres* over thematic and textual strategies, and therefore works less to elucidate the cultural functions of these films. I thus consider American Eccentricity as a mode (as opposed to a purely auteurist occurrence, or a film movement, period, or era) in which existential anxiety, as a central theme, is treated with trepidation and discomfort, and is therefore expressed through ironic and reflexive articulation.

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[205] Miranda July falls outside of the (arbitrary) boundaries outlined by Mayshark on the basis of gender, Whit Stillman on the basis of age (born 1952), and Hal Hartley due to his blue-collar upbringing (see Peter de Jong's article 'The Jean-Luc Godard of Long Island' [1994] and Mark Berrettini's book *Hal Hartley* [2011]).

[206] Mayshark does signal that there are three filmmakers, Sofia Coppola, David Fincher, and Richard Kelly, who can be seen as 'fellow travellers' to the American Eccentrics as all three exhibit a sense of alienation in their work through their portrayal of characters in search of meaning, purpose and existential significance. However, due the inconsistencies in their *oeuvres* (Fincher) and/or an insufficient body of work from which to draw conclusions (Kelly and Coppola) these filmmakers cannot (yet) be considered American Eccentrics in Mayshark's terms (163-85). Sofia Coppola, who along with Richard Kelly, was regarded by Mayshark as not having 'produced enough work to warrant [their] own chapter' (161) at his time of writing, has since directed two films — *Somewhere* (2010), and *The Bling Ring* (2013).
Existential anxiety is an unwavering theme throughout Sofia Coppola's *oeuvre*. *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) is an ethereal sketch of the five teenage Lisbon sisters and their suicides in the 1970s, drawn from the remembered observations of their male neighbours. *Lost in Translation* (2003) is an acquiescent portrait of inter and intrapersonal isolation, and alienation in a foreign environment. *Marie Antoinette*, *Somewhere*, *The Bling Ring*, and *Lost in Translation* are concerned with the meandering, aimless existences of the wealthy youths for whom the world seems disconnected from their actions. Among these films, *Marie Antoinette* is distinguishable as the work most clearly aligned with the American Eccentric mode.

In each chapter of this thesis I have identified one of the four notable textual characteristics that are consistent in the American Eccentric mode. In Chapter One, I analysed the relationship of American Eccentricity to genre through the study of transgressions, subversions, and ironic play of the New Hollywood road movie in relation to *The Darjeeling Limited* and *Being John Malkovich*. I established that American Eccentricity modifies the road film genre in an adjectival sense through its relationship to reflexive postmodern techniques to express existential anxiety. Through close readings of *Easy Rider* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*, I positioned the New Hollywood road film in dialogue with the Western, Western frontier mythology, the failed American Dream, and the countercultural zeitgeist. In the New Hollywood, the road motif both thematically and formally presented a site for cultural and personal existential interrogation. I concluded that despite presenting the road as a potential site for liberation and existential interrogation, the anxieties that stimulated the New Hollywood journeys were fundamentally unresolvable. American Eccentric road films parody, ironise, and subvert genre expectations and conventions while maintaining the sincere existential motivations for the road travel. The American Eccentric road thus occupies an uneasy space between its historical promise of liberation and the simultaneous awareness of its failure in the New Hollywood.

In Chapter Two I theorised the shift toward pure cinematic characterisation in the American Eccentric mode through close analysis of Wes Anderson's films. I contrasted the American Eccentric pure cinematic character with the cinematised peer of the New Hollywood. The New Hollywood cinematised peers, such as Benjamin Braddock (*The Graduate*) and Charlie *(Mean Streets*), promote alignment with figures able to be imagined and identified with, outside the confines of the cinema. Pure cinematic characters, on the other hand, are idiosyncratic, yet unidentifiable as depictions of real people. As pure cinematic characters are both created for contained by a particular film's diegesis they are always viewed from a distanced position. Where cinematised peers were created as representations of real

people who reacted on-screen to the real-life frustrations and mood of their audience, pure cinematic characters are at once peculiar and empathetic, yet consciously created to inhabit only a specific cinematic milieu. Like the cinematised peer, the plights of the pure cinematic character centre on genuine existential issues; however, the pure cinematic character slides between an emotional alignment and identification that does not emerges through coercion or force but rather is encouraged and desired, and a semi-absurdity in which the place and role of the cinematic construction of character within the film is highlighted. A significant aspect of pure cinematic characterisation is the role of unnatural dialogue in the place of 'plain speaking' in the New Hollywood. Dialogue in the American Eccentric mode is consciously written for, and delivered by, pure cinematic characters. In Chapter Three I identified hyper-dialogue as a dramatic device that functions to mediate sincere underlying thematic concerns for the viewer through ironic, reflexive speech and traced its use in *I Heart Huckabees*. I described the naturalistic dialogue of the New Hollywood as an *absent-script*—the aesthetic effect of the deliberate invisibility of a structured script in contrast to the American Eccentric *present-script*—the aesthetic effect of an obviously recognised performed script.

Chapter Four positioned the genre subversions, pure cinematic characterisation, and presence of hyper-dialogue in relation to the construction of Eccentric worlds. In contrast to New Hollywood films, which situate their idealised peers within cinematic worlds that aim to reflect objective or subjective realities (or both), American Eccentric films present cinematic worlds that are partly familiar, yet impossible realities. American Eccentric worlds are anachronistic assemblages that accentuate their own artifice for the benefit of narrative construction and structure. Unlike the 'real' locations of the New Hollywood, Eccentric film worlds do not attempt to capture the essence of known locations—instead these worlds are constructed from allusions to other films and popular culture. Eccentric worlds are assemblages that contain parodic and reflexive aesthetics, subversions of genre

convention, and visual and spatio-temporal incongruity in their narrative structures, such that pure cinematic characters are not incongruous with their diegeses. These four textual characteristics delineate the American Eccentric mode from the existing sensibilities and tendencies that have identified and theorised the complex relation between ironic and sincere expression in contemporary film and culture.

The connection between American Eccentricity and the New Hollywood is the shared thematic preoccupation of existential anxiety. Where the New Hollywood presented existentialist concerns as cultural manifestations through actual events and reactions to real-life issues, American Eccentricity does not bind anxiety to external sources—in the absence of the cultural and national tumult that presented external and legitimate sites for existential concern, anxiety in the American Eccentric mode is ungrounded and, essentially, objectless. Thus, films such as *I'm Not There* and *Southland Tales* demonstrate a cultural phenomenon in which the existential anxieties are no longer directly accessed and discussed as they had been in the New Hollywood's *Alice's Restaurant*, *Easy Rider*, or *Five Easy Pieces*. But the fact that this modality can be characterised as American Eccentricity leads one to ask whether there is something inherently *American* about this existential anxiety. The Declaration of Independence pronounces 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' (U.S. 1776) as the foundation of the American political and philosophical ideal. By focusing on racial, economic, and generational issues, New Hollywood films offered a critique of American society as failing these ideals. These New Hollywood films, like *The Graduate*, comment negatively on the manifestation of selfish materialistic gain and complacency as the false fulfilment of those foundational moral values and philosophical ideals. Benjamin's return from college brings with it a socio-cultural imperative to 'mature' and assimilate with the bourgeois 'Americanness' of his parents' generation. However, his transition into 'American' adulthood reveals that the materialism of the older generation promotes

only feigned fulfilment—it is essentially hollow. Benjamin's ultimate rebellion is to reinscribe this American narrative with sentimentality and hope for the future, but *where* can this future possibly take place? In the film's final sequence, Benjamin and Elaine face an unknown fate—not with exuberance, but with the uncertainty and trepidation of embarking on a journey that, ultimately, has nowhere to go.

The New Hollywood period emerged at a time when perspectives on American social and political agendas and the character of American fulfilment were splintering, again along racial, economic, and generational divides. The Civil Rights movement, the excesses of capitalism and its connection to imperialist involvement in Vietnam, and a rising counter-cultural movement that questioned the state and direction of American society provided the New Hollywood filmmakers with a set of characters, situations, and scenes that could act synecdochically to be read against the background of the nation as a whole. In the absence of the tangible, concrete political, and socio-cultural events onto which the anxieties present in the New Hollywood can be mapped, American Eccentricity negotiates the blurred scenarios of postmodern America, which does not promote clear cultural divisions or polarised socio-political perspectives. The existential anxiety exhibited by American Eccentricity is not directed at any identifiable object, but rather relates to the nature of 'being in the world' articulated by European existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Existential anxiety here is not an experience shared among a generation with common symptoms, but rather exists as individualised and idiosyncratic manifestations. This form of anxiety is located in the experience of existing in a world devoid of meaning. These classic anxieties are not new to American Eccentricity. The previous chapter instanced a party scene in Cassavetes' *Shadows* in which a bourgeois woman's intellectual conversation is contrasted with Lelia's flirtatious interaction with David. The bourgeois woman declares to another:

> I don't understand your viewpoint. Jean-Paul Sartre has absolutely nothing to do with existential psychoanalysis!...The trouble with you is, you have a

> case of self-induced hysteria every time you hear the word 'existentialism.' Are you aware of that? It's perfectly obvious. Man in contrast to other animals is conscious of his own existence, therefore conscious of the possibility of nonexistence. Ergo, he has anxiety.

This generalised articulation communicates the form of anxiety that remains present in the American Eccentric mode. By assigning this dialogue to an un-relatable bourgeois woman, *Shadows* questions these classic anxieties because they distracted from actualities of social existence implicated in larger, but less pressingly philosophical issues, represented by the complex interracial relationship of Lelia and David.[207] Cassavetes here portrays the innate anxieties of the human condition as an intellectualising of life at the expense of the specific challenges and questions posed by it. Existential anxiety in the American Eccentric mode is not fixed or articulated through tangible cultural concerns or events, and as such, is not depicted as a broader cultural manifestation but as isolated concerns tied to distinct individuals. Is it that in our contemporary moment America has seen a return of these large, generalised philosophical concerns but, in a post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, postmodern society these anxieties can no longer be pinned to social actuality and thus emerge fleetingly, situationally, personally—without broader cultural and social prominence? While both American Eccentric and New Hollywood films centre on a yearning for human connection, American Eccentric films portray the genuine hope for human connection from a position in which they predict and anticipate failure before the first frame.

[207] A similar, complex situation is presented in the salon sequence of *Five Easy Pieces* in which a bourgeois woman is negatively depicted while discussing ridiculously intellectualised concepts which are at odds with the real social issues of class and gender personified in Rayette and Bobby's relationship.

Figure 109 Contrasting conversations in *Shadows*

The American Eccentric mode can therefore be seen as a contemporary reimagining of Thomas Elsaesser's pathos of failure—the inability of the New Hollywood 'unmotivated hero' to fulfil the narrative functions of the classical Hollywood protagonist—to pursue a goal or react to a challenge presented (63). The unmotivated hero exhibits 'the moral and emotional gestures of a defeated generation' (Elsaesser, 283). American Eccentricity embodies filmic representation beyond the pathos of failure: the pursuit of existential journeys with genuine desire for unattainable resolution *despite* the awareness of their inevitable failure.

Sianne Ngai considers anxiety to be a weak, or 'ugly', feeling that is 'explicitly *a*moral and *non*carthartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor therapeutic or purifying release' (6, emphasis in original). As an ugly feeling, anxiety 'tend[s] to interfere with the outpouring of other emotions…[and is] defined by a flatness or ongoingness' (Ngai, 6-7). Thus, anxiety has a certain lingering impotence as it is not abated with cathartic release. Rather, the seemingly unjustifiable, and objectless nature of anxiety as an 'ugly' feeling often induces a reflexive negative reaction—an 'unpleasurable feeling *about* the feeling' itself (Ngai, 10). Ngai sees the association between anxiety and the emotional response it evokes in a very specific

relationship with irony. The largely objectless, generalised, and ephemeral nature of existential anxiety in the American Eccentric mode magnifies and enhances the emotion as the lack of locatable origins for the anxiety itself causes additional concern. It is the deployment of irony to distance anxiety, outlined by Ngai, that is at the core of the American Eccentric mode.

Ironic expression in the American Eccentric mode facilitates an engagement with the spectator that promotes access and connection with genuine existential anxieties, while simultaneously positioning her at a safe distance. *The Royal Tenenbaums* presents the spectator with crises of belonging, suicide, unrequited and socially acceptable love, familial breakdown, grief, and death—however, these sincere concerns are tempered with humorous, idiosyncratic pure cinematic characters, absurd hyper-dialogic utterances, and reflexive narration. The spectator is encouraged to fluctuate between engaging on an emotional level with the sincerity of the characters' plights, and a referential game-play with the intertextual references, and ironic postmodern play with allusion, parody, pastiche, and reflexive subversions of genre. American Eccentric characters and cinematic diegeses are at once highly, and reflexively, constructed and yet deeply affecting. The spectator is invited to recognise that the Los Angeles presented in *Magnolia* is not real, she is urged to identify the ensemble cast as characters played by known actors, and yet, she is encouraged to empathise with them and to allow the film world's impossibilities to emotionally move her within the confines of the films duration. American Eccentric films commence in order to tell a story with sincere implications, but just as importantly, they definitively conclude. Like a Cornell box, the American Eccentric films are enclosed. They invite the spectator to peer in, and find something genuine to which she can relate, to feel through the anxieties of the assembled world presented—but she must recognise the parameters of the box. The film does not create *the* world, but *a* world to be opened, explored, and then closed. The unapologetic self-conscious construction of American Eccentric films responds to the

contemporary position that despair, angst, grief and alienation are, as Chabon states 'at full scale, too big for us to take it in; [these feelings] literally cannot be comprehended' (2013b). American Eccentricity provides a means to access and play with the incomprehensible nature of existential anxiety; it also delivers the box in which to store it.

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