Directed, written and produced by Paul Thomas Anderson
Produced by JoAnne Sellar
Original Music by Jon Brion
Cinematography by Robert Elswit
Film Editing by Dylan Tichenor
Production Design by William Arnold, Mark Bridges
Set Decoration by Chris L. Spellman
Costume Design by Mark Bridges
Gray Miller… animator

John C. Reilly… Officer Jim Kurring
Tom Cruise… Frank T.J. Mackey
Philip Baker Hall… Jimmy Gator
Philip Seymour Hoffman… Phil Parma
Jason Robards… Earl Partridge
Alfred Molina… Solomon Solomon
Melora Walters… Claudia Wilson Gator
Michael Bowen… Rick Spector
Ricky Jay… Burt Ramsey / Narrator
Jeremy Blackman… Stanley Spector
Melinda Dillon… Rose Gator
April Grace… Gwenovier
Luis Guzmán… Luis
Henry Gibson… Thurston Howell
Felicity Huffman… Cynthia
Emmanuel Johnson… Dixon
Don McManus… Dr. Landon
Eileen Ryan… Mary
Danny Wells… Dick Jennings
Orlando Jones… Worm
Michael Murphy… Alan Kligman Esq.
Pat Healy… Sir Edmund William Godfrey / Young Pharmacy Kid
Genevieve Zweg… Mrs. Godfrey
Mark Flanagan… Joseph Green
Neil Flynn… Stanley Berry
Rod McLachlan… Daniel Hill
Allan Graf… Firefighter
Patton Oswalt… Delmer Darion
Raymond 'Big Guy' Gonzales… Reno Security Guard
Brad Hunt… Craig Hansen

Meskimen… Forensic Scientist
Chris O'Hara… Sydney Barringer
Clement Blake… Arthur Barringer
Frank Elmore… 1958 Detective
John Kraft Seitz… 1958 Policeman
Cory Buck… Young Boy
Tim Soronen… Infomercial Guy
Jim Ortlieb… Middle Aged Guy
Thomas Jane… Young Jimmy Gator
Holly Houston… Jimmy's Showgirl
Benjamin Niedens… Little Donnie Smith
Robert Downey Sr… WDKK Show Director (as Bob Downey Sr. 'a Prince')

(Note: in the credits lists, titles in italics are films; titles in quotation marks are television programs, series, or made-for-tv movies.)


André Crous; Paul Thomas Anderson: Tracking through a Fantastic Reality, Senses of Cinema, 25 November 2007

That Moment

In each of the four feature-length films directed by Paul Thomas Anderson, there is at least one visually arresting moment when a Steadicam follows a moving target in a long take, effecting a continuous trajectory forwards, backwards and sideways – descending from the heavens, winding through corridors and plunging into swimming pools. These shots respect dramatic time and space because of their continuity in both respects. This instance of visible continuity does not imply, however, the construction of a realistic diegesis in the Bazinian sense, for the content might originate somewhere foreign to our reality.

The focus of Paul Thomas Anderson’s films lies more on the spectacular presentation of their material than is the case in the films of Robert Altman, a director to whom he is inevitably (albeit simplistically) compared. Altman’s goal was a humanistic realism – the mimetic representation of daily conversations, for example. Anderson uses this kind of ambiance as one layer of his storytelling fabric, onto which he adds spectacular audiovisual imagery that no longer adheres to the laws of physical nature.

A self-made filmmaker without any film school education, Paul Thomas Anderson has written all of his films himself; he is the purest auteur of the contemporary movie industry – even obtaining the exceptional right of final cut on his projects.

The long tracking shot is a way for the director to display (in almost boastful fashion) his skills as a conductor of complex actions over time, and many of today’s top filmmakers have tried to top each other, sometimes completely undermining the credibility at the root of these shots’ success. David Fincher’s widely quoted tracking shot in Panic Room (2002) – the camera seemingly descends a staircase, enters a keyhole and proceeds to shoot past the handle of a coffee pot – is unashamedly manipulated by special effects and strictly speaking doesn’t even qualify as a continuous shot. While the tracking shot that follows Bruce Willis past an apartment building, through a hole in the fence and across an open field in Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction (1994) is noteworthy, it contains but a single character and travels in only one direction: forward. Much the same is true of another long Steadicam take in the same film, where Vincent Vega...
(John Travolta) walks around the Jack Rabbit Slim’s diner: forward movement, one central character, no dialogue.

In this regard, Anderson distinguishes himself with a firm grasp of mise en scène – he uses a multitude of props, characters, snippets of dialogue, music pumping full-blast on the soundtrack and pitch-perfect choreography – that remains engaging because of the cinematic energy he conjures up in the process.

**The Golden Thread of the PTA Canon**

Paul Thomas Anderson’s impressive visual virtuosity is not limited to his feature films. At first glance, *The Dirk Diggler Story* (1988), a 30-minute short film directed by a teenage Anderson, is a collection of interviews conducted after the death of the titular central character. In what could have been a modernist set-up for a mock documentary, Anderson pauses during the climax to provide a visually significant event: in a take that lasts 70 seconds, Paul Thomas Anderson’s camera tracks forwards, sideways and backwards around a pornographic film crew in prayer. It is a take filled with black humour and contradiction: having asked the Lord’s blessing that Dirk Diggler (Michael Stein) should perform without premature ejaculation, the take ends when Diggler has overdosed in the bathroom.

The singularity of the take’s visual form, the tracking shot that lasts much longer than anticipated, together with the narrative content, the supplication of divine action (prevention of flaccidity), creates suspense and expectation. These hopes are met with a decidedly downbeat response: the death of Diggler (even though still unbeknownst to both the viewer and the characters) and a cut. The moment of the great supernatural having passed, harsh reality intervenes and smashes the poise of the preceding shot.

Anderson’s next short film was the 24-minute *Cigarettes & Coffee* (1992) and is set almost exclusively at a small diner near Las Vegas. Anderson establishes an evident connection between the characters – two couples and a man – by means of tracking shots that link the conversations at various dramatic pauses. A spectacular low-angle push-in (or brief forward tracking shot on a static object) appears smack in the middle of the revelatory sequence of events that acknowledges a build-up of spatial and temporal coincidences. The shot neatly frames the mysterious stranger, whose fragmented presence right through the film is given meaning by the previous conversation and given stature by the visual form that Anderson employs. The push-in also demonstrates an energy that elicits a feeling of elation and exhilaration in the viewer.

With *Hard Eight* (1996), his first feature-length film, Paul Thomas Anderson’s bravura use of the Steadicam allows much more elaborately staged tracking shots, and his subsequent films all benefit from very skilfully directed long takes filmed with this apparatus that smooths out the camera’s movement. In fact, Anderson’s very first shot is a Steadicam tracking shot accompanying Sydney (Philip Baker Hall) as he crosses the road, walks over some stepping-stones and stops in front of a crestfallen John (John C. Reilly) sitting next to the entrance of a roadside diner. The director immediately emphasises what would become the basis for the signature shots of his films: the crafty tracking shot.

Half an hour into *Hard Eight*, hard on the heels of our first glimpse of the film’s fourth and final major character, Sydney crosses the length of a hall filled with slot machines and bright lights in a complex tracking shot that starts off filming him frontally, then from the side and finally from behind. The shot lasts 74 seconds. Sydney is the centre of attention almost throughout, except when the camera briefly pans away – while remaining in motion – and picks up Sydney elsewhere in the room moments later, when he reaches a craps table and throws the dice.

Framing the crucial dramatic turn of events in a motel, Anderson’s camera first executes a tracking shot, following Sydney from his car in the parking lot, up the stairs, along the outside corridor, to the door of the motel room. After an intense interior scene, the Steadicam tracks backwards, keeping the moving characters inside the frame, even as they descend the staircase, and ends the shot outside the parking lot, in the main street.

The first shot of *Boogie Nights* (1997) – a combination of Steadicam and crane work – is astounding in its complexity and is unmatched by any of Anderson’s previous (or subsequent) work. While Anderson tends to use his camera to explore the physical trajectory of his characters, this particular tracking shot uses the vertical axis and thus evokes a feeling of the impossible becoming possible. The camera descends from above to mix with the porn community below. Anderson’s aptitude as a director shines through not only in the complicated staging of the camera movements, but also in his mise en scène: the orchestration of his cast in a take that lasts 165 seconds – the longest shot duration in Anderson’s entire career.

Anderson’s dynamic camera work calls to mind the cinema of Martin Scorsese and it is only to be expected that this tracking shot will be compared to Scorsese’s legendary Steadicam shot at the Copacabana nightclub in *GoodFellas* (1990).

At a pool party later in the film, the camera eavesdrops on two separate conversations, snaking between the guests and the other sunbathers, and, after following a girl into the swimming pool, breaks the surface once more to show the character of Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg) jack-knifing into the pool from the diving board. Recognising his debt to the audacious construction of a particular shot in the first five minutes of Mikhail Kalatozov’s *Soy Cuba* (*I Am Cuba*, 1964), during which the camera dives into a hotel swimming pool, Paul Thomas Anderson spends as much time and effort developing his characters and establishing a communal space in which they and the camera can operate without restraint as he does in setting up a technically complicated shot and executing it with great skill and flair.

Another filmmaker who grew up on films as a way of forming himself in the craft of filmmaking is Quentin Tarantino. As
an interesting comparison, a scene at the beginning of Kill Bill: Vol. 2 (2004) supports the contention that the crane shot possesses some supernatural implication. The camera tracks back, from the altar to the front lawn of the church (a symbol of the divine), where the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad (DIVAS) arrives. They enter the church and proceed to kill most of its occupants whilst the camera ascends without losing sight of the killing spree. The camera may be seen as God (symbol of Good), who exits the church and allows the DIVAS (symbol of Evil) to enter and kill – He is watching from the heavens and does not interfere.

A more classical approach to the tracking shot, especially to its function as a complete narrative element with a set-up, a complication and a resolution, is evident at one of the evening parties Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds) in another demonstration of Anderson’s very impressive use of the Steadicam. William H. Macy’s character, Little Bill, enters Horner’s house through the front door and, whilst trying to locate his wife, wanders through the crowd. He finally manages to track her down among the madness and is stunned when he discovers her having sex with one of the guests. Little Bill returns to his car, takes his pistol, walks back to the bedroom and shoots both his wife and the other man. This continuous shot lasts 161 seconds and, while constantly focused on Little Bill, the camera executes forwards, backwards and sideways moves relative to him.

In Magnolia (1999), Anderson ups the stakes on every level. Dealing with coincidences and criss-crossing numerous major storylines in a film that lasts more than three hours, Magnolia’s climax seems to have been taken from a myth. The major tracking shot in this film occurs within the world of television (the world of images), at the studio where a television quiz show called What Do Kids Know? is being shot. The camera, starting outside under a heavy downpour before entering the production building, follows or accompanies an assortment of characters as they pass each other in the corridors, into elevators and greenrooms: 1) Stanley (Jeremy Blackman) and his father (Michael Bowen); 2) Stanley, his father and Cynthia (Felicity Huffman), the show’s coordinator; 3) Stanley’s father; 4) a production assistant; 5) Stanley and Cynthia; 6) Mary (Eileen Ryan), the assistant of Jimmy Gator (Philip Baker Hall).

The shot lasts 122 seconds and ends – at first glance – without a significant climactic event. The last image we see before the cut to another brief tracking shot (picking up Mary, in post-modern fashion, at an angle perpendicular to her movement) is a big drawing of Gator’s face on the door. This image of an image (Jimmy Gator is a television icon), like the slow-motion used to highlight Dirk Diggler when he appears at the end of Boogie Nights’ opening shot, reminds us that the tracking shot is made up of both natural and unnatural elements, the latter sometimes revealing that reality is still one more step away.

The art form of the opera is often invoked in discussions about this film and with due pertinence. Magnolia is indeed operatic: it is a melodrama from beginning to end, glossed over with many of Aimee Mann’s songs, has a musical number (in which nine main characters sing one song together with disregard of all logic of space and collective presence) and even features a direct citation from an opera when Stanley sings an aria from Georges Bizet’s Carmen. A professional opera singer subsequently repeats this aria on the soundtrack, as if called upon by the young Stanley.

The previously mentioned musical number – in which most of the cast participates across the spatial divide and without any definite musical source – and the biblical climax are further events that blur the distinction between natural and preternatural. A spectacle creates a feeling of “being overwhelmed” and this sensation is produced by the capable hands of Anderson when he uses his camera, his editing (or lack thereof) and his screenplay in innovative ways to create a vital energy on-screen.

The poster image of Punch–Drunk Love (2002) features Adam Sandler and Emily Watson kissing in silhouette in the archway of a Hawaiian hotel. The Magritte-like image visually pinpoints the surrealism (or a sense of heightened reality) that pervades the entire narrative and interestingly it is the only shot taken from a fixed position within a cluster of seven shots – the others being either push-ins or tracking shots, symmetrically surrounding this central image. Immediately following the magical image of the kiss, the camera meanders through an outdoor restaurant, swerving around tables, and finally fixes on the newly formed couple. Much like the impressive opening shot of Boogie Nights, the camera starts as an autonomous entity roaming freely (but propelled forward by a very audible soundtrack) before focusing on and accompanying one or more characters.

“So now then…”

While Paul Thomas Anderson’s tracking shots are much shorter and less elaborate than Alfonso Cuaron’s visual constructions that serve as complete scenes (the single-shot sequence of especially the neo-
realist filmmakers whom André Bazin held in such high esteem), the desire for the supernatural – to increase the spectacular aspect of his storytelling – is evident in these particular shots.

Furthermore, the extensive presence of magical realism in Anderson's most recent work should be emphasised. Certain events occur that the characters do not perceive as something totally out of the ordinary, and yet these events are always exceptional, and at times downright impossible. Magnolia's sing-along and the falling frogs certainly fit these categories. So too does the occurrence of the digits '8' and '2' throughout the film, ostensibly referring to Exodus 8:2 (directly cited at numerous intervals) – the biblical passage reporting on the imminent plague of frogs.

_Punch-Drunk Love_ is even more liberal in its treatment of reality. A mysterious light, that seems to emanate from the instrument itself, lights up the face of Barry (Adam Sandler) while he plays the harmonium for the first time. Luminous red, white and blue spots of unknown origin appear in the background during the car accident at the end of the film. Finally, there are the puddings that physically call out to Barry and instruct him (“Come here! Barry, come here!”) when he is most in need of assistance. Barry (highly-strung, but definitely not hallucinating) does not bat at eye at the apparent absurdity of this phenomenon.

The tracking shot fulfills an essential function in the creation of an illusion of the film’s realism, and the presence of some extraordinary elements within these supposedly unfeathered slices of reality casts a beautiful glow over the entire shot. Conversely, the presence of the long tracking shot within the structure of the film stabilises any tension that supernatural elements might otherwise create within a realist narrative. In this respect, Anderson’s tracking shots normalise the extraordinary with equally extraordinary panache.

**Gary Johnson: magn.mp3ia, Imagesjournal 8**

When Paul Thomas Anderson began writing _Magnolia_, he wanted "something small and intimate"--something he could shoot in 30 days. But as he wrote, his characters began to take over. Working with a theme of estrangement and parental relationships, Anderson discovered that relationships beget relationships. And soon he was weaving a complex network of characters and stories. Eventually he had at least twelve main characters and nine story lines. While the resulting movie is nearly three hours long, it nonetheless still feels intimate, but not necessarily so small anymore.

Anderson uses the accumulation of multiple stories to build the movie's intensity to levels that few single stories could ever achieve. This interconnectedness of the stories becomes a major focus of _Magnolia_. The movie even opens with a ten-minute prologue done in Ripley’s Believe It or Not fashion that examines three bizarre cases where happenstance reaches absolutely absurd proportions. In one case, a man attempts to commit suicide by jumping off a building, but he lands in a safety net erected for window washers. That's not so strange, you say? Well, the man would have survived the fall, but on his way down he was killed by an errant bullet. As he passed by a window, his own mother fired a gun shot during a domestic dispute. The shot killed her own son immediately. Anderson teases us with crazy coincidences like this before launching into the movie’s main stories. He wants to prime our eyes and brains so that we're open to accepting how the lives of his characters are interconnected.

After the prologue ends, Anderson begins introducing the main characters. His camera fluidly tracks around the participants as if the camera operators had wings, pulling us first into one story and then sliding sideways into the next. During these introductions, Anderson uses the old Three Dog Night hit "One" (as covered by Aimee Mann, who wrote several songs for _Magnolia_) as commentary on the characters: "One is the loneliest number ..." It's not the most subtle of approaches, and the music is played at such a high volume level that it effectively drowns out the actors, but Anderson makes his point: the characters in this movie are terribly alone. They need and want love. They need and want someone with whom they can share their lives. But the movie reinforces their isolation. Meanwhile, the specter of cancer casts a long shadow across their lives.

Earl Partridge (Jason Robards) is a wealthy television producer who is dying of cancer. With his final wish, he asks to see his son, whom he abandoned and hasn't seen in many years. Linda Partridge (Julianne Moore) is the young, beautiful wife of Earl. She married him for his money, but now, as she begins to loathe her mercenary ways, she discovers a deep attachment to her dying husband. Frank T.J. Mackey (Tom Cruise) is the estranged son of Earl Partridge. He's a television guru of female seduction. Just call 1-877-TAME-HER. For Frank, relationships are all about seducing and destroying, Donnie Smith (William H. Macy) is an ex-boy genius. In the '60s, he won thousands of dollars on a television quiz show. But time hasn't been kind to Donnie. Now he's barely hanging onto his job at an electronics store. Everything would be okay if the bartender at the corner bar would pay him some attention. Stanley Spector (Jeremy Blackman) is the new boy genius on "What Do Kids Know?" He knows all the answers, but all he really wants is his father's love. However, Rick Spector (Michael Bowen) only sees his son as a means of making it rich. Jimmy Gator (Philip Baker Hall) is the game show host. He has skeletons in his closet that explain why his daughter refuses to talk to him or show him any compassion when he tells her he has cancer. Claudia Gator (Melora Walters) is the daughter who dulls her senses with drugs, loud music, and meaningless sex. Officer Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly) is a compassionate but bumbling police officer who interviews himself as he drives in the squad car. When he's called to Claudia's apartment on a disturbing-the-peace call, he soon finds himself totally smitten. Even a blind man would've known that Claudia is trouble. All of these characters are horribly isolated in their own lives. Like the petals on a flower, each character is separate but they’re linked together. And it's those links that Anderson is interested in exploring. He wants to rip back the veneers that people erect around themselves and show us why they operate as they do. He wants to show us the
choices that people make and how those choices affect their lives and everyone around them.

One character, Earl Partridge's male nurse, Phil Parma (Philip Seymour Hoffman), is the one character in the movie who isn't trying to clean up his own life. But his profession places him in the role of helping others. When he attempts to locate Earl's long-estranged son, he sets in motion a stunning sequence of events. While Frank T.J. Mackey sits down for an interview with an interviewer who has definitely done her homework on Frank's past, Phil's telephone call is slowly passed from hand to hand, gradually coming closer and closer to Frank. As Frank's assistant walks down a hallway to the room where the interview is being filmed, the interviewer's questions begin to sting Frank's ego and rip away his cocky exterior. Meanwhile Jimmy Gator (Hall) struggles while hosting "What Do Kids Know?" His illness and his personal demons have begun to tear down his smiling exterior. During this same show, quiz kid Stanley Spector is suddenly refusing to answer any questions--making his father furious in the Green Room.

Few directors outside of Robert Altman deal with groups of characters as large as Anderson does in Magnolia. If anything, though, Anderson has better instincts as a storyteller than Altman. It would be difficult to imagine as lazy and unfocused a film as Altman's Kansas City coming from Anderson's imagination. Anderson loves the coincidences and unlikely occurrences that typically plague Hollywood movies. In Magnolia, he embraces those contrivances and imbues them with nothing less than mystical powers. Anderson even brings the movie to a conclusion by utilizing a phenomena of truly astounding proportions that must be seen to be believed.

Also like Altman, Anderson has attracted his own stock company of actors. Julianne Moore, William H. Macy, Philip Baker Hall, Philip Seymour Hoffman, John C. Reilly, and Melora Walters all had starring roles in Boogie Nights. And John C. Reilly, Philip Baker Hall, Philip Seymour Hoffman, and Melora Walters starred in Anderson's debut feature, Hard Eight. In Magnolia, several new (but familiar) faces appear amongst the usual Anderson troupe. Tom Cruise delivers one of the best performances of his career as a strutting, grinning womanizer who spreads his gospel through seminars where he gives away secrets such as "How to Fake Like You Are Nice and Caring." But Cruise lets us see past his bluster and smirks to the scars that mar his psyche. This is Cruise's gutsiest performance yet. Jason Robards also makes his first appearance in an Anderson movie. His role as a man dying from cancer is much more low key than Cruise's role. Before working on Magnolia, Robards had just recovered from a near-fatal illness of his own. He uses this experience to create a flawless portrait of a man struggling to make amends before he dies.

Among the Anderson veterans that appear in Magnolia, Philip Baker Hall is miscast as a game show host. Mr. Hall is many things, but he's not particularly charismatic--and he must be in order for us to believe his character is a nationally loved celebrity. But he's one of the few false notes in the movie. Julienne Moore delivers a stunning performance as the young wife of Earl Partridge (Robards). Her finest moment comes in a drugstore: after she turns in a handful of prescriptions to be filled, the drugstore assistant immediately becomes suspicious and starts making snide remarks about all the partying she could do with the drugs. Linda Partridge (Moore) does a slow burn before erupting in anger.

If there was any doubt about Anderson's stature among American directors, that doubt has been erased by Magnolia. This is a magnificent movie.

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