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Kathrin Swift

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Ao. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Monika Seidl

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Introduction

The last twenty years have seen a continuous rise in the popularity of a very special category of ‘experimental films’. This category has a wide range of different names – including ‘ensemble films’, ‘mosaic films’, ‘episodic films’, ‘fractal films’ and ‘network narratives’ – but one significant set of characteristics: multiple characters in separate and individual storylines, which eventually interweave into a network of actions. This striking structure is the reason for my choice of term – ‘network films’. My interest and fascination for this film category led to the observation that a significant number of network films are set in Los Angeles – an observation that eventually motivated the topic of my thesis. The aim of this thesis is thus the elaborate discussion of this strong connection between Los Angeles and network films. Generally, the topic will be approached from two different perspectives – the role, representation and construction of Los Angeles in network films, and the analogies between the city and the film category.

First of all, sections 1 and 2 will offer introductions to the category of network films (I shall not use the word ‘genre’, as it might be controversial and misleading in this context), the three films selected for the purpose of detailed analysis, and Los Angeles as an important city of and in film. After a brief discussion of the cinematic discourse of ‘experimental storytelling’, section 1 will review different terms and definitions of the film category that I have come to call ‘network films’, and then summarise its most important characteristic features. Then section 1.4. will introduce the selection of network films for the thesis. Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993), Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999) and Paul Haggis’ *Crash* (2005) were chosen for various reasons. First of all, Los Angeles does not just function as a setting, but also as a subject in each of the films. Furthermore, the choice of three dramas with striking similarities makes some aspects of analysis and comparison easier. All three films are special and fascinating in the way they portray characters and relationships. After some general introductory information (including release and cast), a brief summary of each storyline shall give the reader a first impression of the films and a useful guideline for discussion. Section 2 will offer a brief introduction to Los Angeles – the city of film. After a few facts concerning its location, population and popularity, the ‘introduction’ will only focus on those aspects that are important for later

discussions and analysis, including the city's significance for the media industry and the most popular constructed images.

After these introductions, section 3 will focus on Los Angeles as a setting and subject of the films. First of all, section 3.1. will deal with the representation of Los Angeles in the three selected network films – on both a visual level and on the level of dialogue. Without any further interpretation, this section shall simply demonstrate whether and in which way Los Angeles is mentioned or represented in the films. Are any typical landmarks shown? Do the films present their setting in the opening or closing sequences? Do the characters actually speak about the city? Which impression does the viewer get of the city? Concerning the representation of L.A. on a visual level, the illustrations of the films and their brief descriptions will be presented in a chronological order (just as they appear in the films). In contrast, the analysis of the level of dialogue will focus more on a logical rather than chronological order.

Network films contribute to the construction of quite typical, or even stereotypical, images of Los Angeles. In order to illustrate this argument, section 3.2. will explore the three most striking and common constructions of Los Angeles in *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash* – Los Angeles as 'the city of media industry', 'the automobile city' and 'the city of natural disasters and wonders'.

In a further step, the analysis and discussion will move from Los Angeles in the films to analogies between the city and the film category. One analogy concerns the description of both as paradigms of postmodernism. Although 'postmodernism' is a very ambiguous and controversial concept, I will very briefly introduce the concept and then concentrate on those typically postmodern features that the city and the films have in common, including fragmentation, decentralisation, chaos and network. Another analogy concerns the discussion of both the city and the film category with reference to traffic and the road network. The importance of the car industry and freeway system for L.A. is undisputable and frequently mentioned in descriptions of the city. Strikingly, various definitions of network films feature traffic and road metaphors.

The final section will deal with cognitive mapping as the process of orientation in both a spatial and a narrative 'environment'. First of all, the concepts of 'cognitive mapping' and

‘cognitive maps’ will be introduced, by concentrating on the following question: What are cognitive maps and why are they an essential part of our lives? Then Kevin Lynch’s research on the cognitive mapping of large cities like Los Angeles will be discussed. After the discussion of spatial orientation, the thesis will consider whether the concept of cognitive mapping can also be applied to network films and whether network films like *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash* can be considered as cognitive maps of L.A. – a city too large to grasp.

Finally, the last sections will offer detailed analyses of connections between single storylines and characters in *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash*, since these links are essential for the successful cognitive mapping process of the films. A quote by Bordwell stresses the importance of interlocking the single storylines in network films: “Any film’s narration, in coaxing us to build the story world a particular way, must expose the relationships among the characters. In a network tale, the narration must do this with an elaborateness seldom seen in the more ordinary movie. The narration must *reveal* connections, *anticipate* connections, and *conceal* connections” (*Poetics* 207). Thus, the goal of the final sections is to illustrate this ‘elaborateness’, by analysing very different types of linking devices and strategies on both a narrative and cinematic level.

1. Introducing network films and Los Angeles

1.1. A growing trend: Experimenting with storytelling

Pulp Fiction (1994, dir. Tarantino), *Lola Rennt* (1998, dir. Tykwer), *Memento* (2000, dir. Nolan), *Love Actually* (2003, dir. Curtis), *The Butterfly Effect* (2004, dir. Bress/Gruber), *Babel* (2006, dir. Iñárritu), *Vantage Point* (2008, dir. Travis) and recently *Cloud Atlas* (2012, dir. Tykwer/Wachowski) – all these films are examples of so-called ‘experimental storytelling’ (a term for instance used by Bordwell in *The Way Hollywood Tells It*) or ‘alternative narratives’ (Berg 6). This brief selection shall illustrate that such experiments in cinematic discourse have come into prominence during the last two decades, constantly growing in popularity – not just in Hollywood, but all around the world and concerning very different genres. However, this ‘counter-trend’ to the more ‘classical’ film structure – meaning “Hollywood’s chronologically linear, beginning-middle-end, three-act structure” (Berg 7) – is not really new. There have always been experiments with narration over the long history of cinema, but not to such an extent as there are now (Berg 7). A significant example is, for instance, Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941) – probably one of the most well-known ‘flashback movies’. Charles Foster Kane’s life history is not just presented in several flashbacks, but also told from different characters’ perspectives – two prominent narrative techniques for cinematic experimentation. In *The Way Hollywood Tells It* Bordwell mentions minor trends in ‘alternative storytelling’ from the 1940s to 1955 and from the late 1960s to the early 1970s (72-73) and then concludes:

Another era of experimental storytelling was launched in the 1990s, when a fresh batch of films seemed to shatter the classical norms. Movies boasted paradoxical time schemes, hypothetical futures, digressive and dawdling action lines, stories told backward and in loops, and plots stuffed with protagonists. It seemed filmmakers were competing to outdo one another in flashy nonconformity. (73)

In other words, these ‘alternative films’ invite their spectators to be dazzled, confused, astonished and amazed by intersecting stories, multiple perspectives, alternative endings (‘what if’ style) and stories told in flashbacks, reverse order or without any chronological order at all, just to name a few techniques. Producers can play with form, time and space. From this it follows that terms such as ‘alternative narratives’ or ‘experimental storytelling’ are umbrella terms for a wide range of different categories of films (‘genres’ would

probably be a controversial term to use in this context). The following paragraph gives a brief overview of such categories, based on the description by Berg in his article “A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films”, by assigning the previously mentioned films to the categories.

Berg names 12 film categories and forms them into three groups: ‘plots based on the number of protagonists’, ‘plots with nonlinear temporality’ and ‘plots that violate classical rules of subjectivity, causality, and self-referential narration’ (14-56). In the following short descriptions only categories of the first two groups will be taken into consideration. Probably the most prominent category is what Berg calls the ‘Polyphonic or Ensemble Plot’ (Berg 14). These are films that feature multiple characters in one location, whose storylines occasionally intersect and affect each other (14). *Love Actually* (2003) is a good example of this category: The interlocking (love) stories of the characters are all set in London. Another very similar category is the ‘parallel plot’, which is also characterised as multi-protagonist. However, while in these films the stories of the characters are related in one way or another, they are separated by time and/or space (Berg 18). *Babel* (2006), for instance, shows the interrelated stories of four families – set in Morocco, Tokyo, California and Mexico at roughly the same time. In *Cloud Atlas* (2012), another example, the lives of the various characters, set in the past, present and future, are connected with each other. Concerning films with ‘nonlinear plots’ there are, for instance, those with backwards plots (Berg 27), like *Memento* (2000), whose main character, a man who has lost his short-term memory, is trying to find the murderer of his wife, and those in which the spectator is left to arrange the events, which are usually presented in no reasonable order (Berg 41) – as in Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994). The last two categories that shall be mentioned are the ‘repeated action plot’ (Berg 30) and the ‘repeated event plot’ (Berg 33). *Lola Rennt* (1998) and *The Butterfly Effect* (2004) belong to the first category. In both films the main character repeats an action several times, but each time there is a slight change in the chain of events, which eventually leads to different outcomes. The stories are driven by questions such as: What would have happened, if I had acted differently? ‘Repeated event plot’ is the category for films that show one event several times, but from different character perspectives. In *Vantage Point* (2008) the attempted murder of the President is shown from different perspectives, for example.

After this brief overview of a selection of categories, the following question arises: Why has there been such a boom of ‘experimental storytelling’ in films in the late 20th and especially 21st century?

1.2. Considering the zeitgeist: Alternative films as reflections of our time

[G]enre movies have been commonly understood as inevitable expressions of the contemporary *zeitgeist*. This is true not only of individual genre movies, but also of the changing patterns and popularity of different genres and of the shifting relationships between them. For whether they are set in the past or in the future, on the mean streets of contemporary New York or long ago in a galaxy far away, genre movies are always about the time and place in which they are made. (Grant 5-6)

The following paragraphs will illustrate that this statement about genres and genre movies can also be applied to the whole ‘new trend’ in playing with the ‘classical’ film structure. These ‘experimental films’ seem to perfectly fit the interests (and needs) of our society and reflect our time, which is probably the reason for the recent boost in popularity. But what exactly is it that they reflect? What are the “possible contributory factors [that] might have helped shape this surging trend in unconventional narration” (Berg 6)? Several film theorists have dealt with these questions and have come up with various answers.

Lommel, for instance, discusses two hypotheses in his article “Überlegungen zur Aktualität des Episodenfilms” (“Thoughts on the topicality of episodic films”): He is of the opinion that the popularity of such films is to a great extent due to the parallels between their structure and our globalised world – our ‘network society’. In a time in which people can enjoy worldwide connections via the internet, especially social networks, and rapid access to information, many experimental films give their spectators the possibility to search for interrelations while at the same time challenging them by withholding information and creating confusion. This again reflects the fragmentation and contrariness that are also characteristic of our society and time. The second hypothesis concerns the television habits of our time. Skilled by regularly watching soap operas or series, that also have multiple characters or stories of equal importance, and by zapping from one channel to another, spectators probably find it easier to follow alternative narratives that often ‘zap’ from one perspective or storyline to another – in linear and nonlinear fashion. Lommel also mentions the function the TV sometimes has as a nice distraction while doing something else – so serving as ‘perceptual background’. Thus, it does not seem to be a coincidence that, for

instance, in multi-protagonist films the television is frequently shown in the background, sometimes holding an important reference to later events. (124-127)

Bordwell emphasises a completely different aspect. He writes:

The self-consciousness of the films' narration, shouting or whispering more or less directly to the audience, goes along with filmmakers' growing interest in sheer artifice. If gray is the new black, form is the new content. ... Now, thanks to film festivals and the Internet and DVD commentaries, directors and screenwriters everywhere are aware of innovations. Infotainment television programs, fan magazines, websites, and director commentaries all discuss film technique to a degree unheard of even a decade ago. (*Poetics* 244-245)

A last aspect that shall be mentioned at this point is the role the DVD plays when watching 'experimental films'. As form and style are essential to those films, they are usually rather complex and a lot of work is put into details. Thus, when watching them the first time, one's concentration is normally occupied with keeping track of the story. Only when watching them a second time or more often will the spectator be able to focus on the cinematic level, usually discovering things that s/he had not noticed before. This is especially the case when watching a film on DVD (or other storage media): the spectator has the possibility to press 'pause', rewind and watch a scene again and again. (Bordwell, *Hollywood* 103)

A summarized list of 'contributory factors' by Berg shall conclude this section:

[T]he fragmenting "postmodern condition" and its revolt against master narratives; the ubiquity of shorter narrative media forms such as music videos; video games, which stress multiple kinds of interactive narrativity, require various sorts of player strategies including role playing and team building, and repeatedly take players back to the same situations; the branched experience of surfing the net; and hypertext linking that allows users to create a personalized sequence of disparate types of artifacts that might include text, image, video, and sound. In the U.S., the rise of independent film and the need for product differentiation are surely important factors. (6)

1.3. It is a small world: Defining the network film

1.3.1. Puzzle pieces: Different terms & definitions

After having given an overall introduction to ‘experimental storytelling’ in film, the thesis will now focus on one very specific category of ‘alternative films’. This category can generally and very briefly be described as featuring multiple characters, all of which are roughly of equal importance and are located in the same space (be it a hotel or a city), where their single storylines frequently intersect. However, finding a clear-cut definition is not as easy as it might seem – simply given the fact that theorists use very different terms for these sorts of films. Let us consider a few examples.

Berg, for instance, whose classification was discussed in the first section, uses the term ‘polyphonic plot film’ or ‘ensemble plot film’ to describe multi-protagonist films whose characters are in a single location (14). In addition to the obvious features already mentioned before, he defines the films as having “several characters, each of whom has an individual goal, but none of these characters’ goals becomes *the* featured goal of the film, the narrative’s organizing principle” (Berg 16).

In his research article Bruns reflects on the special term ‘polyphonic film’ in more detail, by explaining this musical analogy. In music, ‘polyphonic’ implies an “arrangement of multiple voices of equal importance” (Bruns 189). Each voice is somehow independent, but at the same time they all form an ensemble together. Applied to film this would again mean that there are simultaneous, however independent, storylines (= voices), which match and thus form a special unity – something that exceeds the sum of all parts. (Bruns 190)

Another term is ‘mosaic film’, which was introduced by Trohler and taken up by Azcona. She defines these sort of multi-protagonist films the following way: “Initially characters in mosaic films are linked only insofar as they happen to live in the same city at the same time, though eventually ... the characters’ paths cross and their stories become enmeshed, largely through coincidence” (Azcona 12).

‘Episodenfilm’, a German term used by Lommel (among others), which roughly translates ‘episodic film’, stresses the already mentioned parallel to soap operas or series on television. To be more precise, Lommel distinguishes between two narrative structures: the ‘sequential’ and the ‘interlocking’ structure¹. The ‘sequential structure’, which is more similar to soap operas, implies that the episodes are presented one after the other, whereas the ‘interlocking structure’ cuts between the episodes in an alternating style. In both cases, all the ‘episodes’ are connected in one way or another and together form the actual story. (Lommel 130)

Everett’s choice of term is also striking, as it puts the focus on a further characteristic of these films. She refers to this ‘new narrative’ as ‘fractal’ – emphasising the key features of fragmentation and chaos, which are also two essential theories used to describe our world in its current condition (159-160). Everett comes up with the following definition:

Preoccupied with the unpredictability of the universe, haunted by the question ‘What if?’, such films, which I shall henceforth refer to as ‘fractal’ – since they both illustrate and explore the complex architecture of chaos – are structured as a series of apparently unrelated stories that intersect and interact with each other in random, unstable, and unpredictable ways. (160)

The last term I want to mention deserves particular attention. ‘Network narrative’ and ‘network tale’ are terms used by Bordwell, focusing on the often complicated intermingling of storylines and at the same time emphasising the relation between the films and the view of our society as a ‘network’. (Bordwell, *Hollywood* 99) Bordwell argues: “Any film’s narration ... must expose the relationships among the characters. In a network tale, the narration must do this with an elaborateness seldom seen in the more ordinary movie. The narration must *reveal* connections, *anticipate* connections, and *conceal* connections” (*Poetics* 207).

For the further purpose of my thesis, I have chosen to use the term ‘network film’, since the concept of the network and the intersections and connections between the single storylines will be major topics of my thesis.

¹ Translated terms are borrowed from Ri-A You’s diploma thesis (35)

1.3.2. Solving the puzzle: Structure & characteristic features

In the following paragraphs I will summarize the most prominent characteristic features and structure – the ‘essence’ of network films as it were – while including the various definitions.

A network film consists of several single storylines that interweave into a whole net of actions. Although a second type of structure – the sequential structure – was mentioned earlier, it is not of any importance for the thesis being presented and thus will not further be regarded. The multiple characters are of equal importance, except for some minor characters, and could thus all be referred to as protagonists. This is also the reason why the spectator is not likely to identify or empathise with a character, but rather – as intended by the film – takes on an ‘omniscient’ position, looking at the characters and events objectively. Sometimes though, this ‘omniscience’ is only slowly established as the stories unfold. Bordwell explains it the following way:

Because of the shared-time principle, the narration tends toward omniscience. It's showing us characters who might not meet, who might not know of each other's existence. Filmmakers have found several ingenious ways to handle this omniscience, shaping our expectations in unusual ways and often cunningly withholding key information. Within the overarching omniscience – signalled in some fairly explicit ways – the narration may restrict us to what one or a few characters know at some points, thus revealing unexpected links for the sake of surprise. Like a mystery film, the network narrative frankly exposes the act of narration, inviting the viewer to build inferences out of teases, hints, and gaps. (*Poetics* 200)

Other important details concern time and space: All characters in the film are located in the same space – be it a building or, like probably in most cases, a city or even a wider region. Each character, or rather group of characters, has an individual storyline, which deals with daily situations or problems, and pursues individual goals. The single storylines unfold simultaneously and are more or less parallel, until the first start to intermingle.

Many storylines interweave at some point in the film, usually forming a whole net of stories, as already mentioned. Some storylines are, for instance, interlocked because characters are friends or members of the same family, others simply by chance and coincidence. “The narrative of [many network films] ... is a weaving together of random

incidents, instead of a linear chain of cause and effect. Accidents, coincidences and chance encounters are more significant than any causal motivations between them” (36), Laine states. Sometimes the paths of characters cross without them even noticing – just for the pleasure of the ‘omniscient’ audience. (e.g. Bordwell, *Hollywood* 97) Even if there are not so many actual crossings, characters are usually connected by an overall theme, for instance the same sorts of problems – frustration, fear, love (just to name a few) – or by incidents that concern and affect them all, as for example natural disasters. Connections on a narrative level are furthermore complemented or reinforced by the connections on a cinematic level that are mostly created by editing (cross-cutting techniques), but also by mise-en-scene (similar and repetitive arrangements), cinematography (for instance similar camera shots or angles) and music and sound. (e.g. Bordwell, *Poetics* 207) Bordwell writes: “The technique of crosscutting among strangers is particularly useful. It can make their eventual encounters seem less coincidental, for they’ve been connected for us, if not for each other, from the start“ (*Poetics* 207).

What makes these network films so special and unique is that these links and intersections, which will be a major topic in the second half of the thesis, find their expression on both the narrative and the cinematic level – giving the spectator a feeling of ‘how small the world must be’.

Concerning the role of the audience, the films seem to demand an objective attitude of the spectator, putting him/her in a rather omniscient position (at least at the end of the film), as already mentioned. Furthermore, it is the special structure and narrative style of these network films that make them more challenging to decipher – so the spectator is very aware of the cinematic level while watching the film. As “filmmakers tend to use [polyphonic films] ... to render the complex, multi-faceted nature of an entire society” (Berg 18), these films usually convey a certain message, wanting the viewers not simply to observe and find meaning, but also to judge. (Bruns 204) Concluding, “[t]his kind of narrative, then, does not tell us what to expect, it requires effort and creative engagement” (Laine 46).

After this general discussion of the characteristic structure and main features of ‘network films’ the following section will present the actual selection of films for the thesis. Naturally, the foremost criterion for the choice was the Los Angeles setting. In a further

step, I decided to choose three dramas for the sake of comparison. Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993), Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) and Paul Haggis' *Crash* (2005) will be the subjects of analysis. As this section has illustrated, network films have quite complex structures. Thus, the following section (1.4.) offers an arranged and informative overview of all three films, in order to give the reader a useful guideline for later discussions and analyses. After a short introductory paragraph on general film information, the various storylines of each film will be introduced separately.

1.4. Sneak Peek: Introducing *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* & *Crash*

1.4.1. “To hell with love”: Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993)

Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* was released in the US in 1993, featuring stars such as Julianne Moore, Andie MacDowell, Robert Downey Jr., Tim Robbins and Lori Singer. The screenplay is based on various short stories by Raymond Carver. The film's characters live in the suburbs of Los Angeles. While the paths of lots of characters actually cross, they also share common problems or similar moods: frustration, sexual frustration, indifference, lying and cheating. The following paragraphs offer a very brief overview of the most important characters and their storylines:

Storyline 1: Howard Finnigan, wife Ann & son Casey

One day before his eighth birthday Casey is hit by a car on his way to school and falls into a coma. While he is lying in hospital, Howard's father appears (who he has not seen in thirty years) and the baker, who is angry that the expensive birthday cake Ann had ordered was not picked up, terrorises the family with angry anonymous calls. After Casey's death Howard, a TV reporter, and Ann confront the man and eventually find consolation.

Storyline 2: Dr. Ralph Wyman & wife Marian

Ralph is the doctor in charge of Casey in hospital. Ralph and Marian, a passionate painter, do not seem to have a good relationship, which is stressed by the fact that she had an affair a few years ago. However, they manage to hide their troubles behind a façade of indifference and happiness, when Stuart and Claire Kane come to their barbecue party.

Storyline 3: Gene Shepard, wife Sherri & children

Gene, a police officer, has an affair with Betty Weathers. His wife Sherri knows, but seems quite indifferent – she talks openly about it with her sister Marian and even finds his lies amusing. Gene eventually ends the affair and spends more time with his wife and family again.

Storyline 4: Stuart Kane & wife Claire

Stuart is unemployed and Claire earns money as a clown on children's birthday parties. Stuart goes on a fishing trip with his friends for three days. They discover the dead body of a young woman in the water, but only report it at the end of their trip. Claire is disappointed and disgusted by the behaviour of her husband. However, they hide their argument behind a friendly mask, when visiting the Wymans, whom they got to know at a cello concert (with Zoe Trainer) a few days earlier.

Storyline 5: Jerry Kaiser, wife Lois & children

Jerry has his own little business – the maintenance and cleaning of pools. He, for instance, cleans the Finnigan's and Trainer's pool. Lois is a phone-sex provider and takes care of their two children. Having to listen to the sex calls makes Jerry jealous and sexually frustrated. Jerry and Lois are friends with Bill and Honey Bush, whom they like to go out with – for instance in the nightclub where Tess Trainer performs. They also go for a picnic together, where Jerry and Bill follow two girls and Jerry ends up killing one of them with a blow to the head.

Storyline 6: Bill Bush & wife Honey

Bill is a make-up artist and enjoys playing macabre little games with Honey. Pretending to have beaten her up and taking photos of her sexually arouses him. Honey is the daughter of Earl and Doreen Piggot.

Storyline 7: Earl Piggot & wife Doreen

Earl, the chauffeur of a limousine, is an alcoholic. Doreen, a waitress, cannot stand him when he is drunk, but always forgives him after a big argument. Doreen is worried, because she hit a boy with her car. She offered her help, but he did not want it and 'seemed okay'. Doreen does not know that Casey dies of his injuries.

Storyline 8: Stormy Weathers, ex-wife Betty & son Chad

When Stormy, a pilot, comes to see his son, he tries to find out whether Betty is seeing someone else. Betty does not just have an affair with Gene, but also cheats on Gene with another man. However, Gene suspects it and ends their relationship. Stormy, who is jealous and angry, ruins the whole house, while Betty and Chad stay at her new boyfriend's house for the weekend.

Storyline 9: Tess Trainer & daughter Zoe

Tess and her daughter Zoe live next to the Finnigans. Tess is a frustrated jazz singer in a nightclub. She fails to give her daughter the attention and love she desperately strives for. Zoe, a very talented cellist, feels so unloved and unhappy, that she takes her own life (with exhaust fumes).

1.4.2. “One is the loneliest number”: Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999)

P.T. Anderson’s *Magnolia* was released in the US in 1999 and features an ensemble cast of famous actors and actresses, including Tom Cruise, Julianne Moore, Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly. A narrator (Ricky Jay) introduces the audience to the film’s underlying theme of coincidence in the opening sequence. He tells three stories of great coincidence, stressing that unbelievable incidents like those do really happen. The rest of the film shows a day in the lives of eleven characters (excluding the minor ones), who all live in Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley. The characters are connected by similar problems – they deal with illness and mortality, despair, guilt, regret, hatred, loneliness, lack of appreciation and shame. Many of the characters strive for love, forgiveness, happiness and respect. Here are brief descriptions of the main characters:

Storyline 1: Jimmy Gator & his wife Rose

Jimmy Gator, host of the famous quiz show ‘What Do Kids Know?’, has terminal cancer and cannot hide it anymore. His attempt at reconciliation with his daughter Claudia is unsuccessful. When Rose finds out that sexual abuse is (probably) the reason for Claudia’s hatred towards her father, she leaves him to die alone.

Storyline 2: Claudia Gator

Claudia is an insecure, depressed and lonely woman. She tries to overcome or suppress her feelings and memories by taking cocaine and hiding in her dark apartment. When Officer Kurring stands in front of her door because of a noise complaint, it seems that her life might soon change: the man shows concern and interest in her. He is willing to listen and give her the love and attention she needs.

Storyline 3: Officer Jim Kurring

Jim Kurring puts his heart and soul in his job. He is a very decent, religious and positive man. That's why he is even more desperate and ashamed, when he loses his gun in a reckless action. He really cares for Claudia and tries to win her trust and heart. Jim also recognises the good-hearted nature of Donnie Smith and decides to help him bring back the money he had stolen.

Storyline 4: Earl Partridge and Phil Parma

Earl, former producer of the children's quiz show, is dying. On this last day of his life, he is full of regret and remorse and tells his nurse Phil Parma about all the wrongs he has done. His biggest regret is leaving his teenage-son behind with his dying mother. He is now craving for forgiveness and thus Phil, who is very sensitive and loving, tries hard to fulfil his dying wish. On his deathbed Earl can see his son again.

Storyline 5: Linda Partridge

Linda, Earl's much younger (and second) wife, is also full of despair and remorse: having married Earl only for his money and having cheated on him several times, she has now recognised that she truly loves him. Desperately she tries to change his last will, because she does not want his money anymore. Additionally, she does not want to make the decision when to administer the morphine and thus leaves it to Phil. Wanting to end her life, she takes an overdose of strong pills, but is found and brought to the hospital.

Storyline 6: Frank T.J. Mackey

Frank, macho, 'woman-hater' and well-known motivational speaker of the seminar 'Seduce and Destroy', has made up a 'new identity' and changed his life story for the press. In an interview with reporter Gwenovier, who knows the truth about his past and real identity, his façade slowly falls apart. What a coincidence that he is informed about his

father's dying wish to see him this same day. He finally decides to go see his father and get rid of everything he wanted to say for years.

Storyline 7: Stanley Spector and his father Rick

10-year-old Stanley is a successful contestant on the show 'What Do Kids Know?' and one win away from the new record. He finally 'breaks' under the pressure exerted by his father and publicly expresses his frustration.

Storyline 8: Quiz-Kid Donnie Smith

Donnie was the champion (and still is the record holder) of the quiz show years ago. He is now a desperate, lonely and lately also unemployed middle-aged man, who is in love with a younger barkeeper. Thinking he could win his interest and love if he also had braces, Donnie breaks into the company he worked for and steals the money he needs for the braces. On his way home he has a guilty conscience and decides to put the money back. After a few difficulties he is able to return the money with the help of Jim Kurring, who coincidentally crosses his way.

1.4.3. "We miss that touch so much": Haggis' *Crash* (2004)

Crash – Haggis' debut production – was shown on the Toronto International Film Festival in 2004 and finally released in the US in 2005. In March 2006 the film won three Academy Awards for 'Best Picture', 'Best Original Screenplay' and 'Best Film Editing'. The cast is an ensemble of well-known and successful actors and actresses, including Matt Dillon, Sandra Bullock, Brendan Fraser, Ryan Phillippe and Don Cheadle. The film is set in Los Angeles, around Christmas time, and tells stories of racism, prejudice, the loss and fear of interpersonal contact, the striving for touch and the collisions that sometimes force people to get to know each other. The film shows two days in the lives of eight groups of characters, whose paths cross – sometimes even twice – in order to make them think and learn something about others and eventually also about themselves.

The film begins with a rear-end collision of Detective Graham Waters and colleague Ria with a Korean woman near a homicide crime scene. When Waters sees the dead body, he

freezes. Before the spectator finds out why, the film is wound back roughly 36 hours. Here is a brief overview of the eight storylines that intersect during the film:

Storyline 1: Shopkeeper Farhad

Because of discrimination and racist assaults, the Persian shopkeeper Farhad does not feel safe anymore and buys a gun to protect his wife and daughter. As the door to his shop does not close properly, he has a locksmith come and fix it. The locksmith exchanges the lock and informs Farhad that the door is the actual problem, but Farhad does not believe him. The next day, when he finds his shop plundered and ruined, the shopkeeper takes his gun and pays the locksmith, who he gives the blame, a visit. While they argue, he accidentally fires his gun at the locksmith's daughter, but luckily nobody is harmed. Farhad did not know that his daughter had bought him blanks.

Storyline 2: Carjackers Peter & Anthony

The two young African American men Peter and Anthony steal a car and on the way to their trader they run over a Korean man, whom they drop off in front of a hospital. The next day they are about to rob a man (Cameron Thayer) of his car, when the man suddenly defends himself. In the further course of the story Anthony, who could have been arrested by passing police, gets away with the help of the man they wanted to carjack. On his way home he passes the minibus of the Korean man they had nearly killed the night before, which is – to his surprise – full of refugees. Peter, who hitchhikes home, is shot due to a misunderstanding.

Storyline 3: District Attorney Rick Cabot & wife Jean

After being carjacked by two young African American men, Rick and his wife have door locks of their house exchanged. Jean, who feels vindicated in her racist prejudices, even mistrusts the Mexican-American locksmith. While Rick worries about losing the votes of either his 'black' or conservative voters in the forthcoming elections, his wife feels helpless, angry and lonely.

Storyline 4: Detective Graham Waters & colleague Ria

Graham and Ria, who are shown to have a sexual relationship, investigate a murder case, in which a black undercover cop was shot by another police officer. Meanwhile Graham is pressured by his mother - a drug addict – to find his younger brother, who has not been

home for a while. Graham is then blackmailed into withholding important information concerning the murder case by being threatened to imprison his brother due to his criminal records. At night Graham and Ria are ordered to another crime scene. The man that was shot is Graham's brother Peter.

Storyline 5: Officer John Ryan & Officer Thomas Hansen

John and Thomas, who go on patrol together, follow a car that is the same as one reported stolen. John decides to stop the car, although he knows that it is not the stolen one. What starts as a vehicle inspection ends as a deliberate humiliation of the African American couple driving the car. John's terrible and racist behaviour makes Thomas change patrol. The next day both officers happen to meet the couple again: Thomas keeps Cameron from being arrested and John saves Christine out of a crashed and burning car. On his way home from work that night Thomas takes a hitchhiker with him and ends up shooting him as a result of a coincidence and misunderstandings.

Storyline 6: Locksmith Daniel

Daniel is a hard-working honest worker and loving father. Twice in those two days he has to deal with racial discrimination and insults: Jean Cabot refers to him as 'gang member' (because of his shaved head and tattoos) and Farhad calls him a cheater. At home Daniel gives his daughter, who is afraid of bullets, an invisible magic cloak that shall protect her. This is also the reason why his daughter comes to his rescue when Farhad threatens Daniel with his gun.

Storyline 7: Cameron & Christine Thayer

After an insulting and humiliating experience with the police, during which Cameron cannot prevent his wife from harassment, the couple has a big argument. The next day – as fate would have it – they each meet one of the officers again. Cameron is saved from an unnecessary arrest and Christine from her burning car.

Storyline 8: Korean couple

The Korean man – a human trafficker – is knocked down by a car and brought to hospital. His wife, who rushes to hospital, has a rear-end collision with Graham and Ria on her way.

1.5. Made in L.A.: Superstar Los Angeles

Finally, a brief introduction of Los Angeles shall form the ‘prelude’ to the first point of analysis. A ‘brief introduction’ of a metropolis like L.A. seems a difficult task, though. Hence, the following paragraphs will only focus on those aspects and information which are important for later discussions and analyses.

First a few general facts: Los Angeles is one of the most rapidly growing cities of the Western world and belongs to the largest, most populous and multicultural areas worldwide. Situated in California, the Greater Los Angeles Area encompasses five counties and more than a hundred cities, lacking a ‘city centre’ in the conventional sense (‘Downtown’ is for instance more of a financial quarter). L.A. is one of the largest industrial cities of the world, especially concerning oil, electronics and automobiles. Furthermore, the area has the greatest traffic system around the globe and is well-known for its jammed freeways. The car is thus the most important means of transport. But apart from all these characteristics, the city is probably most famous for its film industry. (Jahnke 23-24)

Los Angeles – city of film! Which city is more related to the film industry than Los Angeles with its Hollywood Hills? Los Angeles has been and still is a popular film location – even for films which are not set in L.A., which means that L.A. often plays another city. There are a number of reasons for that, for instance financial reasons. Often films are produced in proximity to Hollywood simply to save money. Another important reason concerns the city’s geographical location and the many advantages that come with it. The weather in L.A. is ideal for the making of a film (shooting conditions), as it is warm and sunny most of the year. Furthermore, L.A. has a lot of different landscapes to offer – on the one hand, the sea and beaches with palm trees and on the other hand, hills, mountains and forests and both city and country life. (Lüke 16-17; Jahnke 9) It is not without reason that L.A. is frequently referred to as ‘city of contradictions’.

Dimendberg gives a very brief overview of the history of films set in Los Angeles. He argues that only towards the end of the Second World War L.A. became a well-known film location due to the popular ‘Film Noir’ genre – thrillers, mystery and detective stories. At

the end of the 1950s the rising popularity of the television with its soap operas and series (for instance police soaps), sequels and newscasts meant a competition to the film industry and a new medium for constructing the image of the city. In the 1960s representatives of the Nouvelle Vague enriched the representation of L.A. in their films. A great number of the most vivid and strongest 'Los Angeles films' of the 1970s were documentaries. In the 1980s films set in L.A. dealt with the increasing gang crime. At the beginning of the 1990s themes such as chance, coincidence and arbitrariness were at the centre of attention – an interest that has lasted until the present day. (44-48)

Furthermore, Los Angeles does not just have the role of film location, but is also subject and theme in the films. The representation of the city in films of various genres is, naturally, not always close to the 'real city'. Frequently, films take up the '(stereo)typical' – often slightly mythical – characteristics of the city and construct extreme images of Los Angeles. Jahnke also suggests: "Filme greifen die gegebenen Wirklichkeiten einer Stadt auf, reflektieren das Image und erzählen es fort"² (14). The main thesis of Lüke's book *Los Angeles im Film* ('Los Angeles in Film') is also that the mythical constructions of the city are those that constitute the fictional image of Los Angeles and thus its role in the films (7).

Some films about Los Angeles construct negative or positive images: utopia or dystopia, dream or nightmare, 'city of disasters and apocalypse' or 'city of angels', 'sunny city' – high society of Beverly Hills and the relaxed life on the beaches – or 'dark city' as in the Film Noir (Jahnke 10, 212). "Los Angeles has almost always been viewed as an exception to the mainstream of American urban culture. Located on the continental margins, the city conjures up visions of unbridled urban sprawl, inconsequential architecture, freeways, sun, surf, and smog" (Hise, Dear, and Schockman qtd. in Perry 59). Films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *L.A. Confidential* (1997), *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Big Lebowski* (1998), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *Collateral* (2004) and *Drive* (2011) have constructed special and memorable images of Los Angeles. (Jahnke 9-10) "L.A. as the archetypal dark city, "sprawled out and disconnected" as Cruise's Vincent states [in *Collateral*], is clearly the overwhelming image and pervasive discourse of this most cinematic of cityscapes" (Scott 202).

² Translation Swift: Films pick up the existing realities of a city, reflect its image and construct it further.

Summing up, Los Angeles does not just live on the film industry, but lives in and through its films. The image of the city seems to be as much constructed by films than by any other discourse (Lüke 17). In other words, it is the Los Angeles of the films that constitute the image of the city in the heads of those who have never actually been there. On the other hand, the images of the city constructed by the media (at the forefront films) also influence the way visitors experience the city. Thus, it can probably be assumed that there is an interplay between fiction and reality. (Lüke 18)

Going one step back in the history of film, Lüke answers the question why large cities such as Los Angeles have always been popular subjects of films. He argues that a film is the ideal medium to portray the speed of life and sensory stimulation in a large city:

Das Medium Film eignete sich gerade deshalb gut für die Großstadtdarstellung, weil es in der Lage war, das beschleunigte Tempo und die reizüberflutende Fülle des modernen Großstadtlebens adäquat darzustellen. Der Film war in der Lage, die Bewegung der Stadt so zu visualisieren, dass sie sich der menschlichen Wahrnehmung annäherte, und mithilfe der Montage bzw. Schnittfrequenz beschleunigte er die Bilder zusätzlich.³ (Lüke 13)

³ Translation Swift: The film as medium was especially suitable for the representation of large cities, since it was able to adequately show the accelerated speed and sensory overload of modern city life. The film made it possible to visualise the motion of the city in a way that it approximated human perception, and with the help of montage or rather cutting frequency the images gained additional acceleration.

2. Representation of Los Angeles in network films

Los Angeles seems to be an especially popular setting of network films: *Grand Canyon* (1991), *Short Cuts* (1993), *2 Days in the Valley* (1996), *Magnolia* (1999), *Crash* (2004), *Crossing Over* (2009), *Valentine's Day* (2010). Significantly, network films like those mentioned do not just have L.A. as their setting, but make Los Angeles - its structure, inhabitants and problems – their prime subject. (Jahnke 151) The city is not just something in the background but written onto the people that live there. The characters and their storylines are thus strongly linked to the city and its characteristics. Furthermore, Los Angeles has a strong influence on the narration and on the film structure (Lüke 8-9) – so the narrative and cinematic level – as will be illustrated in the course of this thesis.

The subsequent section (2.1.) will deal with the following questions: Is the city of Los Angeles explicitly 'mentioned' or shown in the films? At what point does it become clear that the films are set in L.A.? Often a film's setting is introduced in the opening sequences or shown in the closing sequence – is this also true for these three films? To answer these questions, the analysis will focus on the representation of Los Angeles in the three selected films – on the visual level and on the level of dialogue (or sound). The description of the films' visual level simply follows a chronological order, whereas the analysis of the audio level has a more coherent order. In a further step, section 2.2. will identify and explore the three most common – and also generally popular – (stereo)typical constructions of Los Angeles in the films *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash*.

2.1. Representation of L.A. in *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* & *Crash*

2.1.1. The city's representation on a visual level

Short Cuts

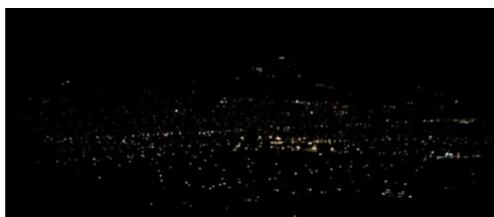


Fig. 1

The opening sequence of the film starts with an extreme long shot (fig. 1) of a sea of lights, which can easily be recognised as the lights of a city. Although one might not immediately identify the city as Los Angeles, L.A. at night

(shown from bird's-eye view) with its bright lights organised into straight lines, signifying the illuminated streets and freeways, is one of the most popular filmic landmarks of the city. (Jahnke 55)



Fig. 2

In another significant long shot, the camera captures Gene on his motorbike (fig. 2). He rides along a street in what seems to be a typical suburban area of L.A., signified by the small houses with their neatly arranged front yards in the foreground. At closer observation one can also see palm trees and part of the city covered in smog in the background.



Fig. 3

Scenes in the Wymans' house all feature shots, in which one can see a panorama of the city through a large glass wall in the living room. One over-the-shoulder shot (fig. 3) for instance shows Ralph Wyman in the foreground and Marian and Sherri in the background in front of the glass wall, which offers a beautiful view of L.A.



Fig. 4

Another long shot (fig. 4) presents the Kanes in Claire's clown car in front of the Wyman house. In the background one can perfectly see a skyline of Los Angeles: lots of small houses and only a few skyscrapers in the 'centre'.



Fig. 5

A different but very explicit hint on the film's location is provided in one of the scenes that take place during the earthquake. The camera captures Gene in a medium shot (fig. 5),

holding a megaphone that reads 'LAPD' – the abbreviation for the 'Los Angeles Police Department'.

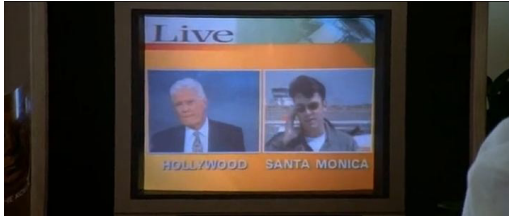


Fig. 6

After the earthquake the Kanes and the Wymans watch a newscast on the television. In a close-up of the TV (fig. 6) the camera shows the commentator on the left and Stormy on the right side of the screen. Their location is also named – Hollywood and Santa Monica – one probably the most well-known district of L.A. and the latter a large city in L.A.



Fig. 7

In the closing sequence the camera, which is situated on the terrace of the Wyman house, pans over L.A., showing a panorama of a city covered in smog, with thousands of houses and a few skyscrapers (as seen on the snapshot in fig.7).

When the end credits start, the camera stops panning and zooms in instead. After a few seconds there is a dissolve from the city to shots of city maps, thus creating a feeling of disorientation in the spectator – disorientation in a city that is too large to grasp.

The examples above have illustrated that it definitely becomes clear – on a visual level – that Los Angeles is the film location of *Short Cuts*. Several times during the film, the spectator gets a panoramic view of L.A., stressing its enormous size, its population density and generally the urban sprawl that is so characteristic of Los Angeles. Both the opening and the closing sequences show extreme long shots of the city, thus framing the action and explicitly placing it in L.A.

Magnolia

The contrary is the case in Anderson's *Magnolia*. There are no extreme long shots of the city, that would provide orientation for the viewer, and neither the opening nor the closing sequence offers any information on the visual level concerning the film's location. The only shots that reveal some information are long shots of Magnolia Boulevard, where a lot of the film's action takes place – especially towards the end (or rather the last third) of the film. 'Magnolia Boulevard' is one of the main streets that run through the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles. This is also (among other interpretations) the reason for the film's title. (Lane 3)

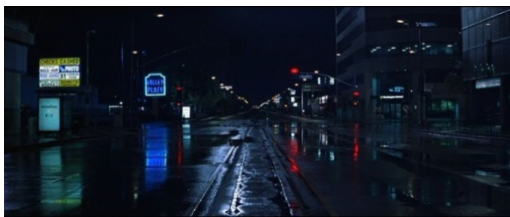


Fig. 8

After the song 'Wise up' there is a long shot (fig. 8) of a street at night. Although probably not recognisable at first glance, a street sign under the traffic lights reads 'Magnolia'.



Fig. 9

That same junction and part of Magnolia Boulevard is shown in another long shot (fig. 9) towards the end of the film. This time the camera captures an ambulance in the foreground and a car in the background. Not just that the street sign reads 'Magnolia', but there is another even more explicit hint of the film's location in the shot. The ambulance has L.A.F.D. written on it – an abbreviation for the 'Los Angeles Fire Department'.

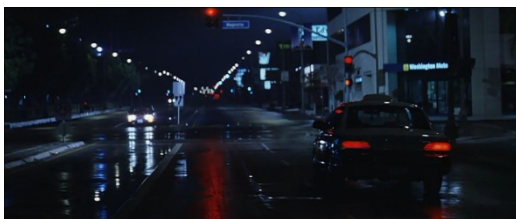


Fig. 10

In the sequence following the one mentioned above the viewer can see Claudia sitting in a taxi. The subsequent long shot (fig. 10) of the juncture and the taxi again reveals the street sign reading 'Magnolia' – this time rather explicitly.

Crash

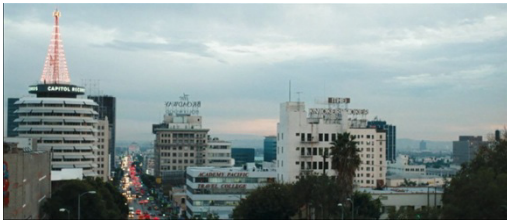


Fig. 11

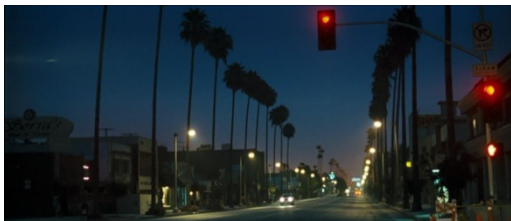


Fig. 12



Fig. 13

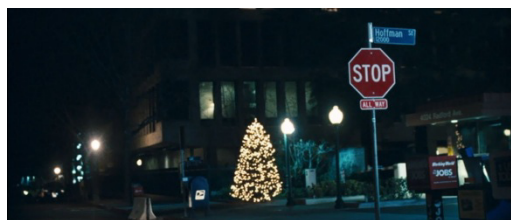


Fig. 14

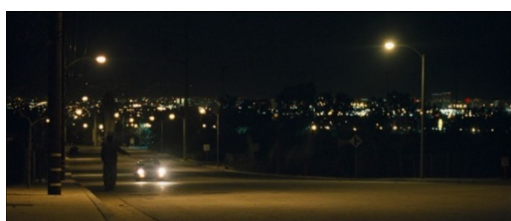


Fig. 15

After the opening sequence there is a flashback in the story. Fig. 11 shows an extreme long shot of a part of the city. At closer observation one can, for instance, read 'Capitol Records' on the round building and 'Academy Pacific Travel College' on another. The Capitol Tower is one of the landmarks of Hollywood. Thus, depending on previous knowledge, spectators might be able to identify this part of the city. Furthermore, the broad and busy freeway shown in the shot is typical of L.A. Also quite characteristic is the beautiful long shot (fig. 12) of a Boulevard with palm trees along both sides.

In another long shot (fig. 13) the camera reveals a black Lincoln Navigator (with Cameron and Anthony in it) located between two smaller intersections. In the background the spectator can see palm trees and gentle hills. In addition, a street sign in the foreground reads 'Ventura Ct' – a smaller road that runs parallel to Ventura Blvd. through Studio City.

There is another long shot in the film (fig. 14) that presents a street sign, this time reading 'Hoffman St.' – a street that is also around the corner of Ventura Blvd. in Studio City.

Furthermore, there are two (extreme) long shots that present the city at night – a sea of lights on the horizon, typical of any large city,

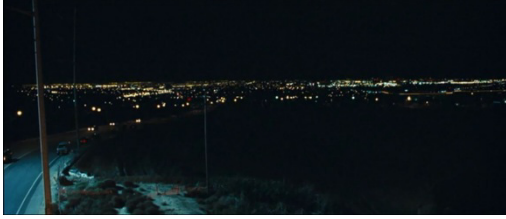


Fig. 16

but, as already mentioned, especially characteristic of Los Angeles. In one shot the camera is positioned in a straight-on angle (fig. 15) and in the other shot in a high angle (fig. 16), providing a better view.



Fig. 17

In one long shot towards the end of the film (fig. 17) the camera captures a high and lit up building that stands out against the dark night sky. It is a well-known landmark of L.A. – the Los Angeles City Hall.

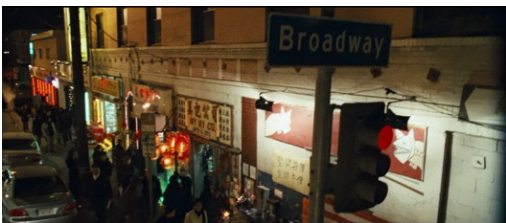


Fig. 18

The last shot I want to mention is a long shot (fig. 18), in which the camera captures a shopping promenade in what can only be Chinatown. The camera reveals the exact place of action, as it shows a street sign that reads ‘Broadway’ in the foreground of the shot.

Similar to *Short Cuts* the closing sequence of Haggis’ *Crash* one last time draws the viewer’s attention to the city that is not just the location of the action, but also the subject of the film – Los Angeles. In the last scene of the film, which ends with a rear-end collision, the camera captures the people involved in the collision in a long shot, then slightly pushes back and slowly up into the sky. After a quick cut, the scene is shown from an aerial perspective, the camera still pushing back, until one can see the whole intersection. Finally, the camera slightly turns, tilts up and reveals a panorama of the inner city of Los Angeles with its skyscrapers that are hardly recognisable against the dark night sky and because of the falling snow.

Summing up, *Crash* really introduces Los Angeles on a visual level and frames the action with two (extreme) long shots of the city. One last aspect I shall briefly mention concerns the film title. In the German version the original title *Crash* was changed into *L.A. Crash*, thus explicitly naming the location.

2.1.2. The city's representation on the level of dialogue

Short Cuts

Los Angeles is explicitly mentioned several times during the film *Short Cuts*. In the opening sequence it already becomes clear that the action takes place in L.A. First a newscast is shown on a TV in a limousine. Howard Finnigan is reporting about the 'war against the medfly' (medfly epidemic) and the spraying of pesticides in California. Then, shortly after that scene, Lois Kaiser, who is on the phone to a customer (sex hotline), says: "I'm in L.A. Can you hear the helicopters?" (04:48-04:51). In another scene of the opening sequence the TV commentator eventually states: "The medfly is already established in Los Angeles." (11:47)

There are two other minor instances, in which the city is mentioned without any further meaning: by Howard's father, who explains that he "was just passing through L.A." (01:13:26), and by Gene during the earthquake, when he speaks through his megaphone: "This is Officer Gene Shepard of the Los Angeles Police Department. We are currently experiencing an earthquake." (02:52:43-02:52:48)

The following statements seem to hold more information: When Tess Trainer comes home from the club one morning, she complains to her daughter: "It was a lousy crowd. I hate L.A. All they do is snort coke and talk." (01:56:45-01:56:52) This utterance, naturally, paints a very negative picture of the city. The contrary is the case at the end of the film, when Stormy Weathers says in the TV report on the earthquake: "As I was landing I was remarking to myself [short pause] what a beautiful sight L.A. is. ... It is a beautiful day, the kind of day every Angelino says to himself or herself just how lucky he or she is to be living in L.A." (02:55:31-02:55:45) This is the most significant comment concerning the representation of Los Angeles on the level of the dialogue. After the city has been affected by a medfly epidemic and an earthquake, this remark about L.A.'s beauty seems very sarcastic. This image of indifference is constructed throughout the film.

Magnolia

Similar to the visual level, the level of dialogue in *Magnolia* does not hold any meaningful information concerning the film's location. Twice Los Angeles is mentioned in the context

of Jim Kurring's job. Once, rather at the beginning of the film, Kurring's voice can be heard off-screen, probably coming from his answering machine, introducing himself as an officer for the L.A.P.D. – the Los Angeles Police Department: "This is Jim. I work in Law Enforcement. I am an officer for the L.A.P.D. and I work out of the Van Nuys district" (00:10:23-00:10:30). Furthermore, he mentions the 'Van Nuys district' – a district in San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles. A second time his job is mentioned in a scene in Claudia's flat, when Jim says to her: "So Claudia, let me just say, so I can get my role as an L.A.P.D. Officer out of the way here, so before we enjoy our coffee. [...]" (01:16:19-01:16:25).

The only other instance, in which the location comes up, is in the introduction of the quiz show. Dick Jennings announces: "Live from Burbank, California, it's: 'What Do Kids Know?'" (1:02:59). Burbank is a city in Los Angeles County.

Crash

In *Crash* Los Angeles comes up in the first minutes of the film:

"It's the sense of touch. ... In any real city you walk, you know. You brush past people, people bump into you. In L.A. nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something." (spoken by Detective Graham Waters, 0:03:00-0:03:31)

Los Angeles is not just mentioned as the place of action, but the city and its inhabitants are also described. First of all the statement implies that L.A. is not a 'real city' and that its inhabitants all drive their cars and do not use any public transport. Thus they are captured in their automobiles, not able to meet any people on the streets anymore. The people in L.A. miss that human interaction and touch so much, that a car crash or any other collision is the only way they can meet somebody and finally feel something. This is the theme and key message of *Crash*. Los Angeles is thus not just location, but also character and subject.

There are a few other (minor) L.A.-related mentions, which shall only be described briefly. In the scene, in which Anthony and Peter eventually steal the Cabot's car, Anthony points out: "... this white woman sees two black guys that look like UCLA students strolling down the sidewalk and her reaction is blind fear? ... We're the only two black faces surrounded by a sea of over-caffeinated white people patrolled by the trigger-happy L.A.P.D." (00:09:09) UCLA is an abbreviation for the University of California at Los

Angeles and L.A.P.D., as mentioned before, for the Los Angeles Police Department, which is characterised as ‘trigger-happy’ due to the many race-related issues in the past. The L.A.P.D is later even described as “a racist fucking organisation” by the black L.A.P.D. Lieutenant in a conversation with Thomas Hansen: “... I’m sure you understand how hard a black man has to work to get to, say, where I am in a racist fucking organisation like the L.A.P.D.” (00:33:29) Furthermore, in the context of a murder investigation, Ria identifies the black police officer, who has been shot, as “... William Lewis ... Hollywood Division” (11:26), Rick Cabot says about himself: “I’m the goddamn District Attorney of Los Angeles” (14:09) and Thomas tries to convince John that “Nobody jacks a car and takes it to Studio City” (00:16:30). Hollywood is probably the most well-known district of Los Angeles and Studio City is a large area in San Fernando Valley. One of the main roads in the Valley is Ventura Boulevard, which is also mentioned in a heated discussion between Cameron and Christine after the incident with the police. Cameron argues: “What did you want me to do? Get us both shot?” and Christine answers: “They were gonna shoot us on Ventura Boulevard! Pathetic!” (00:23:06)

2.2. Construction of L.A. in *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* & *Crash*

Section 1.5. briefly dealt with the general construction of Los Angeles in films. As already mentioned, Jahnke suggests that films pick up some of the existing realities and well-known features of a city, reflect its image and then further construct it (14). I claim that this is also true for the construction of Los Angeles in the three network films. On the one hand, they reflect existing characteristics of the city and, on the other hand, they further contribute to the typical – maybe stereotypical – constructions of its image. The following three subsections will examine the three most striking and common constructions of Los Angeles in the selected films – L.A. as ‘city of media industry’, ‘automobile city’ and ‘city of natural disasters and wonders’.

2.2.1. In the spotlight: City of media industry

Los Angeles has a huge media and entertainment industry. It is not just *the* city of film, but also well-known for its television production (Dillman 149). Thomson even states that living in L.A. means “to be within the most futile reach of The Story, The Show” (qtd. in

Boddy 15) and, furthermore, that “[p]eople in L.A. think in scenes and give you lines; the city is like a daytime talk-show” (qtd. in Boddy 15). The following paragraphs shall illustrate that the constructions of Los Angeles in *Short Cuts*, *Crash* and especially in *Magnolia* contribute to the image of L.A. as ‘the city of media industry’.

First of all, let us very briefly consider the cinematic level. All three films are similar to soap operas or TV series concerning their structure and style. Dillman, for instance, suggests that “at the level of form [*Magnolia*] ... most clearly parallels the soap opera” (146). As already mentioned in the second section, the simultaneously unfolding narratives, the ‘zapping’ from one episode to the other and the multiple equal characters in network films remind the spectator of a typical televisual style and experience. Viewers are overwhelmed by the large number of characters and storylines, their interconnections and the rapid short cuts. (Lommel 127)

On a narrative level, the television or media industry in general play an important role or even serve a specific function in the films. The first aspect of discussion concerns the profession of the characters. In *Short Cuts* Howard Finnigan is a TV commentator and his editorial on the medfly epidemic is shown in various episodes in the first scene of the film. Cameron Thayer of *Crash* is a television director. At the vehicle inspection he explains to Officer Ryan that he is just on his way home from an awards show. In *Magnolia* Jimmy Gator is the host of the quiz show *What Do Kids Know?*, Earl Partridge was the former producer of the show and Earl’s son Frank Mackey is a media magnate with his own self-help seminar ‘Seduce and Destroy’. He also appears in an infomercial, promoting his programme and articles and gives an interview for the show “Profiles”. All three films give their spectators a ‘behind the scenes’ of the media industry: In *Short Cuts* there is a scene, in which Howard Finnigan is shown on the set of his newscast. In *Crash* the viewer gets an insight into Cameron’s work in the television studio in Studio City and lots of scenes in *Magnolia* capture backstage and studio action of the show *What Do Kids Know?*. In the scene, in which Jimmy Gator for instance collapses during the show, it is not the reaction of the audience that we get to see, but of the producers. (Dillman 147)

Some other characters in *Magnolia* might not have a profession related to the media industry, but their lives definitely circle around it – they are “mediated by television” (147), as Dillman states: The boy Stanley is, for instance, a contestant of *What Do Kids*

Know? and Donnie Smith is a former contestant and record holder of the show. Even the character of the police officer seems to be influenced by television. Driving alone in his car, Jim Kurring talks about his job and shares his thoughts directly with the audience, behaving as if he was on TV in an episode of the series *Cops* (Fuchs).

Furthermore, Dillman points out that *Magnolia* is a critique of the television and film industry (148). A major part of this critique also evolves from the characters: Jimmy and Earl, host and producer of the quiz show, are both terminally ill and left with nothing but regret and remorse. Both did wrong on their children (Earl abandoned Frank and Jimmy probably molested Claudia) and cheated on their wives. Frank Mackey, woman seducer and hero of single men, ravaged by the loss of mother and father in his childhood, leaves his 'old identity' behind and creates himself new in the media industry. He is "the consummate product of TV", as Fuchs argues. Donnie Smith, former 'whiz kid', is now lonely, depressed and unemployed. Stanley is a genius and about to win a lot of money, but he feels misunderstood, unloved and pressured by his father and society in general. While the other two children contestants discuss money and fame, Stanley is not really interested in this whole business. His public rebellion during the quiz show is a significant moment in the film, because he "plainly exposes the game show and, by extension, television, for what it is" (Dillman 148). Stanley explains, "I'm not a toy. I'm not a doll" (01:50:04), "I'm not silly and cute" (01:52:31) and asks, "We're looked at because you think we're cute? Because – what? What, I'm made to feel like – like a freak, if I answer questions or I'm smart?" (01:50:08) and "I'm smart, so that should make me something – something some people gonna watch how silly it is that he's smart?" (01:52:32). Dillman states that "[s]etting the film in and around Los Angeles, city of television and film production, is also part of this critique" (149). Furthermore, the film holds a mirror up to us viewers, who desperately try to find meaning, logic, order and 'reality' while watching and are then surprised by the unexpected event of the frog rain – something that can easily happen in a fictional world, but not in reality (Dillman 147). Thus Dillman argues that "the 'rain of frogs' ... signifies the absurdity of looking for reality on television" (147). Summing up, Fuchs writes: "This is a film that understands TV – as an industry, cultural context, way of seeing, and map for living".

Another aspect concerning the construction of Los Angeles as city of television and film is the role the TV plays simply as entertainment in the everyday lives of the characters in

Short Cuts and *Magnolia*. (Lane 71) Frequently characters of the films are shown watching television. In *Short Cuts* various characters, for instance, watch the newscast on the medfly epidemic and on the earthquake, or children watch animated films or series. In *Magnolia* some characters are part of the quiz show, while others sit in front of the TV and follow it, as is for instance the case with Phil Parma in Earl's house or Donnie Smith in the bar. Even if characters do not watch it consciously, the TV often simply runs in the background, while characters have a conversation or are engaged with other things. Lommel mentions the function the TV sometimes has as a nice distraction, serving as 'perceptual background'. It thus does not seem to be a coincidence, he argues, that in multi-protagonist films the television is frequently shown in the background, sometimes even holding an important reference to later events. (127)

There is a scene in *Short Cuts*, in which two TV commercials or programmes foreshadow Casey's death: After Casey is knocked down by the car, his mother Ann puts him to bed and phones her husband, who instructs her to bring Casey to the emergency room. Towards the end of the scene, the camera captures a television screen in the background of the TV station that Howard works at. An ambulance is shown on the screen and one can hear its siren. Then there is a cut to Ann and Casey, but the siren can still be heard off screen, probably signifying that Casey is in great danger. Ann wants her son to get up and have some milk, but he doesn't react or move. While she desperately tries to wake him up, the camera zooms in on the glass of milk on the bedside table. The take ends with a close-up of the glass, followed by a very quick and hardly noticeable cut. In the next shot a glass of milk is shown in the same field size and camera perspective as before on – what turns out to be – a TV screen, as part of a commercial. The milk is spilt and the voice in the commercial says "Accidents happen every day. Fortunately, most are harmless, but some are very serious" (00:36:24-00:36:30). The commercial is thus a striking reference to Casey's death.

A last significant aspect worth mentioning concerns the network film *Magnolia*. There is a scene, which deals with film or cinema on a meta-narrative level. When Phil tries to get in touch with Frank, he explains to the person on the phone:

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 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. (01:11:47 – 01:12:10)

With a similar effect – the narrator states towards the end of the film: “And we generally say, ‘Well, if that was in a movie I wouldn’t believe it’.” (02:45:51-02:45:55)

To conclude this section, I want to quote from Fuchs’s review of *Magnolia*. She argues that “[t]elevision is at the heart of *Magnolia*” and furthermore writes:

Television is everywhere in *Magnolia*, in the game show, in the commercials that run incessantly in the backgrounds of scenes, in Jim’s self-narrating, in Frank’s sensational bravado. ... *Magnolia* is a movie about excess that is undeniably excessive. It’s about TV, or more precisely, what TV means on an alarmingly grand scale, with its lust for conflict and surfeit, its pretense of format and organization. (Fuchs)

2.2.2. “Always behind this metal and glass”: Automobile city

“The automobile has been with Euro-American societies for well over a century and since about the 1960s ... the car has become a common feature of everyday life itself” (Thrift 45-46). The impact of cars on our daily lives and, furthermore, on the structural organisation of cities through roads and freeways (and even lighting) is undisputed. (Featherstone 1) Above all, cars are vehicles that bring us from one place to another. However, a car is far more than just a means of transportation. On the positive side, it is also a means of self-representation and a sign of progress, freedom, wealth, personal control and the speed of life. On the negative side, it can also be associated with laziness, air pollution, traffic jams and collisions. Although cars make it easy to travel places and gain new experiences, they are also often the reason for negative experiences, severe injuries or death. (Brottman xxxvi)

“Cities all over the world have been rebuilt to accommodate growing populations, but also to a great extent to make room for their cars” (Ladd 11). This seems to be especially true for Los Angeles. L.A. was the first American city, whose majority of residents owned their own cars. Probably more than any other city this metropolis is shaped by the automobile, or in Brottman’s words “constructed with the automobile in mind” (xxxvi) – urban sprawl and a large network of freeways being the result. (Ladd 90-91) Los Angeles has the

worldwide biggest freeway system, but comparatively little public transport. (Jahnke 24) On the one hand, cars can connect people, because they make it possible to go different places. On the other hand, they also isolate them from their surroundings. (Ladd 7) Every day people in Los Angeles are, for example, stuck in traffic jams on one of the vast freeways on their way to work or back again. (Ladd 93) They spend hours alone in their cars – “prisoners in [their] steel cages” (Ladd 7). This seems to be a typical experience in Los Angeles. Ladd argues: “[C]ars changed the character of human interaction in city streets. Their speed, plus the layer of glass and steel encasing the motorist, made encounters in the streets far more impersonal and anonymous” (69).

Concerning L.A.’s “love affair with the automobile” (Scott 206), the fictional image of Los Angeles created in the three selected network films is definitely a negative one – in some aspects probably close to the ‘real’ city described above. First of all, almost all the characters in *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash* move around the city in their cars. The only two characters who are explicitly shown taking a public means of transport are Claudia in *Magnolia*, who takes a taxi home, and Anthony in *Crash*, who rides a bus. However, a taxi is also a car and there are no other people involved except the taxi driver, and the only reason Anthony is actually riding the bus is because his car broke down. The films thus give the impression that the Los Angelinos are dependent on their cars.

What might also immediately come to mind – as it has already been mentioned before – is the first dialogue in the opening sequence of *Crash*, which shall be repeated for the purpose of analysis:

“It’s the sense of touch. ... In any real city you walk, you know. You brush past people, people bump into you. In L.A. nobody touches you. We’re always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something.” (spoken by Detective Graham Waters, 0:03:00-0:03:31)

This remarkable statement (even though exaggerated) has a very similar message to the quote by Ladd (69) in a previous paragraph. The ‘metal and glass’ is, naturally, a synonym for cars, which are the primary means of transport in Los Angeles. In other large cities people might not really know their neighbours, like it is the case in small villages, but they meet, get to know and accidentally touch or bump into people while moving around in the city – either by walking or using the public transport system. In Los Angeles this does not

seem to be the case for the majority of citizens. *Crash* constructs an image of a metropolis in which the people are alienated from each other, spending a lot of time in the isolation of their cars. "L.A.'s automobiles seem like materializations of the urban ego's protective shell, mobile barriers that safeguard the self from contact with others" (136), Hsu writes. The car for instance serves as a place of protection as well as withdrawal for Frank and Claudia in the 'Wise up' scene in *Magnolia*. They are both desperate and have to face difficult decisions. Thus they seem to 'hide' in the private spheres of their cars to carefully think about their situation. During the scene Linda is probably reflecting upon her life and eventually decides to commit suicide, and Frank, who sits in his car in front of his father's house, is confronted with his past and tries to gain enough strength and confidence to enter the house. In both shots the camera is outside the car and shows the characters through the window, emphasising the car's function as a 'protective shell', in which nobody is allowed to enter.

Crash frequently demonstrates, though, that the car does not offer a reliable protection against human contact and harmful experiences. Cameron and Christine, for example, have to get out of their car during their traffic check, just to be exposed to physical and emotional humiliation. Anthony and Peter carjack the vehicle of the Cabots. This intrusion into their 'private and safe sphere' causes Jean to feel insecure and unprotected in her house and even in her own skin. Anthony and Peter's attempt to carjack Cameron ends in a violent confrontation, which costs them a lot of trouble and almost their freedom or even lives. Another example is the Korean man, who is knocked down by the carjackers while wanting to enter his van. His vehicle, on the other hand, serves as a 'protective shell' but also as a 'steel prison' for the refugees in it. One last striking case in point is the scene, in which Officer Thomas Hansen and Peter meet. Thomas gives Peter, who is wandering the streets alone at night, a lift and thus voluntarily opens his protected space to a stranger. This act eventually causes misunderstandings and great insecurity on Thomas's side, who finds himself a victim of racist prejudice that he thought he was not susceptible of, culminating in the death of Peter.

Car accidents are also examples of breakdowns of the protective barrier of the vehicles. Graham's statement implies that a collision is often the only opportunity left to get in touch with other people in Los Angeles. Drivers involved in a car crash are forced to leave their vehicles and talk to each other, thereby maybe learning something about the others or even

themselves (Ebert, “Crash”). This is, naturally, not the case in serious crashes with injured or dead people, but rather in rear-end collisions, as for instance portrayed twice in *Crash* – one involving Graham, his colleague Ria and the Korean woman and the other involving the health insurance employee Shaniqua Johnson and unknown men. Another instance worth mentioning is the car accident of Christine Thayer, whom Officer John Ryan rescues in the last minute out of her burning car. Both characters are probably shaped by this experience.

In all three network films the car is associated with great harm or even death. As already mentioned, the Korean man in *Crash* is severely injured, because he is hit and dragged along by a car and Peter gets shot in Thomas’s car. In *Short Cuts*, Casey Finnigan is hit by a car and eventually succumbs to his internal injuries in hospital. Another young man, lying in the room next to Casey in hospital, was severely injured in a drive-by shooting on a freeway. Furthermore, Zoe Trainer commits suicide in the garage with the help of car exhaust fumes. Similarly, Linda Partridge (in *Magnolia*) considers suicide with exhaust fumes, but changes her mind. Eventually, as already mentioned, she attempts suicide with an overdose of tablets – also in the solitude of her car.

Summing up, all the examples given are an illustration of the fact that cars cannot just bring joy and connection, but also damage, isolation and solitude. This becomes especially clear in a metropolis like Los Angeles, in which the car probably has a higher status than in any other city in the world. The lifestyle of the citizens is thus shaped by those ‘steel cages’ and the vast system of freeways. In this sense, *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash* construct a very typical image of L.A. – the city “constructed with the automobile in mind” (Brottman xxxvi).

2.2.3. “It is not the big one”: City of natural disasters, chaos and wonders

In his book *Ecology of Fear* (1998) Mike Davis describes Los Angeles as an “apocalypse theme park” (6), as the city was struck by floods, fires, earthquakes and street battles in the 1990s. Due to L.A.’s geographical location natural disasters are not a rarity and thus have more or less become a matter of daily routine. The extent and frequency of natural disasters sometimes even evoke an impression of biblical plagues. (Davis 6-8)

Especially earthquakes present serious hazards to the city's population. After the two earthquakes of 1992 and 1994 (Davis 8), L.A. was impacted by another two earthquakes in 1999 and 2008. By far the worst earthquake was the one in January 1994. It caused 57 deaths, thousands of injured people and severe damage to houses, streets and freeways. The earthquakes have definitely shaped the city and the attitude of its inhabitants. The waiting for the next tremendous earthquake – the 'Big One' that will destroy the whole city – is also entrenched in the minds of the people. (Jahnke 45)

Due to the frequent natural disasters, Jahnke describes Los Angeles as a city of impermanence and change:

L.A. liegt in einem geologischen Risikogebiet. Durch die ständige Gefahr der Erdbebenzerstörung unterliegt die Stadt einer Unbeständigkeit und Wurzellosigkeit. Im Gegensatz zu den traditionsreichen wie geschichtsträchtigen Städten New York und San Francisco, ist in L.A. nichts von Dauer, die Stadt wird förmlich täglich geboren, die Stadt ist bereit, sich ständig zu wandeln. Alles scheint hier möglich.⁴ (25)

Lots of films set in L.A. reflect these hazards, disasters and fears. A dominant film discourse constructs an image of the city that denotes (is marked by) chaos, destruction and even apocalypse. Characteristic examples are *Earthquake* (1974), *The Big One: The Great Los Angeles Earthquake* (1990), *Storm* (1998/99), *Escape from L.A.* (1996), *2012* (2009) and *Battle Los Angeles* (2011). (Lüke 18-19) As the following paragraphs shall illustrate, the three selected network films – especially *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* – also contribute to this dominant construction of Los Angeles as 'the city of disasters and wonders'. To start off the discussion, a quote shall summarize the construction of L.A. as a city of natural disasters and wonders in the three network films:

Short Cuts is bookended by a Medfly epidemic and an earthquake; *Magnolia* climaxes with a torrential downpour of frogs onto the streets and automobiles of the San Fernando Valley; and *Crash* presents both a series of car accidents and a meteorological phenomenon nearly as surreal as the plague of frogs: snow falling over L.A. (Hsu 135)

⁴ Translation Swift: L.A. is situated in a geological risk area. Due to the constant danger of destruction through earthquakes, the city is subject to instability and rootlessness. In contrast to New York and San Francisco – more traditional cities and steeped in history – nothing in L.A. is of permanence. The city is reborn on a daily basis and ready to constantly change. Everything seems to be possible here.

Now let us consider the construction in more detail, starting with the film *Short Cuts*. *Short Cuts* begins with images and sounds that concern the Medfly epidemic in California. Helicopters are shown spraying the pesticide and a sign reads ‘Remember Medfly Quarantine No homegrown fruits or vegetables to leave area’. The helicopters and their loud noise, as well as the sign, denote danger. In addition, TV commentator Howard Finnigan gives a report on the Medfly epidemic, using the phrase ‘war’, thus also dramatizing the situation. Significant for the construction of this natural disaster are the reactions of the characters concerning this natural disaster. Sherry, for instance, immediately calls her husband when she hears the helicopters and instructs him to close all the windows and doors. She is scared that her dog, which Gene leaves in the garden, could get cancer. Other Los Angelinos like Ann Finnigan and Tess Trainer are also afraid that the pesticides could have an effect on their health. They both have misgivings about using their swimming pool because of the pesticides.

As if the Medfly epidemic is not enough, Los Angeles is also shook by an earthquake at the end of the film. This natural disaster evokes very different reactions of the characters. Some are scared and try to protect themselves and their beloved: Howard and Ann Finnigan and the baker Mr. Bitkower hide under a table in his bakery, Honey, Lois and her kids try to find protection on the campsite and Sherry gathers her three children together, while Gene speaks through the megaphone. Others, on the other hand, seem to be rather unimpressed and indifferent: Earl and Doreen, both a bit drunk, seem to enjoy the action, standing in the doorway of their caravan, laughing and fooling around. Earl even happily states: “This is it, baby. We’re going out together. This is the big one, baby”. (02:53:33-02:53:38) Betty Weathers, still shocked by the chaos in her house, laughs hysterically and hides under a jacket with her son. The Wymans and Kanes are in the jacuzzi, Stuart reassuring that this “is not the Big One” (02:53:07) and Tess Trainer, who has just lost her daughter, is singing apathetically. The reactions after the earthquake are even more bizarre. Some characters are at ease and others look rather disappointed, because it was not the ‘Big One’ after all. Doreen and Earl, for instance, laugh about it not being the ‘Big One’. The Wymans and Kanes get out of the Jacuzzi and turn on the TV to listen to the latest news on the earthquake. The following discussion between them is very conclusive:

[Marian]: “Seven-point-four. That’s big.”
[Stuart]: “Well, that’s pretty big.”

Claire: “You know, that’s really not that bad. Eight is bad. That’s not as bad as an eight.”

Stuart: “Obviously it’s not as bad as an eight.”

Claire: “Well, I know. But I mean when you come from California, you don’t worry about that stuff.”

(02:54:55-02:55:06)

The reaction on the report about the injuries and one death is again similar: “You know, that’s really not bad, one person” (02:55:13). When Stormy Weathers is then interviewed about his experiences in the air during the earthquake, the characters’ attention is no longer on the natural disaster, but rather on the pilot’s ridiculous name and on what they are going to drink next. Many characters in *Short Cuts* react indifferently and callously to the earthquake, probably because as Angelinos they are used to earthquakes and other natural disasters. The general motto seems to be: as long as it is not ‘the Big One’, it is not that big of a deal. This attitude is stressed by Stormy’s report. He does not just state that, “It all looked pretty normal” (02:55:25), but also that L.A. is a beautiful sight and that the Angelinos are lucky to live in this beautiful city – a strange remark shortly after an earthquake.

Except from the obvious natural disasters there are also other images that denote chaos and destruction. Stormy Weathers ruins all the furniture, decoration and clothes, leaving the whole house in destruction. Especially bizarre and sarcastic is that the salesman cleans the carpet while there is complete chaos all around him. What also strikes you as chaotic and crazy is the barbecue party with the two women dressed up as clowns, the men wearing make-up, the balloons and the alcohol.

The natural disaster depicted in *Magnolia* is of biblical proportion – a frog rain. The frog rain is the climax of the film, the whole action and even the film’s structure building up to this point. The event is furthermore foreshadowed by biblical references and weather reports. There is a repeated use of the numbers 8 and 2 (or the ‘exodus 8:2’) – a reference to the bible, Exodus Chapter 8 Verse 2, in which the Lord sends Moses to the Pharaoh, threatening him with a frog plague, if he does not release the slaves. (Biblos.com) “This passage informs *Magnolia* because of its emphasis on freedom from oppression and because it communicates a message of redemption and renewal” (Lane 18). Here are a few examples of the biblical references during the film: the telephone number in Frank’s infomercial reads ‘1-877-826-3437’, a board in the bar where Donnie spends his evening

reads 'exodus', '8' and '2' and all along the Boulevard there are advertising panels or banners reading 'exodus 8:2'. Especially significant is a shot around 01:03:05, in which the camera reveals a person in the audience of the quiz show holding a sign that reads 'Exodus 8:2', which is taken away from him by a member of staff. (Lane 19-20)

In addition, the rain and the weather reports also anticipate the natural disaster. "The choice of rain as the overriding experience is appropriate given that *Magnolia* is dripping with affect: tears fall, emotions flow, and, not incidentally, the rain pours" (Lane 18). The three weather reports during the film are not just signs of the upcoming meteorological miracle, but also structure the whole film into four segments, reflecting different stages in the story and the moods or feelings of the characters. After the introduction of all the characters to Aimee Mann's song 'One is the loneliest number', the first weather report states, "Partly Cloudy, 82% Chance of Rain" (00:12:28). The occurrence of the first announcement triggers off the actual story, emphasising the characters' problems, while they try to master yet another day in their lives. Roughly in minute 42 it starts to rain and the second weather report announces, "Light Showers. 99% Humidity. Winds SE 12 MPH" (00:41:38). The characters are getting more and more tense, desperate and lost in their misery, as the story unfolds, and Earl and Jimmy are fighting against death. After Aimee Mann's song 'Wise up' there is a long shot of a boulevard at night and the rain clears. The weather report states, "Rain Clearing, Breezy Overnight" (02:16:45). In that same shot an attentive viewer will recognise a street sign reading 'Magnolia' and two advertising panels reading 'exodus 8:2'. The clearing of the rain signifies the calm before the storm – the upcoming rain of frogs. (Lane 20-21)

Then, shortly before this natural disaster begins, the characters seem to have reached the peak of desperation or depression, or even a turning point in their lives. Jimmy Gator, who tells his wife that he cheated on her and probably molested their daughter, wants to end his life. Claudia runs away from her date with Jim, succumbing to her fears, insecurity and drug addiction. Earl is about to die and, after having been able to get all the anger of his chest, his son Frank begs him not to go. Full of desperation and remorse Linda attempts suicide, but is found and on her way to hospital with the ambulance. After his public expression of emotions, Stanley runs away and breaks into the school's library – his shelter, a place of safety and security. Donnie Smith regrets his theft, but his plan to bring the money back is thwarted by the broken key that is stuck in the lock of the door. Jim

Kurring passes Solomon & Solomon Electronics, sees Donnie climbing up the gutter and decides to turn around and find out what the man is doing. (Lane 16-17) Suddenly the first frog lands on the windshield of Jim's car and the masses follow a few seconds afterwards. All the characters react to the frog rain with surprise, astonishment and fear. A significant shot is the reaction shot of Phil, in which the close-up of his facial expression signifies astonishment and horror (02:41:01).

In *Crash* the construction of Los Angeles as the city of natural disasters or wonders is not that striking, and thus shall only be mentioned briefly. In the opening sequence (which is repeated later on) an officer of the L.A.P.D. and Detective Graham Waters discuss the unbelievable cold. The officer says, "I heard it might snow", whereupon Waters answers in amazement, "Get outta here", and the officer replies, "That's what I heard". Eventually, towards the end of the film (around 01:38:43), while the camera captures Cameron in a medium shot in his car (filmed through the windshield), it starts snowing. He is amazed and stops, gets out of the car and gazes into the sky with astonishment. He even touches the snowflakes on his cardigan – like a child. Cameron's reaction and behaviour stress the fact that snow in Los Angeles is almost a meteorological miracle. Furthermore, as already mentioned, the final shot of the film is an extreme long shot of Los Angeles, while snow is falling.

Summing up, in all three films – especially in *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* – the natural disasters or wonders (earthquake, frog rain and snowfall) happen at the end, forming a climax. In *Magnolia* the frog rain marks a turning point in the lives of the characters (or even the end of life as in Earl's and Jimmy's case), waking them up to the really important things in life. Lane writes: "These characters have hit the point at which they cannot save themselves from themselves. Divine intervention brings a new day." (18) Furthermore, she argues that "[t]his rather unconventional device manifests an epic-scale catharsis and a moral cleansing for almost all the characters" (18): Frank gets to see his father one last time and gets all his anger off his chest, Linda gets another chance to start over new, Rose is with her daughter Claudia (finally understanding her feelings), Donnie Smith gets the possibility to clear his conscience and maybe gain new strength after having been able to finally tell someone (Jim) about his feelings. Stanley plucks up enough courage to tell his father "You have to be nicer to me, Dad" (02:47:56) – hopefully making his father realise the wrong he has done and eventually taking the pressure off the child. Frank decides to

visit Linda in hospital and Jim decides to fight for Claudia's love. In the end the audience gets the feeling that the characters' miserable lives will change for the better. In *Crash* the wonder of snow falling over Los Angeles accompanies the changes some characters might have undergone – changes of heart or attitude. This 'cathartic function' does not hold true for *Short Cuts*. As already discussed, the audience gets the impression that everything will stay the way it was before. Even the murder of the young woman might not have any serious consequences for Jerry, as it seems that she was hit by a rock during the earthquake.

3. Analogies between Los Angeles and network films

After the description and analysis of the representation and construction of Los Angeles in the network films, the following sections will examine the connection between the city and the film category from a different perspective – by exploring their analogies.

3.1. Paradigms of postmodernism

Before getting into details concerning the city and the network films as two paradigms of postmodernism, I shall define and summarise the most important characteristics of ‘postmodernism’ – if this is at all possible. Many theorists of different scientific areas, who deal or have dealt with ‘postmodernism’ and whose thoughts shall be summarised or quoted in the following paragraphs, at least seem to agree on one aspect – the difficulty of defining this ambiguous and controversial concept. Hawthorn, for instance, points out that “to write about postmodernism is to get involved in a variety of problematic issues relating to boundaries and definitions” (216) and Hassan states that “postmodernism suffers from a certain *semantic* instability: that is, no clear consensus about its meaning exists among scholars” (588).

One big disagreement concerns the occurrence of postmodernism and its relation to modernism: When does modernism end and postmodernism start? Can one actually define a clear-cut boundary? Hassan argues that “a ‘period’ [like postmodernism] is generally not a period at all; it is rather both a diachronic and synchronic construct” (589). Furthermore, Hawthorn reflects that “[i]t is not easy to define modernism and postmodernism independently because the boundaries between the two terms vary according to different usages” (211). He explains that “*postmodernism* is typically used in a rather wider sense than is *modernism*, referring to a general human condition, or society at large, as much as to art or culture” (216). While modernism can be described with the key concepts ‘form’, ‘purpose’, ‘design’, ‘art object/finished work’, ‘distance’, ‘creation/totalisation’ and ‘centring’, the following concepts can be assigned to postmodernism: ‘antiform’, ‘play’, ‘chance’, ‘process/performance/happening’, ‘participation’, ‘decreation/deconstruction’ and ‘dispersal’ (Hassan 591).

Postmodernism, then, can be used today in a number of different ways: (i) to refer to the non-realist and non-traditional literature and art of the post-Second World War period; (ii) to refer to literature and art which takes certain modernist characteristics to an extreme stage; and (iii) to refer to aspects of a more general human condition in the ‘late capitalist’ world of the post-1950s which have an all-embracing effect on life, culture, ideology and art, as well as (in some usages) to a generally more welcoming attitude towards these aspects. (Hawthorn 216)

Concerning literature and art, Hawthorn mentions the “rejection of representation in favour of self-reference” (216) and five typical postmodern techniques (as pointed out by Lodge) – *contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness* and *excess* (216-217).

The Film Studies Dictionary (2001) gives the following definition for ‘postmodernism’:

A movement or phase in twentieth-century thought, dating from the 1960s, which represents a break with the assumptions of modernism, but more commonly associated with the intellectual and aesthetic debates and practices that have dominated the 1980s and 1990s. Among the key influential writers on postmodernity are Jean Baudrillard, Jean François Lyotard and Frederic Jameson ... If modernism stems from a fundamental belief in progress and the pursuit of truth, postmodernism is about the absence of such an over-arching concept and is fundamentally anti-essentialist in viewing large-scale attempts to explain the world or provide political and philosophical prescriptions for improving it as vain- often referred to as a rejection of ‘grand narratives’. (Blandford, Grant, and Hillier 183)

The most striking postmodernist thoughts concern our ‘network society’ and the developments regarding communication and information technology. “New communication technologies such as the Internet, e-mail and mobile phones are characterised by interconnectivity, speed, immediacy, and decentralised use. In contrast to old technologies, they are highly personalised and part of everyday life” (Chambers 113). Furthermore, the sociocultural organisation in general has changed – due to the deconstructive approach of postmodernism, which questions dominant discourses and concepts such as gender, age, class and ethnicity, giving way to new discourses and new forms of communities and communication (Chambers 6). The rise of communication and information networks have led to a ‘rise of the network society’ – as Castell argues in his book of the same title *The Rise of the Network Society*. He argues the following:

Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies ... While the networking form of social organization has existed in other times and spaces, the new information technology paradigm provides the material basis for its pervasive expansion throughout the entire social structure. Presence or absence in the network

and the dynamics of each network *vis-à-vis* others are critical sources of domination and change in our society: a society that, therefore, we may properly call the network society, characterized by the pre-eminence of social morphology over social action. (Castells 500)

Despite the controversies and ambiguity of the concept of postmodernism, I would like to illustrate that both the city Los Angeles and the ‘category’ of network films are often similarly described as ‘postmodern’, especially concerning the characteristic key concepts of fragmentation, network, decentralisation and chaos.

Los Angeles

“[I]t is no coincidence that Los Angeles is regarded by many as the prototypical postmodern city”, Dear and Flusty argue (154). It is *the* American city paradigmatic for all the changes that are characteristic of the end of the twentieth century – a period that some have come to call ‘postmodernism’. These changes and transformations include globalisation, de- and reindustrialisation, the emergence and significance of information and communication technology, metropolitan growth and all the changes in urban and political structure. (Dear, and Flusty 153-154)

Lüke states that Los Angeles became the paradigm of the postmodern city in the 90s. The reasons Lüke gives for this development concern the city’s topographical features. Especially the countless suburbs and the lack of an actual city centre – a central point from which the rest of the city radiates – are typical characteristics of postmodernism. Furthermore, people from various cultural backgrounds live next to each other in the melting pot Los Angeles. It is not just the merging of suburbs and cultures, but also of reality and vision (as discussed in section 2) and present and future that constitute the postmodern features of the city. Apart from this fusion, the metropolis is also characterised by dispersion, resulting in the decentralised structure mentioned before. (Lüke 20)

Dear also discusses the decentralisation and fragmentation of Los Angeles – “a fragmented mosaic of polarized neighborhoods segregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and class” (“In the City” 97). Similarly to Lüke, Dear discusses the opposites that merge in the metropolis, as for instance the wealthy and the poor, deindustrialisation and reindustrialisation. “This polycentric, polarized, polyglot metropolis long ago tore up its social contract and is

without even a draft of a replacement. There is no longer a single civic will or a clear collective intentionality behind L.A.'s urbanism" (Dear, "In the City" 99).

Following the descriptions of postmodern social networks and 'network society' as such, Los Angeles seems to be the epitome of a postmodern network – not just considering the connections via the Internet and telephones (or mobile phones) and the rapid access to a whole network of information and knowledge, but also the significant network of streets and freeways. The network of freeways both connects and isolates parts of the city and its surroundings and has thus contributed to the area's fragmentation and decentralisation so characteristic of postmodernism. (Dear, "In the City" 97) Castells writes about the whole region of Los Angeles that "[t]his is the undefined metropolitan region where 20 million people work, live, commute, and communicate by using a network of freeways, media coverage, cable networks, and wireline and wireless telecommunication networks" (Castells xxxiv).

Network Films

In a time of fragmentation and deconstruction, network films form one category of experimental filmmaking, which break with the dominant discourse of filmmaking in Hollywood. They thus reflect "the fragmenting 'postmodern condition' and its revolt against master narratives" (Berg 6). Furthermore, some of the characteristics of the postmodern concept mentioned earlier – including 'chance', 'process/performance/happening', 'participation' and 'dispersal' (Hassan 591) – can be assigned to the 'category' of network films. 'Chance' is an essential concept on the narrative level of the films, as the numerous intersecting storylines are often connected by chance and coincidence. The focus of these films seems to lie rather on the ongoing 'process' or 'happening' of the stories than on the outcome or closure. Since network films are characterised by fragmentation, cross-cutting between various parallel storylines and a high number of characters, interweaving the threads by, for instance, revealing relationships between characters, they demand the full attention and active participation of the spectators in the process of meaning-making. Eventually, 'dispersal' is a suitable term for describing the overall structure of these dynamic and fragmented network films. (Everett 163)

The term I have chosen to use for this type of films already implies their overall structure – the network. Everett points out that "[a]t its most basic, a network is simply a collection of

objects, nodes, people or other elements that are connected to each other in some fashion” (162). Thus, films such as *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* or *Crash* are epitomes of network films. As already discussed in the first sections of the thesis, the numerous parallel storylines, which are shown in an alternating style, randomly intersect with each other, building a complex and dynamic network of stories. Typical for networks, these films have unlimited centres or rather no centre at all. Rather than centring around one main character or storyline, network films treat all their episodes and characters equally. (Everett 162) “The chance events that structure each film are played out in relation to the concept of the network, in acknowledgement of the fact that we live in a ‘connected world’, and that no single action, however random or trivial, is without wider consequences” (Everett 167). Furthermore, typical characteristics of postmodernism and network films are simultaneity – as in the simultaneity of narrative threads, multiplicity – as reflected in the multiplicity of characters, and chaos – as reflected on both a cinematic and a narrative level. (Everett 160) The following paragraphs shall discuss whether the three selected network films *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash* in particular conform to some of the characteristic features of postmodern films pointed out by Boggs and Pollard.

Let us consider the first description: “What we refer to as postmodern films are essentially popular works ... [that] increasingly reveal a fragmented, chaotic, dystopic universe” (Boggs, and Pollard 445). Fragmentation is definitely revealed in all three films, due to the cross-cutting between the narrative storylines and the multiple characters, whose lives are only portrayed in fragments. The construction of chaos in the films has already been discussed in section 2.2.3. and shall thus only be mentioned briefly. On the cinematic level, the multiplicity of characters, the simultaneity of different storylines and the rapid cuts might cause a chaotic structure, difficult to follow for the viewer. On the narrative level, a chaotic and rather dystopic image of Los Angeles is constructed due to the depiction of natural disasters (medfly epidemic, earthquake, frog rain) and chaotic people and relationships. While *Magnolia* and *Crash* at least end on a rather optimistic note, the society in *Short Cuts* could be described as an epitome of social chaos – the representation of a ‘dystopic universe’. Most of the characters are unable to have a personal, loving and caring relationship built on trust and understanding. They are indifferent to what happens in society – even when Los Angeles is shaken by an earthquake, causing injuries and death.

Here is a second description of postmodern films: “Films labelled postmodern by academic and media critics frequently embrace strong undercurrents of mayhem, satire, irreverence, and irony, revealing at the same time a milieu in which social and personal relationships often enter into a process of breakdown and collapse.” (Boggs, and Pollard 445) The ‘breakdown and collapse’ of social and personal relationships is a major topic of all three films. In *Crash* characters are caught in their net of prejudice concerning people of other colour or ethnicity. Some are shown unable to connect, some are scared of touch, and others strive for love and understanding, but do not get it. The breakdown of personal relationships is also at the heart of *Magnolia*, especially between fathers and their children (as is the case with Earl Partridge and Frank, and Jimmy Gator and Claudia). Children are scarred and thus unable to have a healthy relationship with their parents or a partner: Frank is a sex-maniac, Claudia an insecure drug-addict, the former quiz and whiz kid Donnie Smith is in love with a bartender and has ‘so much love to give’, but does not get any attention or love in return, and current champion Stanley Spector strives for his father’s attention and love. Furthermore, Jimmy has cheated on his wife Rose many times, Earl cheated on his first wife and left her in her illness and Linda married Earl for his money (but eventually feels love for him before he dies). In *Short Cuts* relationships of any kind are portrayed as completely chaotic, sometimes even in an ironic way: Tess Trainer does not understand the real needs of her daughter, who eventually kills herself. Gene cheats on his wife and Sherri pretends not to know while amusing herself with his lies. Betty, Gene’s affair, cheats on him with at least one other man and Stormy, Betty’s ex-husband, is jealous and eventually ruins the whole house. Ralph and Marian do not like to talk about their feelings or problems, which becomes clear when Marian’s affair is discussed three years after it actually happened. Jerry Kaiser envies the men Lois talks to on her sex chatline, and Earl and Doreen have a relationship which is alternately based on conflict and reconciliation.

The last quote I want to use for a brief analysis is the following:

Postmodern films depend upon such devices as jump cuts, flashbacks, flashforwards, split screens, and other formalist conventions that refocus attention to particular film discourses as artistic constructs, in the process approaching Bertold Brecht’s theatrical dictum that audiences must never be lulled, even momentarily, into believing that they are viewing real-life representations. (Boggs, and Pollard 446)

The rapid cross-cutting in all three films, characteristic of network films in general, directs the viewers' attention to the cinematic level (narrative methods and techniques) of the films. Match cuts, in particular, as in *Short Cuts* and *Crash*, stress the films' artifice. In addition, the use of a narrator in *Magnolia* gives the audience the feeling that a story is told – a fable rather than real-life experiences. Furthermore, the introductions of all the characters at the beginning of *Magnolia*, the narration's segmenting by the weather reports, and the discussion of films on a meta-fictional level (as has been discussed in section 2.2.1.) emphasise the fact that films are 'artistic constructs'. The frog rain, per se, is a reminder of the film's fiction. The major part of *Crash* is told in a flashback, which starts after the film's opening sequence.

Summing up, Los Angeles and network films could be considered as paradigms of postmodernism. They both share common features such as networks, fragmentation, decentralisation and chaos. Network films do not just reflect these postmodern characteristics on the cinematic level, but also on the narrative level, portraying a fragmented, chaotic society and networks of chance and coincidence. (Everett 160) Following these thoughts and observations, it does not come as a surprise that “the majority of such films are set within the postmodern spaces of the city” (Everett 167) – in this case the postmodern space of Los Angeles.

3.2. Reference to traffic and road network

This section shall briefly illustrate that there is another analogy in the description of Los Angeles and network films, namely in their reference to traffic and the road network. The Greater Los Angeles Area is structured by a whole network of streets and freeways – probably the largest network of freeways worldwide and definitely a landmark of Los Angeles. The car is an important part of the everyday life and experiences of the majority of inhabitants. (Jahnke 24) Hence, when reading about Los Angeles, one will often come across the description of its significant automobile culture and network system.

Keil even describes Los Angeles itself with a car metaphor: “Los Angeles sits like a car-seat cover, carefully strapped across the elevations of the Santa Monica and San Gabriel Mountains, tugged in at the coastline and open towards the north and east where the deserts

begin. Underneath the cover, the big story of California history is played out in suprahuman intensity and temporality” (xiii).

As already discussed in the last section, network films – as their names imply – consist of multiple storylines that cross each other and thus also form a network. A closer look at the choice of words in various definitions and descriptions of network films also reveals a frequent use of traffic- and road-related vocabulary, such as ‘trajectory’, ‘line’, ‘intersection’ and ‘crossroad’. The following quotes, taken from Bordwell, Lane and Everett, shall illustrate this argument.

The central formal principle is that several protagonists are given more or less the same weight as they participate in intertwining plotlines. Usually these lines affect one another to some degree. The characters might be strangers, slight acquaintances, friends, or kinfolk. The film aims to show a larger pattern underlying their individual trajectories. (Bordwell, “Lessons from Babel”)

Within the context of post-classical cinema, however, narrative more often than not unfolds from any spatial and temporal point rather than through a causal development in time and space. ... [These films] escape the organizational control of narrative. In these films, causality is replaced with disentangled lines of action that randomly intersect, and that are almost impossible to reconstruct in an exact chronological order, at least from memory. As a result, the spectator’s experience is not about constructing meaning along some sort of logic of cause and effect, but rather about forming patterns along how different points of time and space coincidentally traverse. The spectator’s experience of the films of this kind is therefore also more of a journey from one spatial and temporal crossroad to another [...]. (Lane 35-36)

Preoccupied with the unpredictability of the universe, haunted by the question ‘What if?’, such films, which I shall henceforth refer to as ‘fractal’ – since they both illustrate and explore the complex architecture of chaos – are structured as a series of apparently unrelated stories that intersect and interact with each other in random, unstable, and unpredictable ways. (Everett 160)

“If there’s no overarching event frame, unacquainted characters might be granted more autonomy, pursuing their own lives but intersecting occasionally by sheer accident (most often a *traffic* accident: it’s dangerous to take to the roads in today’s movies)” (Bordwell, *Hollywood* 97).

“[M]ovie coincidences create ‘small worlds’ in which characters will intersect again and again, especially if the duration and locale of the action are well circumscribed” (Bordwell, *Hollywood* 98).

“Goal driven or not, characters follow discrete trajectories, often acting in ignorance of their counterparts. The intersection of the strangers will provide the drama, and the network” (Bordwell, *Poetics* 201).

In films like *Crash* “random events [...] produce fortuitous changes”, Laine writes, and “every change causes a chain of local events leading to another [...] change in the trajectory of the global network.” (38)

The use of traffic metaphors for the description of the structure of such films seems to imply that the narrative resembles its setting, which is especially true for the three films discussed in this thesis. In a further step, these traffic metaphors can also be applied to the narrative level of *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash*. At some point in the stories characters seem to arrive at an intersection: Where shall they go? Which road should they take? Where will their life take them? There’s a scene in *Magnolia*, which seems to give this aspect special emphasis – the scene, in which Donnie Smith is on his way home from the robbery. He has to stop at the traffic lights (at Magnolia Boulevard) and while he is waiting at the intersection, he has also metaphorically speaking arrived at a crossroads in his life. Which path does he decide to take? The moment at the intersection makes him reflect upon his actions and he decides to turn round and do the right thing – bring back the stolen money. So the intersection has both a literal and metaphorical meaning in the story. Furthermore, some characters seem to have lost their way or orientation in life, and others have taken the wrong track and need to make a turn. In *Crash* Anthony is, for instance, on the wrong track, but maybe the experience with Cameron makes him realise that he has to head in a new direction. Some characters try to take a short cut, as is the case with Linda Partridge. Her attempted suicide can be described as a ‘short cut’, because she does not want to go the more painful and difficult path, confronting her problems. The film title ‘Short Cuts’ can also be considered to have two meanings – one concerns the editing style and the other signifies the lifestyle of most of the characters – they like to go the easy way, not caring for others and ignoring feelings. Other characters have reached a cul-de-sac. Earl Partridge, Jimmy Gator and Zoe Trainer, for instance, enter the cul-de-sac of their

lives – their road comes to an end. Finally, there are also characters such as Claudia Gator and Jean Cabot who are metaphorically stuck in a roundabout – a vicious circle – and have to gain new confidence or strength to choose a new path.

3.3. Cognitive mapping: Orientation in space & narrative

The following sections will deal with the concept of cognitive mapping, in order to discuss and compare the orientation in a city like Los Angeles and the orientation in network films such as *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash*. After a general discussion of the concept (3.3.1.), Kevin Lynch's research on the cognitive mapping of a city will be introduced (3.3.2.), followed by the application of the concept to network films (3.3.3). Eventually, the most important strategies and devices for the successful orientation in the three films will be analysed on a narrative and on a cinematic level.

3.3.1. Introducing the concepts of cognitive mapping & cognitive maps

The theory of cognitive mapping goes back to 1948, when E.C. Tolman suggested that spatial orientation is based on the internal representation of our environment, which means that we orient ourselves with the help of our internal cognitive maps of reality. A lot of other theorists have dealt with this concept since. One outstanding research in this field is the one by Kevin Lynch, which appeared in 1960. In his seminal work *The Image of the City* he discusses the key elements that are essential for the orientation in a city. (Redtenbacher 1) Before dealing with Lynch's work in more detail, the following paragraphs shall introduce the concept of cognitive maps, by referring to Downs and Stea, who thoroughly reflect on cognitive mapping in their work *Maps in Minds* from 1977. So what are cognitive maps and why are they so important?

First of all Downs and Stea discuss the basic human need of finding one's way around the world. Where are we? How do we get there? What is the quickest or easiest way to go? Which road should one avoid? How far is it and how long does it take to get there? These are everyday questions that concern our spatial behaviour. Our desire to know and understand our surroundings and environment, to explore and experience new places and to use this knowledge is a fundamental and essential part of everyday life. When one visits a

new place, one feels like a stranger and immediately tries to find one's way around and explore the new environment. Once one has gained spatial orientation, one usually feels familiarity and thus comfort. The ability of spatial orientation – of learning and understanding the world we live in by memorising and organising it in our head – is so basic and natural to us that we hardly ever consciously notice or think about it. Downs and Stea point out that the one circumstance, though, in which the ability usually gets recognised, is when we lack it – meaning, when we get lost. The experience of being lost often triggers feelings of unease and sometimes even despair, which again illustrates that orientation is closely linked to the feeling of comfort and familiarity. (Downs, and Stea 3-6) Human beings orient themselves with the help of “the representation of the geographical environment” (Downs, and Stea 4) within their heads – that is “the world as people believe it to be” (4). This brings us to the concepts of cognitive mapping and cognitive maps. Here are definitions provided by Downs and Stea:

Cognitive mapping is an abstraction covering those cognitive or mental abilities that enable us to collect, organize, store, recall, and manipulate information about the spatial environment. ... Above all, cognitive mapping refers to a *process* of doing: it is an *activity* that we engage in rather than an object that we have. It is the way in which we come to grips with and comprehend the world around us. (6)

A *cognitive map* is a *product* – a person's organized representation of some part of the spatial environment. ... Most importantly, a cognitive map is a cross section representing the world at one instant in time. It reflects the world *as some person believes it to be*; it need not be correct. ... It is your understanding of the world, and it may only faintly resemble the world as reflected in cartographic maps or color photographs. (6)

Downs and Stea concentrate on the everyday spatial rather than the social environment in their discussion – places and spaces a person might interact with/in on a regular basis, as for instance the home, the neighbourhood, favourite shop, the workplace, school, leisure time facilities, cinema, library and restaurants. A cognitive map could then be a mental image of such a place or a description that portrays a spatial environment or even a sketch map of a route. (Downs, and Stea 6-7)

Naturally, “[c]ognitive maps and mapping vary according to a person's perspective on the world” (Downs, and Stea 20). Cognitive mapping is essential for every human being – without this ability one would not be able to survive. However, depending on how a person perceives and experiences his/her surroundings, cognitive maps can differ a lot and thus

also the way people understand the world. A child will, for instance, cognitively map its spatial environment differently than a grown-up. Furthermore, cognitive maps do not always have to be visual images. Some people have olfactory or auditory representations of spaces. So the process of perceiving and cognitively mapping an environment for instance depends on age, gender, nationality, education, interest, previous knowledge, experience, familiarity, practice and attitude. The world is how each person experiences and understands it and thus believes it to be. (Downs, and Stea 20-24) Furthermore, cognitive mapping is not just essential for our orientation and spatial behaviour, but also for our own identity (Downs, and Stea 27). Downs and Stea argue that “[c]ognitive maps serve as coathangers for assorted memories. They provide a vehicle for recall – an image of ‘where’ brings back a recollection of ‘who’ and ‘what.’ This sense of place is essential to any ordering of our lives” (27).

3.3.2. Cognitive mapping applied to the construction of a city

Kevin Lynch’s work *The Image of the City* (1960) offers a practical application of the concept of cognitive mapping. He researches the significance of a city’s appearance for the process of cognitive mapping, thus coming up with principles for reasonable city planning. Lynch deals with the question of how our spatial environment can be organised and structured, so that the process of cognitive mapping is facilitated. He points out that it should be made easier for people to orient themselves and grasp space, thus feeling more comfortable. (Downs, and Stea 27) Concerning the visual organisation of cities, Lynch concentrates on the ‘legibility’, ‘building the image’, ‘structure and identity’, and ‘imageability’ – terms and concepts which shall briefly be explained in the following paragraphs.

The legibility refers to the ease in which a person can grasp and memorise single parts of a city and then assemble those parts to construct a mental image. Paths, nodes and landmarks, which are for instance important for cognitive mapping, should be easy to identify for people living in the city. Lynch argues that legibility is essential for the image and thus planning and construction of a city. Furthermore, he points out that a legible structure of a city does not just ease the moving around, but also benefits organisation, relationships, communication, social activities, knowledge and personal development. In

addition, an ordered image contributes to the feeling of security and hence makes a harmonious relationship between oneself and one's environment possible. (Lynch 2-6)

The mental image is the result of an ongoing mutual process between a person and its environment. The observer individually chooses from the relations and distinctions offered by the environment. A cognitive map can thus be ordered and structured for its respective creator, but not at all comprehensible for another person. Lynch suggests that despite these individual distinctions, common constructions of cognitive maps appear among people within the same 'interest groups', such as age groups or groups of people with the same profession or education. (Lynch 6-7)

Furthermore, Lynch mentions the three essential components of a mental image – structure, identity and meaning. 'Structure' refers to the spatial relation between observer and object, 'identity' to the identifying of an object as an individual entity, and 'meaning' naturally to the meaning the object has for the observer. In his thesis Lynch focuses on the physical qualities of the environment – that is the structure and identity of objects in a city – because he is convinced that the clarity of the image's structure is most important. This is again linked to the concept of 'legibility' and in a further step to 'imageability'. An object or element in a city has to be distinguishable, perceptible and legible in order to be memorable or cognitively mapped by the observer. 'Imageability' is an object's quality of attracting attention and giving the observer the possibility to paint a vivid mental image, for instance because of its colour, clear shape or legible arrangement. (Lynch 8-9)

For his research Lynch explored cognitive maps of the three American cities Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles. He wanted to find out how the cognitive maps of inhabitants (or people who at least work there) differed and which elements of a city attracted the most attention. For that purpose, Lynch for instance asked the participants of his research to give information about the city, descriptions of paths and most memorable places, and do some map sketches. In order to describe the most common and least common images of the city, he came up with five key elements, which underlie a great number of mental maps researched: 'paths', 'edges', 'districts', 'nodes' and 'landmarks'. (Redtenbacher 30-32) Lynch defines those elements as follows: "Paths are the channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves. They may be streets, walkways, transit lines, canals, railroads" (Lynch 47).

Edges are the linear elements not used or considered as paths by the observer. They are the boundaries between two phases, linear breaks in continuity: shores, railroad cuts, edges of development, walls. ... Such edges may be barriers, ... which close one region off from another; or they may be seams, lines along which two regions are related and joined together. (Lynch 47)

“Districts are the medium-to-large sections of the city, conceived of as having two-dimensional extent, which the observer mentally enters ‘inside of,’ and which are recognisable as having some common, identifying character. Always identifiable from the inside, they are also used for exterior reference if visible from the outside” (Lynch 47).

Nodes are points, the strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which he is traveling. They may be primarily junctions, places of a break in transportation, a crossing or convergence of paths, moments of shift from one structure to another. Or the nodes may be simply concentrations, which gain their importance from being the condensation of some use or physical character ... (Lynch 47)

“Landmarks are another type of point-reference, but in this case the observer does not enter within them, they are external. They are usually a rather simply defined physical object: building, sign, store, or mountain. Their use involves the singling out of one element from a host of possibilities” (Lynch 48).

In his research Lynch found out that districts and paths were the two dominant elements in the mental images of a high number of people – which one was preferred seemed to depend on the individual and the city. Edges did not seem to be as important as paths, but were still frequently used, especially to structure districts. In the majority of cognitive maps several nodes appeared and landmarks were most frequently used by people who were more familiar with the city. (Lynch 47-48)

Although Lynch’s work dates back to 1960, his description of the spatial environment and cognitive mapping of Los Angeles is significant for the thesis and shall thus be described in the following paragraphs.

Lynch argues that just like any other big city the heart of Los Angeles is its centre. The centre is busy and active, has some recognisable and memorable buildings and actually a rather clear structure due to its organised and regular network of roads and freeways. However, the cognitive mapping process of this city centre does not seem to be as easy as

is the case in other cities, like Boston, because of various factors. One of the factors that Lynch points out is the already discussed decentralisation. The city centre is still called 'downtown', although it is not at all the centre of attraction. Furthermore, the regular road system has the disadvantage that people easily confuse streets with each other. An aerial photograph of the city centre shows that the centre lacks typical and striking landmarks that make it immediately recognisable as L.A. To come back to the five elements defined earlier, Lynch lists some typical elements of Los Angeles city centre: Pershing Square as an essential node, the Civic Center and the Richfield Building as significant landmarks, the Spring-Street financial district as a popular district, and Skid Row, Broadway and the 'Hollywood and Harbor Freeways' as well-known paths. (Lynch 33-36)

When the people in Lynch's research were asked to characterise the whole city, they described it as vast, formless and decentralised. It seems impossible to grasp or represent Los Angeles as an entity. Lynch argues that on a regional scale orientation does not seem to be too difficult because of helpful elements such as the sea, mountains and hills, valley regions and an extensive freeway network. But when asked for more details, the subjects had problems with identifying and structuring objects in their mental images, in other words problems with 'legibility' and 'imageability'. Striking details could only be described along the most familiar paths, such as the way from home to work. The many hours spent on the freeways also seemed to give the people an impression of the city's topography, but then again they could not relate the network of freeways to the overall city structure. Generally, lots of interviewees described their daily experiences and struggles on the streets and freeways of Los Angeles and mentioned the smog as one of the great burdens of Los Angeles. (Lynch 40-42)

Fredric Jameson, who based some of his work on Lynch's ideas about mental maps, adding a social and global scale (Jameson 415), sums up Lynch's research as follows:

Kevin Lynch taught us that the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves ... Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories. (51)

3.3.3. Cognitive mapping applied to network films

Cognitive mapping has been described as the ability of spatial orientation. This section will consider the following question: Can the concept of cognitive mapping also be applied to the viewers' orientation in a film – especially a network film? 'Orientation in a film' would imply that a viewer orients him- or herself by means of the film's structure, as for instance the characters and their relationships. (Mikunda 246) Exploring orientation in network films is especially challenging, since these films have a very complex structure.

Let us go back to Lynch's research on cognitive mapping of a city. He discusses five key elements for the successful orientation in a city – paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. In 1990 Christian Mikunda already argues that these elements can also be applied to the orientation in films. 'Paths' may be compared to storylines, 'districts' to group of characters or stories and 'landmarks', for instance, to the central character in a district or important incidents (Mikunda 246-247). Two of the five elements – paths and nodes – are especially important for the cognitive mapping process of network films and shall thus be at the centre of attention. In the context of network films 'paths' refer to the single storylines and 'nodes', which Lynch defines as "a crossing or convergence of paths" (47), to the intersections of storylines and connections of characters.

Due to the multiple paths and nodes network films form a whole network of stories and characters – as their name already implies. Network films "have come to draw wider and wider circles between their characters. They steer away from featuring any one main protagonist, instead assembling tenuous connections between diverse individuals in order to present the world as a web or system of interconnections" (Silvey, "Not Just Ensemble Films"). In this sense the structure of a network film like *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* or *Crash* is homologous with the overall structure of Los Angeles. As already discussed in section 3.1., the city and the films share the following characteristics: They are both marked by decentralisation – Los Angeles lacks an actual city centre and network films do not centre around a main character, but characters and storylines are of equal weight. The network of stories and characters resembles the network of roads and freeways typical for L.A. In both cases the nodes are essential for a person's 'spatial' orientation – the process of cognitive

mapping. Silvey also points out that the “practice of cognitive mapping collides with the paradigm of network society” (Silvey, “Not Just Ensemble Films”).

Thus, the overall structures of the three selected network films, which are set in L.A., also reflect the city’s topographical features. (Lüke 82) Jahnke even suggests that the films are adjusted to the city – especially concerning its vastness and complexity. (211) Due to the convergence and linkage of seemingly disparate storylines, though, the films become easier to grasp and at the same time make a vast city like Los Angeles (even if just a part of it) feel more like a village, in which people know each other. (Hsu 144) So the films create an understanding and hence a feeling of familiarity and community for Los Angeles. In this sense, the films may be considered as cognitive maps of Los Angeles, or one might also argue that the films and the city create similar cognitive maps in the beholders. Strikingly, the closing sequence of *Short Cuts* has the camera pan across Los Angeles and then across a city map – maybe emphasising the film’s function as cognitive map.

Ensemble films encourage viewers’ identification with the objective, all-seeing camera ... in order to attempt the impossible task of cognitively mapping L.A., or even a small portion of the metropolis – a handful of suburban houses or a few blocks of Magnolia Boulevard. The promise – if not the delivery – of a cognitive map of the metropolis responds to an intense but directionless longing for community on the part of its inhabitants, as well as on the part of the cinematic audience ... (Hsu 138)

The cognitive mapping process of a city like Los Angeles or a network film like *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* or *Crash* always has the same purpose. Grasping the structure – whether the narrative organisation or spatial environment – is essential for our understanding. A sense of orientation usually triggers feelings of comfort, ease and familiarity – as has already been mentioned earlier. During the course of network films, the viewer learns that the characters are all somehow linked – especially by the city. Los Angeles weaves all the single narrative threads and characters together, thus demonstrating that there are common feelings, collective experiences and a sense of community despite the isolation, anonymity and alienation usually associated with a large city like L.A. (Hsu 138)

Downs and Stea point out: “Many novels depend upon a sense of place within which characters and plot and landscape are woven together” (261). This is also true for network films – they depend on the viewer’s ability of cognitive mapping. As already mentioned, paths and nodes are the most essential elements for the successful orientation in network

films. Paths of the three films have already been discussed in section 1.4.: I identified nine paths in *Short Cuts*, eight in *Magnolia* and another eight in *Crash*. Especially significant for network films are the innumerable nodes between the storylines. Although all the characters pursue their own paths, these paths occasionally intersect. Network films' unquestioned aim of connecting characters and thus creating a sense of unity is criticised by Bruns, who describes this intention as a "falseness of unity" (208). He argues that "[i]t is as if we have lost an ear for polyphony, so strong is the compulsion to unify disparate elements, so tempting it is to bring separate lines to some sort of tonal accord" (208).

With the help of the nodes that "perform cognitive mapping" (Silvey, "Not Just Ensemble Films") the audience can orient itself in the films and get a feeling of satisfaction, pleasure and familiarity. The following (and final) sections of the thesis will hence focus on the different nodes on both the narrative and cinematic levels of the three films. On the narrative level actual encounters or crossings between characters of different storylines and common or collective experiences, such as overall feelings, natural disasters, music, sounds or TV programmes, will be explored. On the cinematic level cross-cutting techniques, including match cuts, and non-diegetic music shall be analysed. Each category of linking devices or strategies discussed in the following sections will feature examples from *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash*. However, it shall be mentioned at this point that some aspects may not be illustrated by all three films, and that many examples are combinations of two or even three narrative strategies or stylistic devices.

3.3.3.1. Nodes on the narrative level of *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash*

Encounters between characters

In the first few minutes of network films the roughly ten to twenty characters are usually individually presented to the viewer with hardly any connections whatsoever. Only during the course of the film, characters, who first seem to be strangers to one another, are often revealed to be acquaintances or even relatives. Some paths of characters cross wittingly, others unwittingly. These convergences and intersections may impact the lives of the involved or may happen without any consequences. (Silvey, "Not Just Ensemble Films") Kermode describes this strategy significantly with the use of traffic metaphors: "characters

cross paths, impacting, overtaking or merely bypassing each other's lives" (33). As already mentioned, various encounters between strangers are made more likely and plausible due to the fact that all the characters at least live in the same city – Los Angeles.

Encounters based on existing relationships

When it comes to the question, 'how to connect paths, form nodes, and thus ease the cognitive mapping process?', one simple strategy applied by writers and directors is the revelation of already existing relationships between the characters – they could be relatives, friends, lovers, colleagues or neighbours. Bordwell, for instance, points out: "If mutual strangers create gaps or weak links, at least initially, the strong ties in the story world are provided by familiars" (*Poetics* 201). The following illustrations from the three selected network films allow a closer look at these 'strong ties'.

In Altman's *Short Cuts* Marian Wyman and Sherri Shepard are revealed as sisters quite early in the film. This bond is displayed in various scenes: in one scene Sherri is on a visit at Marian's house, where Marian paints a nude picture of her. In another scene the sisters are shown in the Shepards' house, talking about Gene's infidelity. Once their strong tie is even emphasised on an additional visual level: while they are on the phone to each other, the women are both shown eating peanut butter. The Trainers and the Finnigans are next-door neighbours, which is the reason why Zoe Trainer likes Casey very much. Gene Shepard, Sherri's husband, has an affair with Betty Weathers. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that the Bushs and Kaisers are friends, as they go out together to the club, in which Tess Trainer sings, have a barbecue party together and in the end go for a picnic at a campsite. Moreover, Honey Bush is revealed as Earl and Doreen's daughter quite late in the film. While Honey is out with her husband and friends at the jazz club, she has a chance encounter with Earl.

In *Magnolia* some of the main convergences of storylines are based on family-ties: Jimmy and Rose Gator are Claudia's parents. This is already demonstrated at the beginning of the film, first of all in a shot, which captures a family photo of the Gators, and then in the scene in which Jimmy visits Claudia to tell her that he is dying. This scene already gives the viewer a good impression of the father-daughter relationship, although the viewer does not know the reason for Claudia's hatred and anger towards her father yet. In one of the

last sequences of the film, Claudia and her mother Rose are finally reunited again. The second important bond is the relationship between Earl Partridge and his estranged son Frank. Shortly before the frog rain, Frank finally subdues his fear and doubts and visits his father on his deathbed. At the end the film even hints at a meeting of Frank and Linda, Earl's second wife: Frank is presented in a hospital corridor, but the actual encounter is not shown.

Haggis' *Crash* has one single but very significant family-tie: Detective Graham Waters and Peter are brothers. This node is only revealed at the end of the film, in order to keep the viewers in suspense and eventually surprise them. The film actually starts with the scene, in which the connection between Graham and Peter would become clear, but before it is displayed, the action is wound back roughly 36 hours. Most of the suspense and elements of surprise in network films result from withholding information from the audience, especially concerning nodes between storylines.

Chance encounters and coincidences

However, the most significant convergence strategy on a narrative level is not based on a plausible linear reason, but on chance and coincidence. Bordwell argues that "[i]n a plot populated by strangers, contingency replaces causality" (*Poetics* 204). Similarly, Laine, for instance, states about *Crash*: "The narrative of *Crash* is a weaving together of random incidents, instead of a linear chain of cause and effect. Accidents, coincidences and chance encounters are more significant than any causal motivations between them" (36). According to Bordwell, this strategy has come to be called "'converging fates" device" (*Hollywood* 97).

An example from *Short Cuts* is the chance encounter of the Wymans and the Kanes at the cello concert, in which Zoe Trainer performs. The concert thus links all three storylines. While this intersection has an effect on the further course of the Wymans' and the Kanes' storylines, since they arrange another private meeting at the Wymans (which is displayed towards the end of the film), the convergence happens without noticing and without consequences for Zoe. There is another bizarre scene, in which Honey picks up photos at the same time as one of Stuart's fishing friends. They accidentally swap them at the kiosk and are both bewildered and disgusted by the other's pictures: Honey's photos show her

full of bruises and blood (Bill had made her up to look like a victim of a violent attack) and the man's photos show the woman's dead body Stuart and his friends had discovered on their fishing trip. Honey and the man are both horrified and thus take down the other's car registration number. In *Magnolia* a boy functions as the node between Linda and Jim's storylines. The unconscious Linda is found and rescued by the boy who talks to Jim about the murder investigation earlier in the film. In *Crash* Peter and Anthony's path crosses the Cabots' path at the beginning of the film: they threaten Jean and Rick with their guns and rob them of their car. This chance encounter has different effects on the Cabots – Jean is permanently angry and scared, while Rick is only concerned about his forthcoming election. A chance encounter between Officer Hansen and Peter also has serious and tragic consequences for both. Thomas Hansen gives Peter a ride and shoots him in his car as a result of an unfortunate and fatal coincidence: both men have a little figure of St Christopher, the patron saint of travellers, with them. Hence, the figure itself functions as an additional node between the two storylines. When Peter realises this coincidence, he wants to show Thomas his figure, but Thomas misinterprets his behaviour, thinking he is pulling a gun. Ironically, the figure of St Christopher, which is supposed to protect travellers, eventually causes Peter's death.

Many characters of network films work in different kinds of service industries – for instance as doctor, policeman or waitress. A high number of narrative nodes are connected to the occupation of the characters and thus make chance encounters seem less random. Illustrations from the three selected films will be given in the following paragraphs.

In *Short Cuts* Jerry Kaiser has a pool service and thus crosses paths with the Finnigans and the Trainers, whose pools he cleans. In one scene he even watches Zoe Trainer undress and swim naked in the pool. Coincidentally, there is a second convergence between Jerry and Tess Trainer – he recognises her as the jazz singer in the club. Stuart Kane and his two friends stop at a coffee shop on their way to the fishing trip. They cross paths with Doreen Piggot, who works as a waitress there. By chance, Doreen's husband Earl is also there at the same time, noticing the way the men discuss Doreen's sexual attraction. Another scene also plays at the coffee shop, this time linking Doreen's storyline with the storyline of Betty Weathers and her son Chad and the storyline of Gene Shepard. Gene, Betty and Chad celebrate Betty's birthday and Doreen is their waitress. Claire Kane meets Howard Finnigan's father and Dr. Wyman, whom she already met at the cello concert, at the

hospital – the hospital, in which Casey dies. Ralph Wyman is Casey's doctor in charge at the hospital. Gene, who is a policeman, stops Claire in her clown car, because she was driving too slowly, and flirts with her.

In *Magnolia* Claudia and Officer Jim Kurring's paths only intersect because Jim gets a noise complaint from Claudia's neighbours. Donnie Smith, former contestant of the quiz show *What Do Kids Know?*, and Stanley, current child prodigy and contestant, are linked to Jimmy Gator, because he is the host of the show. As a dutiful policeman Jim also tries to find out what Donnie Smith is doing, when he sees him climbing up a mast. The fortuitous meeting with Jim makes it possible for Donnie to return the stolen money and to finally share his feelings and problems with a caring person.

Graham's profession as a detective in *Crash* is the reason why he comes to the crime scene and sees the dead body of his brother Peter. Furthermore, Graham briefly meets Rick Cabot, the District Attorney, because of a murder investigation. In one scene Anthony's storyline intersects with Cameron Thayer's and Thomas Hansen's. After Anthony and Peter try to carjack Cameron, Thomas comes to the scene and interferes. To be more precise, Thomas' and Anthony's paths cross unnoticed, because Anthony hides in Cameron's car and they do not see each other. However, this intersection of storylines has an impact on Cameron's and Anthony's lives: without Thomas' help they could have been arrested or even killed. Daniel is called to the Cabots' house and to Farhad's shop because they need his service as a locksmith. Farhad later pays Daniel a visit at his house, threatening him with his gun for money. In their function as policemen Officer Ryan and Officer Hansen stop Cameron and Christine Thayer for a vehicle inspection. Each of the policemen has another chance encounter with one of the Thayers later on in the film: John saves Christine from her burning car and Thomas, as already mentioned, saves Cameron from an arrest.

A very popular chance encounter and node on the narrative level is the car accident or crash. David Bordwell, for instance, argues that car accidents are the most common chance incidents that force contact between strangers and can have a tragic impact on the lives of the people involved. Thus, the car accident is essential for network films in its role as narrative element and node that plausibly connects single storylines. (Bordwell, *Poetics* 204-205) Bordwell states:

It seems that a network movie can't do without a traffic jam, smashup, fender-bender, felled pedestrian, or brake-squealing near-miss. [...] Not because car crashes figure forth that lust for speed and perceptual overload characteristic of modernity, or because they embody that morbid fascination with spectacle characteristic of the Postmodern Moment – in other words, not because of some all-purpose explanatory zeitgeist. The car crash conceit will survive because as a device it snugly suits degrees-of-separation storytelling. For one thing, traffic accidents are plausible within a story world. We know that they happen all too often. Moreover, they're the most obvious chance encounter that can have grave consequences. Bump me with your shoulder, and we'll probably move on and forget about it. Dent my car with yours, and we have to halt to sort things out. Smash into my car, and our lives can change forever. (*Poetics* 204-205)

He furthermore explains: „Traffic accidents are just the most extreme instance of dramatic but contingent nodes, the unlikely points of connection within the film's network. A convergence must be made salient for us, and a car collision is a vivid way to do that” (Bordwell, *Poetics* 207).

Short Cuts features one significant car accident that links the Finnigan and Piggot storylines: On his way to school Casey Finnigan gets hit by Doreen's car. Although Doreen has a shock and is frightened, the car accident does not really affect her life, because she is not aware of Casey's death and will probably never find out. The life of the Finnigans, on the other hand, changes dramatically in the course of the accident (Casey dies in hospital).

The motif or theme of the car crash or accident is already introduced in the first minutes of the film *Crash*. As already mentioned (see section 2.2.2.), Graham Waters states: “We miss that touch so much, that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something”. In *Crash* three car accidents function as contingent nodes between two storylines or ‘paths’ each. Significantly, the film begins and ends with a rear-end collision. The first one involves Graham, Ria and the Korean woman, mingling storyline 4 and 8 (see 1.4.3.), and the other involves a minor character, Shaniqua Johnson (the woman who works at the health insurance), and another man. Another car accident again involves storyline number 8 – this time converging with storyline number 2: On their way to their dealer, Anthony and Peter knock down and severely injure the Korean man with the car they have stolen from the Cabots. The most significant and tragic car crash of the film is Christine's crash, which “provides the metaphorical anchor for all of the interpersonal and interracial encounters and relationships explored in Haggis's film” (Hsu 133). In this case, the accident does not link the two characters directly involved, but Christine, who is stuck in her damaged car,

and Officer John Ryan, who coincidentally comes to the scene of the accident and saves Christine. After the vehicle-inspection at the beginning of the film, this is the second encounter between John and Christine.

Unnoticed encounters

The paths of characters can also cross without them actually taking notice of each other. In those instances the figures, for instance, ‘brush past’ one another on a street or in a public building. These nodes are simply for the pleasure of the viewers, illustrating the ‘small world’ theory (typical of postmodernism) and contributing to the cognitive mapping process of the films. Silvey states that “[i]n effect these interconnections, unrecognised by the characters but displayed for us, prompt us to consider the world as a map or system wherein we each are related to one another whether we are conscious of it or not” (“Not Just Ensemble Films”).

Two nodes like those can be found in *Short Cuts*: While Stormy is hiding in his car in front of Betty’s house, exploring whether she has an affair, Gene walks around the house. For Stormy this intersection happens noticed (he watches Gene), for Gene unnoticed. An even more conclusive example is a scene in the bakery: Stormy Weathers, Ann Finnigan and Claire Kane (dressed as a clown) coincidentally cross paths in the bakery – all of them because of a birthday cake. Stormy wants to buy a cake for his ex-wife Betty, Ann Finnigan for her son Casey and Claire has to fetch a cake for a birthday party. Although they all brush past each other, this very brief ‘contact’ is hardly recognised by the characters and does not have any consequences. In *Magnolia* two unnoticed crossings happen at an actual intersection: The ambulance with Linda in it passes Donnie’s car at the intersection (Magnolia Blvd) and in another scene Claudia is shown in a taxi that turns right at the same junction that her mother Rose, who is on her way to Claudia, waits for the traffic lights to turn green.

An illustration from *Crash* concerns nodes between storyline 5 (Officer John Ryan) and storyline 8 (Korean man): While John is on the phone (a public telephone) to the health insurance employee Shaniqua Johnson, the Korean man is located in the same fast food restaurant. On the street in front of the restaurant, their paths cross again – this time literally, as the man passes John in his white van. What may also be described as a

thematic and unrecognised ‘node’ is the fact that the Cabots and the Thayers both drive a Lincoln Navigator – the car that Anthony and Peter steal at the beginning of the film. This coincidence is the reason why Officer Ryan follows and eventually stops the Thayers. Although Cameron and Christine are not aware of that, the intersection (with the policemen) that follows this coincidence has an impact on the further actions of the characters.

Common & collective experiences

Another prominent way of interconnecting separate storylines and thus establishing a sense of community – other than actually bringing characters together and making them meet – is the linkage of characters through common and collective experiences, such as sound, music, mass media, especially TV programmes or newscasts, and incidents that involve all the characters, like natural disasters. (Bordwell, *Poetics* 202)

Diegetic sound & music

I want to start with a detailed analysis of the probably most significant thematic node in *Magnolia* – Aimee Mann’s song ‘Wise Up’, which links the paths of all the main characters. (Lane 86) It shall briefly be mentioned that the viewer does not know whether the song in the musical sequence is played non-diegetically or diegetically, as for instance on the radio. (Lane 84-85) However, since all the characters sing along to ‘Wise Up’, the song was categorised as ‘diegetic’. This singing along to the verses and chorus in alternating style is what makes the sequence so significant. A detailed description of the sequence follows:



Fig. 19

The song commences after Phil gives Earl the liquid morphine. The camera shows Phil in a close-up, while the music starts. Then there is a cut to Claudia, who is presented in a full shot (fig. 19). She is sitting in her living room, snorting drugs, when the song’s lyrics start (“*It’s not –*”). While the camera slowly zooms



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24

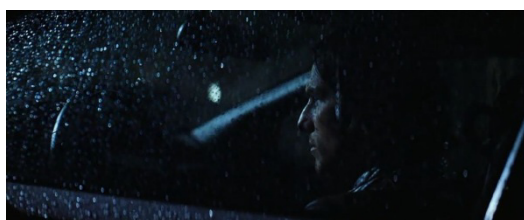


Fig. 25

in on Claudia, she sings along to Mann's song: "*– 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*". Cut to what turns out to be Jim's flat. Jim's voice can already be heard off-screen, while the camera pans and pushes in on Jim, capturing him in a medium shot (fig. 20), sitting on his bed. He sings: "*It's not going to stop ... 'til you wise up*". Cut to full shot of Jimmy (fig. 21) sitting in a chair in his living room. Again the camera slowly pushes in on him, while he sings the line: "*You're sure there's a cure and you have finally found it*". Cut to Donnie presenting him in a medium shot (fig. 22), sitting in his kitchen (with his winning check in the background). The camera again pushes in on him, while he sings along: "*You think one drink will shrink you 'til you're underground and living down. But it's not going to stop*". Cut to a medium shot that shows Phil in the foreground and Earl in the background (fig. 23). The camera pushes past Phil and zooms in on Earl, while they are both singing: "*It's not going to stop ... 'til you wise up*". Earl's close-up is followed by a cut to Linda's car. The camera pushes in on the driver's side, eventually presenting Linda through the wet car window (fig. 24). Her voice intermingles with Mann's voice: "*Prepare a list for what you need, before you sign away the deed. 'Cause it's not going to stop*". Cut to a full shot of Frank's car. Once again the camera pushes in on the driver's



Fig. 26

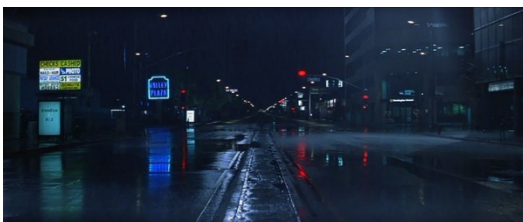


Fig. 27

side, showing Frank through the window (fig. 25), while he is singing: “*It’s not going to stop ... ’til you wise up. No, it’s not going to stop*”. Cut to a close-up of Stanley (fig. 26) in the library, singing the last line of the song “*So just give up*”. Then for the first time in this ‘musical sequence’ the camera zooms out, emphasising the end of the sequence and at the same time the end of this insight into the inner world of the characters. While the music slowly fades out, there is one final cut to a long shot of an empty boulevard at night (fig. 27) and there is an overlap of the music and the loud sound of rain. After a few seconds both sounds – the music and the rain – stop.

The lines the characters sing seem ‘tailor-made’ for each of them, reflecting their inner conflict, feelings and anxieties. The verse Claudia, for instance, sings could refer to her drug addiction, Jim sings about the hope of finding a cure to his illness, Donnie about his drinking problem and Stanley, who has just experienced public embarrassment, sings about giving up. This ‘giving up’ stands in contrast to the ‘wising up’ – the strength of acknowledging and changing one’s situation. Parallel to the fading out of the music, the rain also stops, creating a presentiment of ‘calm before the storm’. Eventually, just as some characters think about giving up (for instance Jimmy Gator), or falling back into their old patterns (like Claudia), the frog rain begins.

The ‘Wise Up’ sequence could be described as *Magnolia*’s climax – the scene which gives the viewer the chance to listen to the characters, as they ‘give voice’ to their feelings and inner conflict – comparable to “an internal dialogue” (Lane 85). Accompanied by Aimee Mann’s leading voice the individual voices of the characters merge into one – “a moment of perfect homophony” (Bruns 208). In combination with the rapid editing style and similar camera movements in every shot, unity is created where there is loneliness and despair. The characters literally ‘sing with one voice’, thus conveying a sense of ‘we are all in this together’. (Bruns 208) Bruns suggests: “Overtly self-conscious and unapologetically

artificial, the scene functions to undermine the possibility of a simultaneity with unity” (208). Lane even compares Mann’s songs in *Magnolia* to signposts: “Like signposts that appear to help us make sense of an apparently rugged terrain, they bring into relief and interpret the overall topographical map of the film” (79). In this quote Lane indirectly addresses the function Mann’s songs, especially ‘Wise Up’, have for the process of cognitively mapping the film.

An example of a diegetic sound that links various storylines is the sound of helicopters in the opening sequence of *Short Cuts*. During the establishing shot one can already hear the sound of the helicopter blades, then there are a few shots of the helicopters (one in which they are spraying the pesticide). The following scenes introduce the different storylines and characters, starting with Earl Piggot in his limousine, followed by a scene of Howard and Ann Finnigan in their bedroom, Zoe Trainer, the Wymans and the Kanes at the cello concert, the Kaisers at home, Earl and Doreen in the coffee shop, the Bushs in the club, in which Tess sings, and the Shepards in their living room. Significantly, all those scenes, presenting the storylines, are linked through shots of the helicopters (and their noise). Most of the time the sound of the helicopters intermingles with on-screen and off-screen voices in addition to the non-diegetic music that accompanies the whole opening sequence. The only two scenes, in which the sound of the helicopters is actually heard, are the Kaiser-scene and the Shepard-scene. Lois Kaiser reacts on the sound, by asking the person she is on the phone to: “Can you hear the helicopters?” (04:50), and Sherri Shepard jumps out of the armchair and shouts her husband the moment she hears the helicopters: “Gene, the helicopters are here!” (08:00)

This opening sequence is only one illustration of the intersection of storylines by means of sound in *Short Cuts*. Sequences are often connected by sound bridges or voice-overs. This technique of bounding storylines together is also frequently applied in *Magnolia*. The following paragraphs present an example of a voice-over in *Magnolia* that interweaves all eight storylines – similar to the ‘Wise Up’ sequence.

After a long sequence, in which Earl tells Phil about the biggest regret of his life (leaving his sick wife and son), seven scenes follow, presenting the other main characters (starting with 02:09:10). During all those scenes Earl’s voice functions as voice-over – sometimes it is the only sound that can be heard by the viewer, sometimes it mixes with other on-screen

sounds. First of all there is a cut from Earl and Phil to a scene with Jimmy, who is coming home from the show, his wife and colleague guiding him into the house. During this shot, the voice-over mixes with the sound of the rain. The next shots show Jimmy getting undressed and dressed in his living room. The viewer can see that Rose and Jimmy are talking with each other, but their voices are almost inaudible. Earl's voice-over in the Jimmy-sequence, however, can be heard loud and clear:

"I loved her so. She knew what I did, she knew all the fucking stupid things I've done. But the love – was stronger than anything you can think of. Goddamn regret! The goddamn regret! [sighs] I'll die, now I'll die and I'll tell you – what? – yeah, the biggest regret of my life – I let my love go. What did I do? I'm sixty-five years old and I'm ashamed."

Then there is a cut to Claudia. During the first shot, which captures her taking a shower, Earl's voice from the off again mixes with the sound of the water coming from the shower. In the following two shots Claudia is shown getting ready for her date with Jim, finally waiting for him in the living room. The last full shot reveals Claudia staring at the cocaine that is lying on the table in front of her, probably considering whether to take some before the date. Earl's voice-over during the Claudia-sequence:

"Million years ago – the fucking regret and guilt. These things – don't ever let anyone ever say to you, you shouldn't regret anything. Don't do that! Don't –"

Then there is a cut to the scene, in which Jim and a great amount of other policemen are trying to find the lost gun. While other sounds, like the sound of rain, are almost inaudible, Earl's voice-over can be heard loud and clear again:

"You regret what you fucking want! Use that – use that – use that regret for anything, any way you want! You can use it, okay? Oh, uh, oh god. It's a long way to go –"

Cut to Stanley, who is breaking into the library. Although the viewer can see him smash the window, no on-screen sound is heard. The shots in the library are accompanied by Earl's off-screen voice:

"- with no punch. A – a little moral – story, I say. Love, love, love, this fucking lie – oh, oh – so fucking hard"

A cut to Donnie follows, showing him preparing keys for the robbery, during the following voice-over:

"So long! life ain't short, it's long! it's long, goddamn it! [sigh] – goddamn, uh"

Cut to Linda, who is taking the pills prescribed for Earl. The voice-over overlaps with the slight sound of the rain:

“Uh, what did I do? What did I do? What did I do? [sigh] What did I do? Help, help me please”.

Finally, there is one last cut to Frank sitting in his car in front of Earl’s house. Frank is captured in a close-up, while the audience hears Earl’s last sentence: “[sigh] *what did I do?*”

Although Earl reflects upon his life and his biggest regrets, the voice-over of each scene also matches the situations, inner conflicts and feelings of the main characters displayed. In the last days of his life, Jimmy is, for instance, also remorseful of having cheated on his wife and of having lost the love and trust of his daughter. “I let my love go” could thus also refer to Claudia. The cut from Jimmy to Claudia puts additional emphasis on their relationship that is full of regret and shame. Claudia might regret her drug addiction, being aware of the vicious circle she is stuck in. Jim, who is proud of his job as policeman, made a shameful mistake, which he also strongly regrets – he lost his gun in a reckless action. In Stanley’s sequence, Earl’s voice repeats the word ‘love’ three times, adding “this fucking lie”. These utterances match Stanley’s situation – his strive for the attention and love of his father. Most significantly, Linda’s attempted suicide blends in with Earl’s repeated utterance “What did I do?” and his plea for help.

Tuning in to a television programme

Frequently television programmes form nodes between storylines. In addition, showing characters of different episodes tuning in to the same television programme suggests simultaneity. Sometimes characters actively watch a TV programme, other times the television is simply displayed in the background of the mise-en-scène.

The opening sequence of *Short Cuts* shall briefly be discussed again, this time focusing on Howard Finnigan’s newscast, which connects four storylines.



Fig. 28

The newscast on the medfly epidemic is first shown on the small TV in the limousine (fig. 28) that Earl Piggot drives. After the cut to the next shot, capturing the helicopters, Howard’s voice can still be heard off screen. It serves as



Fig. 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31

a sound bridge to the following scene, in which Howard and Ann Finnigan are watching Howard's editorial on the TV in their bedroom (fig. 29). Then there is a cut to a shot of the helicopters again, Howard's voice overlapping with the helicopter sound for a few seconds. After the scene at the cello concert and another shot of the helicopters, Howard's editorial is shown on the TV in the Kaisers' living room (fig. 30). Finally, the newscast is also displayed on the TV at the Shepards (fig. 31). Like in the scene with the Kaisers nobody of the family is actively watching the editorial.

As already mentioned, the television medium plays an especially significant role in *Magnolia*. Lane argues that "the omnipresence of the television medium develops an on-going thread that runs throughout the film" (60). Apart from the obvious family ties, which have already been discussed, the game show *What Do Kids Know?* functions as one of the most significant nodes – either in the form of the setting, or as programme that various characters tune in to.

The centering feature and function of television is realized when everyone in *Magnolia* tunes in to *What Do Kids Know?* All the *Magnolia* characters are mediated by television; they are created as a community by it. Anderson achieves this effect of mediation by shooting through the television screen, into and out of the program, sometimes behind the scenes at the studio, sometimes from the position of the audience. (Dillman 147)

In the significant opening sequence (excluding the 'prologue') of *Magnolia* the characters are introduced in alternating style, at the same time linking them through cross-cutting, the overlapping of on-screen and off-screen sounds, non-diegetic music (Aimee Mann's song 'One') and, most notably, television programmes. An analysis shall illustrate the complexity of linking devices in the 'One'-sequence – especially the nodes that are created through the quiz show *What Do Kids Know?* and Frank's infomercial on TV.



Fig. 32



Fig. 33

The sequence starts with the film's title in front of a Magnolia blossom. Then there is a cut to a long shot of a living room with a television in the centre of the mise-en-scène (fig. 32), which shows Frank T.J. Mackey on an infomercial about his 'Seduce and Destroy' programme. The camera zooms in on the screen (fig. 33), followed by a dissolve 'into the infomercial'. After another two shots of the infomercial, there is a cut to Claudia in a long shot showing her in a bar.

Mackey's voice-over mixes with the on-screen noises and the voice of the man who talks to Claudia. Cut to the scene in Claudia's apartment – one shot of her coming home with the man she met in the bar, another one, in which she snorts cocaine, and a third shot, in which they are shown having sexual intercourse. During all of those shots, the voice of Mackey stays off screen, matching the scene, as he talks about treating women as sexual objects.



Fig. 34



Fig. 35

During the sex scene, Mackey's voice-over is succeeded by the voice of a TV commentator, coming from the television in Claudia's bedroom. The camera pushes past Claudia and the man and zooms in on the reflection of a TV in a picture or mirror on the wall (fig. 34) behind the bed. A close-up of the screen (fig. 35) shows a documentary on Jimmy Gator's career as the host of the quiz show *What Do Kids Know?*. The on-screen voice of the commentator overlaps with off-screen sighs.

The viewer may assume that the sighs come from Claudia, but a cut to the next scene presents a shot of Jimmy Gator having sexual intercourse. Now the sighs are on-screen, still intermingling with the off-screen voice of the commentator. While the commentator talks about Jimmy and his family, there is a cut to the next scene, in which the camera zooms in on a family picture of the Gators, eventually remaining in a detail shot of the picture, showing Jimmy next to Claudia. Thus, this shot already reveals that Jimmy is Claudia's father. The detail shot is followed by a scene of Jimmy and his wife at a hospital.

The three shots at the hospital are still accompanied by the commentator's voice-over. The scene and the voice-over end with Jimmy's utterance: "I'm Jimmy Gator".



Fig. 36



Fig. 37



Fig. 38



Fig. 39



Fig. 40

Cut to a long shot of the same living room that is displayed at the beginning of the sequence (fig. 36). This time the TV in the centre of the shot shows a montage of scenes of the quiz show. The camera zooms in on the screen (fig. 37), while the viewer can see and hear Stanley answering questions. After a close-up of Stanley and of the show's sign, there is a cut to a scene with Stanley and his father. During this scene, the viewer can hear Frank's voice again and the camera twice briefly reveals Frank's infomercial on the television in the Spector's living room (fig. 38). Frank's voice-over mixes with Stanley's and his father's on-screen voices. During another two shots of Stanley and his father the non-diegetic music only overlaps with their on-screen voices. Then there is another cut to a long shot of a living room (fig. 39). Although it is not the same living room as before, the mise-en-scène is very similar. The camera once again zooms in on the television, which shows how former quiz kid Donnie won at the show. The camera captures a close-up of Donnie (fig. 40) smiling, while a title card reads: "Quiz Kid Donnie Smith 1968".

Then there is a cut to a close-up of Donnie – now a middle-aged man – and the new title card reads: "Quiz Kid Donnie Smith Today". After a few shots of Donnie at the dentist's practice and a final shot, in which Donnie is shown accidentally driving into a shop. During the Donnie-sequence the non-diegetic music mixes with on-screen voices and in the last shot additionally with music played on Donnie's car radio. Then a sequence with Phil,

Earl and Linda in the Partridge house follows, which introduces Earl as cancer patient, Phil as his caring home nurse and Linda as Earl's stressed much younger wife. In the Partridge scene the song 'One' overlaps with on-screen voices and noises. Cut to a medium shot of Jim, capturing him having breakfast and reading the newspaper. During the shot the viewer can hear the off-screen female voice of the phone service, saying "Press one to hear this person's personal description of themselves and two to leave a personal message of your own".

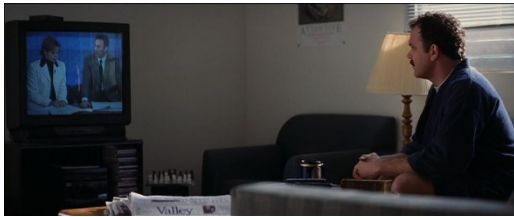


Fig. 41

In the next shot Phil is shown watching a programme or newscast on TV (fig. 41). Jim's off-screen voice (coming from the answering machine), giving his personal description, drowns out the on-screen voices from the television screen.

The final shots of the 'One'-sequence show Jim working out, taking a shower, praying, sitting in the police station, getting into his police car and eventually driving the car on duty. In all these shots one can first hear Jim's voice from the answering machine, then Jim's off-screen voice, as he talks about his job, and eventually his on-screen voice.

Natural disasters and wonders

One last strategy of creating narrative nodes is the so-called "event frame" – "a common fate or significant occasion" (Bordwell, *Hollywood* 97). One kind of 'event frame' that has already been explored is the traffic accident. However, in this section those 'significant occasions' shall be discussed, which usually unite all the storylines in the climax of network films. Lommel uses the phrase "Implosion der Episodendifferenz" (130) ('implosion of the episode differences') for such incidents. He argues that this implosion, which is comparable to a cathartic connection of all storylines, usually follows an acceleration in the cross-cutting between the single simultaneous paths. In *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* a natural disaster functions as 'cathartic implosion'. (Lommel 130-131) In *Short Cuts* all the characters experience an earthquake and in *Magnolia* a frog rain thematically links the eight storylines. These two sequences shall be described in the following paragraphs. The snowfall over Los Angeles at the end of *Crash* will not be considered, since it does not form an obvious node.

The earthquake in *Short Cuts* starts right after Jerry strikes the young woman dead. There is a cut from the scene with Jerry, Bill and the two young women to Honey, Lois and the two kids in the park protecting the children, to the Finnigans and the baker in the bakery crawling under the table, to the Shepards, Sherri protecting her kids and Gene speaking through the megaphone, to Tess Trainer singing hysterically (because of the death of her daughter), to the Wymans and Kanes in the whirlpool, to Betty and Chad in their destroyed living room, to Earl and Doreen in the doorway of their mobile home, to the Shepards again (Gene still talking through the megaphone) and back to Earl and Doreen seemingly enjoying the excitement. During this last shot the earthquake stops. Then the reactions of almost all the characters are shown: Earl and Doreen seem amused, maybe even a bit disappointed, the Finnigans and the baker look surprised and relieved, Honey and Lois look angry, wondering where their husbands are, the Shepards have a family hug, the Wymans and Kanes climb out of the whirlpool and decide to turn on the news and Tess looks just as disturbed and pathetic as before. Summing up, all nine storylines are linked by this collective experience.

In *Magnolia* the first frog falls from the sky, while Jim Kurring is about to pull his car around on the boulevard. Then the sequence moves from one character to the next, thus linking them in this moment of fright and horror. The characters are shown in the following order: Jim on the boulevard, Claudia in her apartment, Phil at Earl's house, Rose in her car, Linda in the ambulance, Jimmy at home, Jim and Donnie next to Solomon & Solomon Electronics, Rose and Claudia in Claudia's apartment, Stanley in the library and Earl and Frank in Earl's living room. Significantly, the frog rain ends with Earl's last breath.

Apart from the linkage of the characters through the collective experience of this natural disaster, the paths of some characters actually cross during the frog rain. Claudia and her mother are finally reunited and Donnie saves Jim's life. Lane interprets the sequence as follows: "Earl's death, Phil's grief, Frank's visit, Linda's rush to the hospital, Gator's bizarre accident, Claudia and Rose's reunion, Stanley's epiphany, and Donnie's encounter with Kurring all take place during a raining flood of frogs. The affective and dramatic buildup of overlapping conflict is answered by a cathartic downpour" (6).

3.3.3.2. Nodes on the cinematic level of *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash*

In addition to these common themes and narrative strategies, ensemble films share formal and stylistic elements like rapid cross-cutting or “short cuts,” a propensity for montage and continual camera motion, scenes choreographed to music, and the use of rhyming visual threads and graphic matches – most often cuts between different characters driving cars or walking through doors to different buildings – to connect disparate sequences. (Hsu 135)

As Hsu describes in the preceding quote, nodes between single storylines are not just created on the narrative level of network films, but also on the cinematic level. In order to offer an elaborate analysis of nodes for the process of cognitive mapping, the following sections will first deal with examples of non-diegetic music and then with cross-cutting techniques and match cuts, discussing their usage and function in the selected film scenes.

Non-diegetic music

Non-diegetic music can function as an effective node between storylines and characters, often emphasising a collective feeling or mood. This is, for instance, the case with Aimee Mann’s song ‘One’ in *Magnolia* or Bird York’s ‘In the Deep’ in *Crash*.

The ‘One’-sequence has already been discussed in the section on the television programme as collective experience and shall thus only be briefly mentioned here. During the whole sequence, which serves as character introduction, Aimee Mann’s song interweaves all the characters and storylines. Furthermore, it introduces one of the main themes of the film – loneliness: “One is the loneliest number that you’ll ever do. Two can be as bad as one, it’s the loneliest number since the number one”. Especially Claudia, Jim and Donnie share this feeling of loneliness. They are all on their own, striving for love. At the end of the film Donnie, who is secretly in love with a barkeeper, confesses: “I really do have love to give, I just don’t know where to put it” (02:48:40). Other characters, that are displayed in the scene, might not actually be on their own, but still feel very lonely. Stanley, for instance, does not have a mother or any siblings, and due to his extraordinary knowledge he does not even have regular lessons with his class colleagues, but sits on his own in the library. Not even his father shows enough attention for the needs of his son. Linda Partridge also feels alone with her problems, fears and guilt.

Crash's 'In the Deep' also functions as a link between various storylines. The musical sequence (01:36:32 – 01:42:30) moves from one storyline to the next: Jean confesses to Maria, that she is actually her best friend. Thomas burns his car in order to destroy all the evidence of the homicide. John soothes his desperate father, who is still in pain. Rick Cabot stares out of the window. Daniel also stares out of the window, while his wife and daughter are already asleep. Cameron is on his way home, when it suddenly starts snowing. Graham is at the crime scene and finds his brother's St. Christopher figure. And finally, Anthony lets the refugees out of the van in Chinatown.

The lyrics of the song are again comments on the emotional world of the characters, reflecting on common feelings, anxieties and problems, and thus suggesting a sense of belonging and community. The song's first verse and chorus are especially significant: "Thought you had all the answers to rest your heart upon. But something happens, don't see it coming, now you can't stop yourself. Now you're out there swimming in the deep". All the characters have experienced tragic incidents during the span of 36 hours in Los Angeles. These experiences – accidents, a shooting incident, murder, carjacking, robbery and sexual assault – have a great impact on the characters' lives. "Swimming in the deep" may refer to the collective feeling of disorientation, powerlessness and despair. But the film does not end without hope for the characters. After all, they have learned something about other people or even about themselves. Ebert also argues that "[a]ll of these people, superficially so different, share the city and learn that they share similar fears and hopes" ("Crash"). This hope is also expressed by the song 'Maybe Tomorrow', which accompanies the final shots of *Crash*. The chorus suggests "So maybe tomorrow, I'll find my way home".

Similar to 'Maybe Tomorrow', Aimee Mann's 'Save Me' and Annie Ross' 'Prisoner of Life' function as overall film comments in the closing sequences of *Magnolia* and *Short Cuts*. Although these songs may not be described as 'nodes' in the actual sense, they however reflect common feelings and thus link all the storylines and characters. In 'Prisoner of Life' Annie Ross sings: "One minute you're filled with happiness, next minute there's nothing but pain ... But no matter what happens, you gotta somehow carry on ... But it's the unexpected and the uncertainty that keeps us going, you know what I mean ... When you're a prisoner and I'm a prisoner, I'm a prisoner of life". On the one hand, the lyrics reflect the ups and downs in the lives of the characters. A good example is the

relationship between Doreen and Earl: One day they argue and life is miserable, the next day they are reconciled and excessively enjoy themselves. On the other hand, the song stresses the powerlessness of the characters (“prisoners of life”), especially when it comes to natural disasters, which are, as already discussed, not a rarity in the risky area of Los Angeles. However, ‘Prisoner of Life’ also reflects the characters’ indifference, or even thrill, towards unexpected happenings. The chorus of Mann’s ‘Save Me’ reflects the characters’ plea for help and love: “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”. The line suggests that the characters have become aware of their problems and have finally acknowledged the need for help.

Editing techniques

As the analysis of many film scenes and sequences has already illustrated, various types of nodes on a narrative level – as for instance encounters, common experiences and music – additionally rely on the significant editing style of the films. Interlocking the storylines through cross-cutting is one of the most characteristic features of network films and considerably contributes to the cognitive mapping by the viewers. Bordwell states: “The technique of crosscutting among strangers is particularly useful. It can make their eventual encounters seem less coincidental, for they’ve been connected for us, if not for each other, from the start“ (*Poetics* 207). Furthermore, Lane points out that “[c]omplex patterns of intercutting create rhythm and pace” (60). Cross-cutting usually implies simultaneity and parallelism of actions in different spaces. (Blandford, Grant, and Hillier 60) By showing that various people have similar problems and fears, cross-cutting furthermore suggests a sense of unity and community.

[T]he camera exposes or at least intimates connections even when characters feel most alienated: when characters are not unwittingly rubbing shoulders or crashing cars on the streets, cross-cutting shows that they are at least all unified by common experiences (Hsu 137)

The following analysis of a very dynamic sequence of *Magnolia* shall illustrate the function of fast-paced cross-cutting as a link between characters and parallel actions. The sequence starts in 01:03:36 with a long shot of Jimmy Gator in the studio. Then there is a cut to a close-up of a television screen showing Jimmy Gator in the show. After the camera

slightly pushes back, a whip pan to the right reveals Phil in a medium shot, suggesting that he is watching the show. The camera slightly pushes in on Phil. As he looks to his left, the camera repeats a whip pan to the right, presenting Earl lying in bed. After the camera pushes in on Earl, there is a jump cut to Frank giving an interview. Typically, the camera starts with a medium shot and pushes in on a close-up of Frank. A whip pan to his interviewer Gwenovier is followed by the same camera movement. After the following whip pan to a scene with Jim and Claudia, the camera first zooms in on Jim and then on Claudia. The close-up of Claudia is followed by a clear cut to a medium shot of a television screen again showing Jimmy Gator on *What Do Kids Know?*. The camera pushes in on the screen and a whip pan to the right reveals Donnie Smith in the bar, suggesting that he is watching the show. Starting with a medium shot, the camera zooms in to a close-up of Donnie's face. After the succeeding whip pan to the right Linda Partridge is presented at the pharmacy, the camera slightly zooming in on her. Once again a whip pan cuts to the next scene – a full shot of Rose. She is sitting in an arm chair, covered in a blanket. Her gaze suggests that she might also be tuning in to the quiz show, watching her husband. The rest of the sequence is not of particular importance for the analysis.

Summing up, the whip pans as well as the similar camera movements and field sizes of each shot and Jimmy's voice-over suggest continuity, simultaneity and parallelism of the storylines. The numerous whip pans and push-ins simulate the viewer's close look from one character to the next, comparable to turning pages in a book. (You 64) Furthermore, "[t]he repetition of continuous tracking shots, especially those that move from extreme long shot or medium shot to tightly framed character close ups, works to reinforce themes of community and continuity." (Lane 59)

Cuts are threads that often interweave storylines in a reasonable order. The following five examples from *Short Cuts* shall, for instance, illustrate that the conversation about a character is often followed by a cut to this specific person. In the scene at the bakery the baker and Mrs. Finnigan talk about Casey's birthday cake. The baker says: "That's really sweet: his name is Casey and he likes baseball?" Then there is a cut (30:04) to the scene, in which Casey comes home after the accident. In another scene Earl has an argument with his wife about her short skirts. His utterance "I know fishermen like them" is followed by a cut (32:24) to the three fishermen. In the scene, in which Casey tells his mother about the accident, he says about the driver of the car: "She was a lady. She was nice". Again, there

is a cut (34:12) to the character that has just been the topic of conversation – Doreen. She is also shown telling Earl about the terrible incident. Doreen says: “It was just a stroke of luck I didn’t kill him” and Earl replies: “I’m glad somebody’s luck’s holdin’ out”. This utterance is immediately followed by a cut (34:44) to Howard Finnigan in the TV station, who is about to get a phone call about Casey’s accident. In minute 43:11 there is another ‘logical’ cut from Chad Weathers, who is telling Stormy about his mother’s new boyfriend, to Gene Shepard.

A closer observation of *Crash* reveals that cuts frequently occur in connection with the entrance or exit of characters. In other words, characters often enter or leave a setting shortly before or after a cut. In this respect the setting resembles the stage of a play. The use of this cinematic technique again has the function of linking characters and storylines. This way nodes are already formed, before the characters actually meet or bump into each other. A few examples shall illustrate this argument. In minute 40:53 the scene begins with a medium shot, in which Richard Cabot and his secretary are shown coming out of his office, entering the hall. The scene ends with a long shot of the characters leaving the *mise-en-scène*. Then there is a cut (41:16) to a medium shot, which reveals Peter and Anthony, as they are coming through a garden gate from the left side of the frame. Another example is the cut that links Farhad and Officer Hansen in minute 54:57. The preceding scene ends with a long shot of Farhad leaving his shop through the back door and the following scene starts with a long shot of Thomas exiting the police station and entering the yard. In hour 01:03:53 Graham Waters enters some kind of conference hall, guided by Rick Cabot’s secretary. In the following scene (after a cut in 01:08:50) Rick is shown coming out of his office into the hall, in which his secretary and Graham Waters are already waiting for him. Shortly before the end of this scene, Rick and his personal assistant are revealed in a long shot, exiting the hall and entering another conference room.

“As well as temporal simultaneity, crosscutting can also imply thematic comparison or contrast” (Blandford, Grant, and Hillier 60). This is, for instance, the case in the following examples: In *Short Cuts* the full shot of the dead woman’s body in the water cuts (01:05:45) to a full shot of a fish swimming in an aquarium. In hour 01:08:04 there is a cut from a close-up of a fish in the aquarium to a long shot of Stuart Kane fishing. The scene in which Honey visits her mother Doreen and brings her two goldfish is followed (cut in 01:22:00) by a scene showing the three fishermen. In those three examples water is the

thematic link between the storylines, which is expressed through cross-cutting. Although it is striking for the viewer to discover this motif, a deeper meaning is not revealed (Schofield n. pag.). A last example for a thematic thread is taken from *Crash*: The scene, in which Graham fills his mother's fridge with groceries is followed by a cut (01:20:48) to Jean Cabot, who is on the phone to a friend, complaining about Maria: "I sent her out for groceries and that was two hours ago."

There are some especially significant instances in *Short Cuts*, in which the cross-cutting between two scenes functions as prediction of coming events – the deaths of Casey and Zoe. Four examples shall demonstrate this argument. In one scene Sherri asks Gene to close the gate. She does not want their dog to get out, because she is afraid that he might get run over. Then there is a cut (26:41) to Ann and Casey Finnigan. Thus, this cross-cutting may be interpreted as a prediction of Casey being run over by a car. In another scene, Ann Finnigan is on the phone to her husband, telling him about the incident. He instructs her to bring Casey to the emergency room right away. As he puts down the phone, a television screen at the station shows an ambulance. After the cut to Ann and Casey (35:59) the ambulance's siren can still be heard off-screen, while Ann's attempt of waking Casey up proves ineffective. The camera pushes in on the glass of milk next to the bed, remaining in a close-up. The following cut (36:24) to a close-up of a glass of milk displayed on a television screen is hardly noticeable due to the same field size and camera perspective. The milk in the commercial shown on-screen is spilt and a voice says: "Accidents happen every day. Fortunately, most are harmless, but some are very serious". The camera pushes back and reveals Earl sitting in front of the TV. Doreen is still telling him about the boy. Hence, the characters involved in the accident are additionally linked on a cinematic level through cross-cutting. Furthermore, the cut from the glass of milk to the commercial forms a metaphorical thread: The milk might stand for Casey's life and hence the spilling of the milk in the commercial may predict death. Furthermore, I want to argue that Zoe Trainer's death is also foreshadowed in three instances. In one scene Zoe is swimming naked in the pool. She does not move for a few seconds and thus resembles a lifeless corpse floating on the water. Strikingly, there is a cut (48:19) to the next scene, in which the fishermen find the dead naked body of a woman in the river. Later on, there is another cut (01:08:27) from a full shot of the dead body to a shot in which Zoe is playing the cello. The same sequence of shots can be found around hour 01:22:48, when a cut again links the girl's corpse and Zoe.

Match Cuts

Striking and especially significant for the discussion of nodes on a cinematic level of network films are the so-called ‚match cuts‘.

Graphic matches, or match cuts, are useful in relating two otherwise disconnected scenes, or in helping to establish a relationship between two scenes. By ending one shot with a frame containing the same compositional elements (shape, color, size, etc.) as the beginning frame of the next shot, a connection is drawn between the two shots with a smooth transition. (“Editing”)

The following – and at the same time final – examples from the three network films shall briefly illustrate the popularity of these ‘match cuts’.

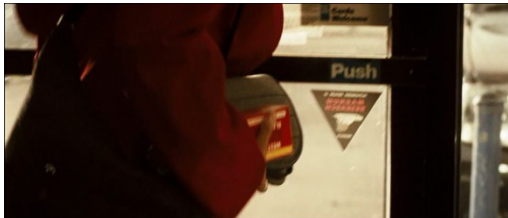


Fig. 42



Fig. 43

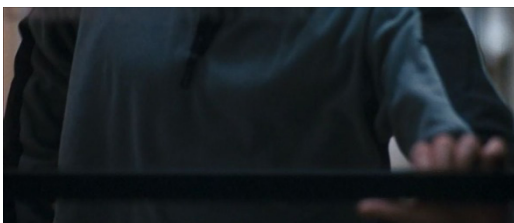


Fig. 44



Fig. 45

Farhad's daughter is about to leave the gunsmith's shop. The last frame of this scene is a close-up of her opening the shop door (fig. 42). Then there is a sudden cut (07:47). The first frame of the next scene remains in the same field size and camera perspective. A close-up shows the opening of a door to a restaurant or coffee shop (fig. 43). Then the camera tilts up and reveals that Anthony and Peter are coming out of the restaurant. Through this match cut the action (in this case the opening of a door), which is started in one scene, is completed in the next.

Another match cut connected to the opening of doors occurs in minute 47:29: Ryan is about to leave the building of the health insurance. The last shot of the scene is a close-up of his left hand on the door (fig. 44). In the next scene a man opens a door and enters the room (fig. 45). The match cut again enables a ‘smooth transition’ from the one scene to the other.

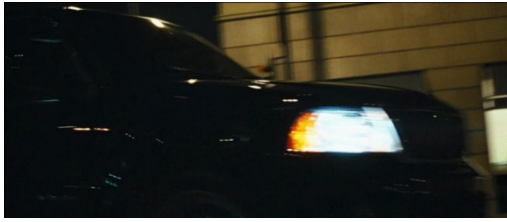


Fig. 46



Fig. 47

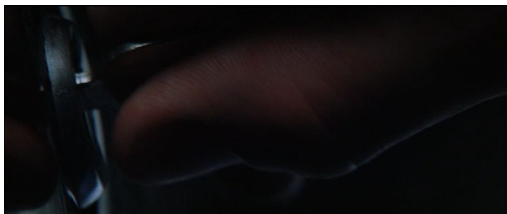


Fig. 48

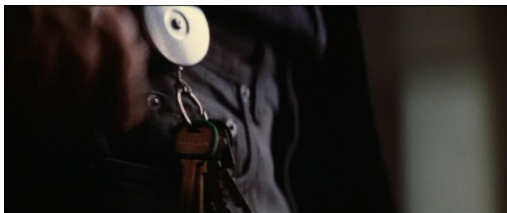


Fig. 49



Fig. 50



Fig. 51

Another illustration from *Crash* is the transition from a scene with Anthony and Peter to a scene with Graham and Ria. Anthony and Peter have just stolen the Cabot's car and are on their way to their dealer. Shortly before the match cut, the black Lincoln Navigator is shown in a close-up, driving past the camera from the left to the right side of the screen (fig. 46). Just as the back door reaches the centre of the shot, there is a hardly recognisable cut to a close-up of a police car (fig. 47), which completes the movement of the car of the previous shot. When the police car disappears from the screen, a crime scene is revealed in the background. Graham Waters and Ria enter the scene.

Here is an example from *Magnolia*: Jim and Claudia are about to get into Jim's car. An extreme close-up shows Jim's hand turning the key in the car lock (fig. 48). Then there is a cut (02:16:58) to another extreme close-up of a bunch of keys hanging on some trousers (fig. 49). The following shot reveals that those keys belong to Donnie Smith.

One scene in *Short Cuts* ends with a long shot of Gene on the motorcycle, driving from the right to the left side of the screen (fig. 50). Just as he passes a tree, there is a cut (27:06). In the next scene a long shot reveals Casey (fig. 51), who is running from the right side of the screen to the left. In the first frame he has also just passed a tree. The field size of the shots as



Fig. 52



Fig. 53

well as the movement of the characters are matching. Thus the cut forms a node on the cinematic level.

The last match cut that shall be mentioned is also very significant. A close-up of Sherri (fig. 52) laughing about her husband's lies is followed (54:15) by a full shot of one of Marian's paintings (fig. 53). The painting depicts a naked woman laughing. Thus the match cut graphically links Sherri and Marian. Strikingly, Sherri poses for one of Marian's pictures later on in the film.

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was the elaborate discussion of the strong tie between Los Angeles and the popular network films. The network film was introduced as a film with multiple characters separated into multiple independent storylines. While all the characters pursue their own goals, their paths cross during the films, creating a whole network of relations and connections on both the narrative and the cinematic level. Three significant and award-winning network films (dramas) from three different periods of time were chosen for the sake of analysis: Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993), Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) and Paul Haggis' *Crash* (2005).

All three selected films are paradigms of network films set in Los Angeles. They use L.A. as their "roiling laboratory" (Sicinski 51) for the experimentation with human contact, interaction and relationships. Moreover, "Los Angeles serves as a microcosmic lens" (Lane 22) through which common everyday conflicts, such as the striving for love and attention, loneliness, depression, sexual frustration, racial prejudice, illness and regret, are shown. Thus Los Angeles is more than simply the setting of the films. The city is essential to the stories and written onto the characters. L.A.'s vast structure and car-centred culture, for instance, intensify the isolation and alienation of the characters, who are, however, at the same time connected by this common and collective experience.

Furthermore, it was illustrated that *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash* especially reflect three of L.A.'s most well-known and typical characteristics – its car culture, media industry and geologically risky location. By (re)presenting and, at the same time, further constructing Los Angeles as 'the city of media industry', 'the automobile city' and 'the city of natural disasters and wonders', the three films contribute to the dominant constructed images of the city. These constructions can be very extreme and excessive, as the frog rain in *Magnolia* demonstrates.

The significance of the car in the everyday life of Los Angelinos is indisputable. Instead of a well-developed public transport system, Los Angeles probably has one of the biggest freeway networks worldwide. Traffic jams and accidents are part of everyday life in a metropolis like L.A. Strikingly, network films such as *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash*

reflect the city's significant car culture and network system in three different ways. First of all on the narrative level by, for instance, depicting the car as the main means of transport, but also as a place of withdrawal and isolation and as the cause of car accidents, serious injuries and death. Secondly, the films' overall structure – the network of storylines and characters – resembles Los Angeles' network of roads and freeways. The last parallel concerns the use of traffic and road metaphors in the definitions and descriptions of network films: storylines are referred to as 'trajectories', the characters' paths are described as 'journeys', and the convergences of storylines are referred to as 'intersections', 'nodes' or 'crossroads'. This aspect illustrates the complexity of the relation between Los Angeles and network films.

Apart from the representation and construction of L.A. in the three selected films, the thesis dealt with analogies between the city and the film category. A significant analogy is their description as paradigms of postmodernism. The topography of Los Angeles and the structure of network films both feature the typically 'postmodern' characteristics of fragmentation, decentralisation, network and chaos. In a further step, these 'postmodern' features were revealed as potential obstacles to a successful orientation in the city and in the films.

In order to compare L.A. and the network films regarding their observers' spatial or narrative orientation, the concept of cognitive mapping was introduced. Basically, the concept implies that orientation is based on the mental maps we make of our environment. The process of cognitive mapping – including the selection, organisation and memorising of information about the surroundings – is thus essential for survival. Kevin Lynch, whose seminal work *The Image of the City* was reviewed in this thesis, applied the concept of cognitive mapping to the construction of cities like Los Angeles. In his research he found out that five elements were important for the successful orientation in a city: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. According to Lynch, Los Angeles' vast freeway and road system, its lack of an actual centre and easily recognisable landmarks and its fragmentation make the cognitive mapping process more difficult. After the discussion of Lynch's work, the concept of cognitive mapping was applied to the network films. Due to the complex structure of network films, the process of cognitive mapping might at first seem difficult. However, during the course of the films a whole network of convergences and intersections of storylines – comparable to Lynch's elements of 'paths' and 'nodes' – is created, which

eases the successful orientation and understanding of the films. With this understanding comes a feeling of satisfaction and familiarity. In order to illustrate this argument, the final sections of the thesis dealt with the different 'nodes' on both the narrative and cinematic level of the three films. When characters do not cross paths, bump into each other or unwittingly pass each other on the street, they are linked by collective experiences, such as common feelings or conflicts, natural disasters and television programmes. Linking strategies on a cinematic level include fast-paced cross-cutting, match cuts, non-diegetic music and repeated camera movements.

Summing up, it is no coincidence that a great number of popular network films, which reflect the complexity, speed and immediacy of our 'network society', are set and centre around Los Angeles. Due to their complex structure network films are the ideal medium for the representation of a large, (post)modern and dynamic city like Los Angeles. By setting their stories in Los Angeles and at the same time reflecting the city's topography in their structure, network films like *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash* function as cognitive maps of a city too large to grasp. And eventually, by creating interconnections between seemingly disparate storylines and characters in such a large city, the films make L.A. feel like a village, thus conveying a sense of community.

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Abstract

The last two decades have seen a continuous rise in the popularity of the network film. Strikingly, a significant number of those network films are set in Los Angeles – the epitome of a city mediated by its films. The thesis will explore the connection between the city and the film category. Three network films have been selected for discussion and analysis: Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993), Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) and Paul Haggis' *Crash* (2005). After introductory sections on the network film, the selected films and Los Angeles, a section will reflect upon the city's role as setting and subject of network films. Then, the representation of Los Angeles on the films' visual level and the level of dialogue will be explored. The following section will deal with the three most common and typical constructed images of the city. The second part of the work will reflect upon the analogies between L.A. and network films, by first discussing them as paradigms of postmodernism, then pointing out their reference to traffic and the road network, and eventually exploring the concept of cognitive mapping as the process of orientation in both a space like L.A. and a narrative like *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia* and *Crash*.

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten gewann der Episodenfilm zunehmend an Bedeutung und Popularität. Es fällt auf, dass eine Vielzahl der Episodenfilme in Los Angeles spielt – die wahrscheinlich bekannteste Stadt der Filmindustrie. Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit widmet sich dieser Beziehung zwischen Los Angeles und dem Episodenfilm. Drei Episodenfilme wurden für die Diskussion und Analyse ausgewählt: Robert Altmans *Short Cuts* (1993), Paul Thomas Andersons *Magnolia* (1999) und Paul Haggis' *L.A. Crash* (2005). Nach einleitenden Kapiteln zum Episodenfilm, den drei selektierten Filmen und der Stadt Los Angeles, wird sich ein Kapitel mit der Rolle der Stadt als Drehort und gleichzeitig Thema der Filme beschäftigen. Danach sollen Illustrationen der drei Filme Auskunft über die Darstellung der Stadt auf der visuellen Ebene und der Ebene des Dialogs geben. Das darauffolgende Kapitel ist den drei ausschlaggebendsten und typischsten ‚Images‘ der Stadt gewidmet. Im zweiten Teil der Arbeit werden Parallelen zwischen der Stadt und den Filmen aufgezeigt und analysiert – zuerst bezüglich ihrer postmodernen Eigenschaften, danach ihr Bezug auf Verkehr und das Straßennetz, und letztendlich die Idee der ‚kognitiven Landkarte‘, die sowohl auf die räumliche Orientierung in einer Stadt als auch auf die Orientierung in einem Episodenfilm angewendet werden kann.

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Kathrin Swift

Schulbildung:

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Seit Oktober 2006 | Universität Wien (Diplomstudium Theater-, Film- und Medienwissenschaft & Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik) |
| Juni 2006 | Maturaabschluss mit ausgezeichnetem Erfolg |
| 1998-2006 | Bundesgymnasium Rechte Kremszeile, 3500 Krems |
| 1994-1998 | Volksschule Lengenfeld, 3552 Lengenfeld |

Arbeitserfahrung:

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Seit September 2011 | Englisch-Trainerin im Kindergarten in Droß (3552) |
| Juni 2009 | Mitarbeit bei dem Projekt „Die Piraten sind los“ des Vereins „Die jungen Theatermacher“ in Wien |
| Sept. 2007 - April 2011 | Geringfügige Beschäftigung als Übersetzerin in der Firma Meisterwerk Internetagentur GmbH in 3500 Krems (ehem. Tourismus Technologie GmbH) |
| August 2007 | Praktikum in der Sportredaktion der NÖN Krems |