“There are frogs falling from the sky”:
Divining the Essence of Lived Experience through
Creative Acts in Magnolia and Proust

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April 27, 2015

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Acknowledgements

My friends, for all the love, advice, and commiseration.

Professor Nimisha Ladva, for your patience and help throughout this process.

Professors Azade Seyhan and Koffi Anyinéfa, who have helped me grow as a writer, reader, and person are greatly responsible for my love for Comparative Literature and for much of how I understand and interpret life and literature.

Professor Israel Burshatin, for your patience and help throughout this process, for welcoming me my freshman year when I first discovered Comp Lit, and for helping me grow as a writer, reader, and person.

To Lucas and Mom, for always listening to me ramble about movies and books, and for your unconditional love and limitless support. We’re the best team around.

Finally, Paul Thomas Anderson for being a badass, for writing from the gut, and for making a movie that’s so close to my heart.
In an interview called “Singing in the Rain” with Mark Olsen of *Sight and Sound* magazine, contemporary American director Paul Thomas Anderson talks about his 1999 film *Magnolia* and his reflections on the relationship he feels in his own life between film and reality. He explains that, “Movies are a big influence on how we deal with death, relationships... But they can also be a betrayal in terms of how to live your life” (Anderson, *Sight and Sound*, 10.3.26). This quote reveals a complicated disparity between real life and fictions: how can fictions help us cope with and comprehend real life events when at the same time they are incongruous with daily, lived experience? In this project, I will explore this issue with the help of *Magnolia* and Marcel Proust’s epic seven-volume work, *In Search of Lost Time*. I will analyze the interactions between the protagonists and fictions within each work, as well as the reader’s and authors’ own experiences with each text. In doing so I will ultimately convey that the creative act of engaging with a text offers an experience of essence, or the holistic, eternal significance of an individual’s experience outside of their isolated subjectivity. This essence experienced through the creative act divulges the essence of everyday reality that would otherwise remain obscured, and in this way is able to help the individual understand and “deal with” their past events, assuring them of their position within that essence.

To begin, I will present the central problem that Marcel faces in *In Search of Lost Time* and the central problem that frames the multiple narratives in Paul Thomas Anderson’s film *Magnolia*. In both texts, the protagonists are attempting to interpret past events through the lens of the present, and are overwhelmed and distraught by their inability to do so. Ultimately, the protagonists are after a sense of essence, which assures them that life itself is meaningful and synthesizes their experience, rather than the alternative fear that life is a painful, haphazard, indistinguishable flurry of events that are void of significance and lead to a lonely, isolated
existence. Despite the similar conflicts they face, the protagonists in *Magnolia* differ from Marcel in an important respect. Marcel is very conscious of the disparity between his present interpretation of a sign he has encountered in the past, and his distress is communicated through a philosophical self-awareness of this disparity. His quest for the truth or “essence” of the present moment is hinged on events that are not always dramatic in nature, but which are nevertheless profound. In *Magnolia*, on the other hand, the characters are less conscious of the disparity between their past experiences and their present interpretation of them. Their inability to understand the meaning of past events is rather evidenced by their dysfunctional and self-destructive behavior, which is explained throughout the film as the viewer comes to understand each character’s past story. Marcel’s struggle to capture a sense of meaning is incarnated in a pattern in which he experiences essence through a contingent sensuous sign that is unprompted and which lasts only a moment. Marcel immediately works furiously to be able to re-capture and interpret that essence, only to fail. He finds the solution in creative expression, whether through other works of art that he engages with or through his own literary transcription of these events.

In *Magnolia*, each character is introduced in their lowest points, which is clearly the result of past traumatic events. They are confronted with their pasts in various ways, and as they must face things from the past, they only become further confused and distressed by what they have experienced. Finally, the narrative culminates in a storm of frogs falling from the sky. This jolts the characters from their isolated perspective, and the film resolves as each of the disparate but connected protagonists are finally able to confront the past and at last acknowledge that, “We may be through with the past, but the past ain’t through with us” (*Magnolia*). Marcel’s experience with essence only through the signs of art is not mirrored exactly in *Magnolia*’s narrative, but the frogs falling from the sky in the film serve as a metaphor for the way in which
signs of art deliver essence to their reader and to their creator. Engaging the film’s self-reflexive moments with those in Proust’s novel also establishes the act of engaging with a text (as a reader or spectator or otherwise) as a creative act in its own right. The autobiographical aspects of the texts in relation to the authors’ (both Marcel Proust and Paul Thomas Anderson) lives provide further evidence of the way in which art is able to synthesize seemingly chaotic and unfathomable or unintelligible events in our lives that would otherwise pass with erroneous interpretation or as mere meaningless coincidence. Finally, the discussion of art within Proust’s narrative, the phenomenon of the frogs falling from the sky in Magnolia, and the autobiographical nature of the texts culminate to suggest that truth is accessible in art because of the way that the creative process engages lived experience, meaning their truth is also founded in lived experience rather than in a transcendental or spiritual realm. Therefore, within the texts’ narratives and in their self-reflexive moments, we are able to see that the truth and meaning of daily, specific lived experience becomes clear in art because it subverts alienating subjectivity and organizes the chaotic events of individual experience within the new world of the narrative, offering an intersubjective exchange of a holistic truth.

I. Chaos, Chance, & the Intimation of Meaning

In this section I will flesh out the central problem that plagues Marcel and the characters in Magnolia -- namely, their attempts to grasp the truth of events that have happened to them and which seem contingent, chaotic, and incomprehensible, but with an intimation of significance. I will begin with a general examination of In Search of Lost Time as it is framed by Gilles Deleuze, followed by an analysis of Marcel’s experience with the iconic madeleine and tea. In this analysis, I will clarify what I mean when I use the term essence, and thus present what
Marcel is after throughout *In Search of Lost Time*, as well as point to the problems that get in his way: namely, contingency and the subject-object dynamic present in the interpretation of habitual experience, both of which combine to suggest that events are chaotic and meaningless. From here, I will transition to the narration that commences *Magnolia*, which offers three side narratives that do not relate to the main narrative in content but which frames its themes of coincidence and indubitable meaning despite apparent disorder. I will introduce the characters in *Magnolia* and the details of each past event that plagues their present selves, and ultimately align this struggle with the struggle of the subject-object dynamic in Marcel’s madeleine episode as well.

**A. Proust**

Throughout the novel, Marcel attempts to understand past moments and experiences as they truly happened, and in this sense is working to gain back “lost time”. However, Gilles Deleuze points out in *Proust and Signs* that this attempt to regain time is better understood as “an apprenticeship to signs”, explaining that Marcel encounters four types of signs throughout the novel which he seeks to interpret and in this way understand his life as it exists in the past from the perspective of the present (Deleuze 4). The first of the four types of signs that Deleuze presents are the worldly signs, which “stand for action and for thought”, for things that are of this world and that we encounter in this world. He provides as an example the many moments of social commentary Proust’s narrative offers, explaining that a worldly sign would be a laugh that someone at a Verdurin dinner party emits to gain social currency, rather than as a natural admission that something was funny (Deleuze 6). He moves to the second world, that of the signs of love. This is manifested in the romantic relationships that Marcel partakes in, such as his relationship with Albertine. He explains that “To love is to try to explicate, to develop, these
unknown worlds [of the beloved] which remain enveloped in [them]” (Deleuze 7). These signs are by nature “deceptive”, and lend to the jealousy so prevalent in Proust’s narrative – the lover remains one of many objects in the unknown world of the beloved, a world that ultimately excludes the lover as subject, or interpreter, in relation to these signs in the beloved’s world. Deleuze explains the sensuous signs next, which are incarnated in moments of involuntary memory. In the case of the madeleine scene, adult Marcel is eating a madeleine dipped in tea, and the taste and smell of the cookie doused in the drink remind him of his childhood visits to Combray years after he actually experienced them. The taste and smell from the madeleine and the tea caused “the extraordinary thing” of involuntary memory to happen to Marcel, which is distinct from other, conscious efforts to remember a specific event. Marcel describes the unique sensation of involuntary memory saying,

“An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had the effect, which love has, of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me” (Proust 60).

Herein lies the first example of the essence that Marcel seeks in his narrative. The presence of the past experience of his childhood in Combray simultaneously experienced in the present moment of his adult life while he is visiting his mother offers a sense of the “eternity” of Combray, and suggests to Marcel that his time spent there is not lost, meaningless time (Deleuze 12). It gives him a sense of himself in an eternal sense, for as Marcel describes the essence he realizes that it is him, or that it constitutes who he is in terms of the significance of his life, while at the same time not being in him, or something that he possesses as a subject alienated from the rest of experience. Deleuze explains essence saying that it is “beyond designated objects, beyond intelligible and formulated truths, but also beyond subjective chains of associations and resurrections by resemblance or contiguity”, and that in this way essences are “alogical and
supralogical” (Deleuze 37). Working with Deleuze’s description of essence as well as Marcel’s transcription of his experience, we can see that essence is that which gives the impression of a totality rather than a fractured and partitioned experience, with subjects separate from the objects that they encounter, but does so in relation to an individual. Essence communicates Marcel’s individual significance, but does so in positioning this significance in an eternal, holistic sense. It causes him to realize that who he is extends beyond his role as a subject or as an object, and that the time he laments as lost is not able to be lost because of its eternal essence. Here it is helpful to turn quickly to Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which Benjamin famously coins the term “aura” and defines the aura of a natural object as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be”, and goes on to illustrate this phenomenon by likening it to the shadow of a branch that falls on someone while they are lying under that branch (Benjamin 219). Already we see the likeness of Benjamin’s aura to the essence in Marcel’s simultaneous experience of Combray with the experience in his mother’s house eating the madeleine, but Benjamin’s description of aura as it relates to art combined with his definition of a natural aura suits Marcel’s experience with essence through the madeleine best. Benjamin describes aura in relation to art as “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Benjamin 218). What Benjamin goes on to do with his definition of aura is not applicable to this essay, but the important impression to reap from his term is that Proust’s essence, which becomes the goal of Marcel’s narrative, is an experience that gives one the sense of the totality and meaningfulness of their experience as it exists within history as a whole. As Deleuze explains, essence naturally defies perfect definition (being “alogical and supralogical”), which is also true for Benjamin’s
aura, but it is an experience that is familiar and offers an impression of the eternal without introducing divinity or spirituality. It dismisses every impression that a personal narrative is insignificant or meaningless and isolated, and instead reveals the eternal essence of experience.

The problem with the sensuous signs, such as the madeleine, is not that they fail to deliver essence but that they remain “material signs”, and thus the “obligation” or “necessity of a mental effort to seek the sign’s meaning” because of the immediate, if fleeting, impression of essence ultimately fails because it turns to a material object, which necessarily interrupts the immateriality of essence which frees Marcel from his subjectivity (Deleuze 12-13). Marcel realizes this in his experience with the madeleine when he continues to drink the tea in the hopes that he will be able to prolong and retrieve the fleeting experience of essence, only to determine that “It is plain that the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself”, and resolves to “examine [his] own mind”, saying that in confronting the essence he is faced with,

“… an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, which it alone can make actual” (Proust 61).

In this passage, we see the both the dynamic that eclipses essence in daily experience and the solution that Marcel ultimately finds, though they are only mentioned and not developed or explicated. Marcel first seeks the object, the tea and madeleine, to gain essence, which fails immediately. He then feels that he must look within himself, but also knows that this will not result in essence but instead “will avail nothing”. Finally, he concludes that he must do more, something beyond the object and beyond himself as subject -- he must “create”. Through an act of creation, Marcel acknowledges that he will be able to access essence in a way that is not fleeting (as it is when its harbinger is a sensuous material sign), nor will he need to rely on
coincidence to garner an impression of essence, but will be able to confirm and legitimize the eternal impression of essence through its presence and sustenance in that creative act.

The sign that delivers essence “forces” Marcel from his habitual daily life, in an essentially “violent” manner, in order to “interpret, decipher, explicate” (Deleuze 17). This is seen in the sensuous signs because they take Marcel by surprise -- it was a coincidence of stumbling across the madeleine and tea at his mother’s house, which Marcel explains he “did not ordinarily take” but “for no particular reason” accepted anyways, and without it he would not have experience joyful essence (Proust 60). This “force” that is required to pull Marcel from his daily life in which he is a subject seeking to explicate the objects in the first three worlds of signs is present in art, which is “the ultimate world of signs” that creates from what is found in the other worlds of signs. In Deleuze’s words, “all the signs converge upon art,” and therefore signs of art rely upon the material worlds of signs in one sense, but act “as though dematerialized” because of the creation of something which before “did not exist” (Deleuze 13). This is the key to essence in the signs of art, because,

“Henceforth the world revealed by art reacts on all the others and notably on the sensuous signs; it integrates them, colors them with an aesthetic meaning, and imbues what was still opaque about them. Then we understand that the sensuous signs already referred to an ideal essence that was incarnated in their meaning. But without art we would not have understood this, nor transcended the law of interpretation…. At the deepest level, the essential is in the signs of art” (Deleuze 14).

Before turning to Magnolia to discuss the analogous problem its protagonists face, I want to examine an episode from Volume II, Within a Budding Grove, in which Marcel engages with a play. This will develop more fully why the signs of art are successful in delivering essence because of their relationship to essence that is present but not accessible in lived experience, or the material worlds of signs in Proust’s narrative. Art delivers essence through use of the other worlds of signs for two reasons. First of all, art fills the sign with a created meaning, thus
working within the framework of the material signs but avoiding the problem of the unknowable, insufficient object, or as Deleuze phrases it, “the sign is doubtless more profound than the object emitting it, but it is still attached to that object” -- art frees the sign from the object because if its immateriality, though it works within the framework of material signs (Deleuze 36). The second thing that art allows is similar but is applied to the subject. Instead of requiring intellectual interpretation, which will fail because the sign is also “more profound than the subject interpreting it” (Deleuze 36), it offers a world in which the usual “subjective compensations” that would ordinarily follow the failure of an object to transmit essence do not hold (Deleuze 34). That is to say, Marcel realizes each time that the object he treated as essence was in fact not the essence itself, he falls back on himself to calibrate his experience with the object in this new light of disappointment – to convince himself that the reason the object disappointed him was the fault of his subjectivity, and not the object. In art, however, Marcel’s position as a subject takes on a whole new dimension, for he is not immersed in his world anymore, but a different one. Deleuze develops the way that signs of art function in an analysis of Marcel’s first visit to the theater to see Berma play the role of Phaedra.

He begins his discussion with the question, “Yet what else is there except the object and the subject?” (Deleuze 37) and explains that it can only be found in signs of art, with “Berma” as the example in Marcel’s narrative that he employs. Marcel is infatuated with an actress named Berma who is playing Phèdre in a play that he goes to see. Marcel sits in the theater and his viewing experience oscillates between the perceiving Berma as an actress and perceiving Phaedra, the character, and this ultimately is disappointing. He explains at one moment, “I listened to [Berma] as though I were reading Phèdre, or as though Phaedra herself had at this moment uttered the words that I was hearing, without its appearing that Berma’s talent had added
anything at all to them” (Proust II.27), in which it is clear that he is engrossed in the narrative without engaging Berma, though still conscious of her as the actress. At the end of the play, everyone is raving about Berma as an actress, and how well she performed and Marcel is engaged with Berma as an actress: “the more I applauded, the better it seemed to me did Berma act” (Proust II.29). Marcel falls into the objective disappointment and subjective compensation pattern while he is watching Berma’s performance because he is engaging her as a worldly sign, as an object that should transmit essence as that object. Instead, Deleuze explains Marcel’s error, saying that,

“neither Berma nor Phèdre are designable characters, nor are they elements of association. Phèdre is a role, and Berma unites herself with this role – not in the same sense in which the role would still be an object or something subjective – on the contrary, it is a world, a spiritual milieu populated by essences” (Deleuze 37). Rather than the “objectivist” stance on art that Marcel realizes is “defect[ive]” in his spectatorship of Phèdre, “art… espouse[s] life in order to exalt it, in order to disengage its value and truth” (Deleuze 33). The subject and object dynamic of daily habitual life is discarded in exchange for a new world, in a combination of the real or material (Berma) and the fictional role (Phèdre) that combines the material signs that cannot deliver essence while in the Lacanian subject/object dynamic but can combine in art to deliver essence in the forceful, violent encounter with the new world it offers. Marcel shows intimations of this when he is leaving the theater, in which he realizes, too late, all that the world of Phèdre could have offered him in contrast to his daily, normal life:

“I felt, all the same, when the curtain had fallen for the last time, disappointed that the pleasure for which I had so longed had not been greater, but at the same time I felt the need to prolong it, not to depart for ever, when I left the theater, from this strange life of the stage which had, for a few hours, been my own, from which I should be tearing myself away, as though I were going into exile, when I returned to my own home” (Proust II.30).
He realizes that he did not engage fully with the world of the text, and wishes that he could “prolong it” in order to grasp the essence that was within the world of Phaedra. Marcel eventually does engage the signs of art in ways that deliver their essence and contrast to his experiences with the other worlds of signs, and ultimately engages them in the same way that Deleuze describes the signs of art to operate:

“They transcend the states of subjectivity no less than the properties of the object. It is the essence that constitutes the sign insofar as it is irreducible to the subject apprehending it. … it is by the work of art… that the hero of the Search arrives at his revelation of essences. The worldly signs, the signs of love, even the sensuous signs are incapable of giving us the essence; they bring us closer to it, but we always fall back into the trap of the object, into the snare of subjectivity. It is only on the level of art that the essences are revealed. But once they are manifested in the work of art, they react upon all the other realms; we learn that they already incarnated, that they were already in all these kinds of signs, in all the types of apprenticeship” (Deleuze 38).

Before examining what Deleuze means when he explains the work of art and the essence it delivers, I want to provide a quick summary of Lacan’s canonical essay *The Mirror Stage* which outlines the formation of the subject. This will give the rest of this essay a more concrete sense of what is meant when I use the terms subject and object, and will be especially helpful in understanding how this dynamic is subverted in art, though practiced throughout lived experience. A brief summary of the real-life situation Lacan discusses is as follows: an infant is in his mother’s arms, and she urges him to look at the mirror and see himself. As she does so, she tells him how wonderful and handsome and special he is, and he sees himself in relation to his mother. He at once establishes himself as subject and object: he is the baby that he sees in the mirror and his mother is not him; she sees him as he sees her. Thus the baby is now aware of the Other, the world of subjects that are not him, that is, the world of objects in relation to him, and the world of subjects that view him as an object. He is welcomed into the isolation of his subjectivity and must spend his life reconciling himself with the difference that is the Other. Additionally, the subject does not have a concrete view of himself – he has an illusionistic way
of picturing himself, but cannot actually see himself truly (or see himself as the Other sees him). He sees himself in the sense that it is a reflection and not his actual self -- he sees a representation of himself, but not the actual self. Essentially, Lacanian theory is grounded in “lack” (Lacan 204). The subject cannot understand himself because he cannot understand the Other, and vice versa. The world of Lacan is a world of representation in the face of this “lack” – this absence of truth, this absence of “real” understanding of oneself or that that lies outside of oneself.

Lacan explains in his book *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* that the subject and the Other is the basis for language and semiotics. The subject, in his effort to understand and connect with the other, relies upon signifiers that will hopefully communicate the “signifieds” in his internal subjectivity, but ultimately, because he cannot know the Other and is an Other to the very object he hopes to communicate with, the subject fails, and must constantly negotiate the insufficiency of the signifier(s) with the unknowablility of his own, as well as others’, signified(s). Ultimately, Lacan posits a world composed of subjects and objects which are entirely known through representation, in a Symbolic sense, and are thus under the influence of desire and drive, which act as motivations to override the “lack” in the Symbolic but which ultimately fail in that they are unable to fulfill that lack – as in desire, which by definition is not able to be satisfied, or in the drive, which is successful only because it does not strive for an object but plays with the insatiability of desire. As such, the Lacanian world of subject and objects do not contain meaning -- they contain at best representation, simulacrum, but not Real or Truth. The very nature of Lacanian theory excludes the Real from being understood or even existing; there can only be the symbolic, not the Real.
Turning back to Deleuze with this new understanding of the subject/object dynamic, we see that it is through signs of art that we are able to escape the illusion, lack-based void of the subject and the void of the object. This is because the signs of art are not material, like the signs of real, lived experience are, but are rather dematerialized, though framed by our reality. As a result, “essences are revealed” in the worlds of art that we enter. However, as Deleuze explains, the signs of art and the essence they deliver also points to the presence of essence in everyday experience – essence is “already incarnated” in the other worlds of signs, but made inaccessible because of the ways that the subject relates to the object in daily life. Now that essence has been defined as the alogical impression of an individual’s eternal and meaningful position within holistic experience and we have seen how Marcel sees intimations of essence in the material signs of daily life but is unable to access essence fully without the signs of art, we are able to move to the central conflict of the characters in *Magnolia*.

**B. Magnolia**

*Magnolia* opens with an anonymous narrator who immediately jumps into “an account of the hanging of three men” from *The New York Herald*. The men were convicted for murdering a man who lived in Greenberry Hill, London. The last names of the men were Green, Berry, and Hill, and their motive was “simple robbery”. The narrator points out the fact that their last names combined to form the name of the man’s estate, though they did not know him personally, and he concludes this segment saying, “I would like to think this was only a matter of chance” (*Magnolia*). He continues with another story, this time from *The Reno Gazette*, in which a forest fire is put out with water from a plane and a scuba diver, Delmer Darion, is trapped in the plane’s water chamber and impaled on a tree as the water was released to put out the fire. It turns out that
Delmer was a blackjack dealer who had gotten into a fight two days before the accident with the volunteer firefighter, Craig Hanson, who was piloting the plane that scooped Delmer up and caused his death. The narrator explains that “the weight of guilt and the measure of coincidence so large, Craig Hanson took his life”, concluding the second strange tale with, “And I am trying to think this was all only a matter of chance”. Finally, the narrator concludes with the story of Sydney Barringer, whose fate was recorded by the American Association of Forensic Science. Simply put, “the coroner ruled that [Sydney’s] unsuccessful suicide had suddenly become a successful homicide”, which the narrator goes on to explain. Sydney jumped off of the roof of his apartment building with a suicide note in his pocket. His parents were fighting three stories beneath him, which was a normal occurrence for the Barringers. His mother was threatening his father with a shotgun, and it accidentally fired off, just as Sydney was passing the window. The shot killed him instantly, but had it not been for the shotgun, Sydney would have survived -- there was a safety net for window washers installed just a day before, and it would have broken his fall. To make matters stranger, Sydney was the one who loaded the gun, since his parents always fought with the gun but never had it loaded, he decided to teach them a lesson and load the gun. Thus, Sydney Barringer was an accomplice in his own homicide by his mother. The portion of strange tales concludes with the narrator’s comment,

“And it is in the humble opinion of this narrator that this is not just “something that happened”. This cannot be “one of those things”. This, please, cannot be that. And for what I would like to say, I can’t. This was not just a matter of chance. These strange things happen all the time” (*Magnolia*).
The screen fades to black and the title card fades in, and the real story begins. When Chuck Stephens asked Paul Thomas Anderson (PTA) in a 2000 interview why he chose to frame his narrative with these strange but historically legitimized stories, PTA responded,

“It’s a promise… that, hey, look at these three stories which, to whatever extent are true are not, are weird and fantastic and filled with amazing coincidence -- and that, if you
gave me three hours, I will give you a story that is just as filled with weird and fantastic coincidence as they are, because “this stuff does happen”” (Web). And PTA delivers on that promise. Magnolia does not have one primary character but several, and their narratives intersect in overt and subtle ways, but in each character’s life there is a past incident that informs their present behavior and which is just as “fantastic” in the sense that it is hard to understand but demands analysis because of the ways that the incidents recur unexpectedly and cannot just be “one of those things”. In this way, when the narrator claims that “These strange things happen all the time”, he is commenting on the familiar experience of a past event emerging again in the present moment, much in the way that Marcel’s experience with the sensuous signs conveys. These strange things do not require the overwhelming strangeness of a scuba diver blackjack dealer being accidentally scooped up in a plane, but can be more commonplace occurrences. The first person that we meet is Jim Kurring, a simple but good-hearted cop who is three years divorced and struggles with self-esteem as a result, giving himself pep talks in his cop car on the way to calls because he doesn’t think that he’s capable of the task. We are introduced to Stanley, a young boy featured on a quiz show for kids called “What Do Kids Know?”. Stanley is very smart and carries the team, and is one win away from breaking a record and making a lot of money. His dad is very obviously neglectful of Stanley’s needs as a child, and sees him as cash cow and display item rather than his son, which Stanley is aware of and has a difficult time navigating, as can be seen in his inability to stand up for himself in the face of his father and the other children on the game show. We meet Donnie Smith, a non-descript loser who can’t make it to work on time and is facing termination, only to realize that he was a star on the same show years before, and lost all the money that he made to his parents and has never been able to move past his reputation as ‘Quiz Kid Donnie Smith’. Next we have Jimmy Gator, the smarmy host of “What Do Kids Know” who cheats on his wife and has just
been diagnosed with cancer. He is the father of Claudia, who prostitutes herself and does drugs
constantly in the wake of being molested by Jimmy throughout her childhood. Next we meet
Linda and Earl Partridge, who are the owners of the company that produces the quiz show. Earl
is bedridden and dying of cancer, and Linda is his gold-digging, frenetic wife who steals his
prescriptions and abuses them. Earl’s estranged son is Frank T.J. Mackey, who is the creator and
face of a program called “Seduce and Destroy”, which teaches men how to master and
manipulate women without any emotional connection or personal investment because Earl
abandoned him and his mother, Lily, when his mother became sick early in his life. As the
narratives intersect, these traumas from the past resurface in strange ways, and cause the
protagonists to confront the meaning of these events in the larger fabric of their lives, much like
Marcel’s attempts to comprehend the meaning of his past experiences, though his are not always
traumatic. If Marcel is seeking essence, a sense of eternal significance outside of himself, the
protagonists in Magnolia are seeking the same thing, though their search is put into different
terms. In the same way that the narrator phrases his reaction to the three strange events in the
frame narrative, the traumatic past events that resurface in the characters’ lives “cannot be one of
those things”, or a simple “matter of chance”. I will focus on the characters Frank T. J. Mackey
and Claudia to illustrate the strange introduction of the past back into the present, and will
illustrate how they turn to art to make sense of these unintelligible past experiences.

Jimmy Gator tries to meet with Claudia to tell her about his declining health. The man
that Claudia is sleeping with for drugs answers the door, and because he doesn’t know about her
past with her father, lets him in. Claudia wakes up and sees him and is immediately terrified and
distraught, shocked that he has found her apartment and clearly unable to believe her eyes. She
yells for him to leave her house, and he attempts to tell her about his cancer, but she doesn’t care
and yells at him to leave between sobs. Later, Claudia is sitting in her apartment, snorting lines of coke and listening to music really loudly. Her neighbors who reported loud shouting prior to the disrupting music call in Jim Kurring, and when he arrives she freaks out and hides her drugs before answering the door. She immediately strikes Jim, and the camera slowly zooms in on his face as he stares at Claudia in the doorway. There is a parallel drawn between them as she walks in to turn her music down and ensure there are not signs of cocaine on her coffee table, while Jim begins to enter her house but is so flustered he drops his baton down the stairs and must go and retrieve it. They both rejoin on her threshold, hoping the other didn’t see their embarrassing action. He asks her standard cop questions, but is clearly trying to determine if she has a boyfriend. When she tells him that the fight that her neighbors referenced was not her boyfriend, Jim starts to flirt with her, and they have a cup of coffee with dialogue that is awkward, as it passes between these two broken characters who are trying to understand how to progress with their feelings for each other in spite of this brokenness. He ends up leaving telling her to “keep your chin up and your music down”, but as soon as he leaves he comes back to ask her on a date. They go on the date later, and it’s very awkward -- Claudia is coked out, and Jim doesn’t understand why she’s acting strangely but is also very upset himself because in the hours prior to their date he loses his gun, which is very embarrassing for a cop. Claudia explains to him that, “I’m really nervous … that you’re gonna find out stuff about me soon, and then you’re gonna hate me”, to which Jim tells her that he lost his gun earlier that night, and that he “is not a good cop”, and is scared that “once you find that out, you might not like me” (Magnolia). He admits that he hasn’t been on a date in three years since his divorce, and promises Claudia that he “will be good to her”. They both kiss, and then the film cuts to a shot of her mother with her father. Jimmy Gator has just had a stroke on live TV while hosting the quiz show, and his wife is trying
to calm him down. He admits to having cheated on her for years, and she is unsurprised, but challenges him by asking why Claudia hates him so much. Jimmy admits, “I think she thinks that I may have molested her”. Rose directly asks if he has every molested her, and Jimmy Gator replies that he doesn’t know. Rose begins to cry, and as she stands to leave for Claudia’s apartment, she tells him, “Yes, you do know … you know, but you won’t say” (Magnolia). She leaves and Jimmy is left alone. The film cuts back to the end of Jim and Claudia’s kiss, and she says that she needs to leave (“Now that you’ve met me, would you object to never seeing me again?”). Jim tries to get her to stay, and Claudia is unable to make eye contact with him and begs him, “Just let me go, Jimmy, please, just let me go”. It’s important to note that the first time that she has been able to go on an emotionally invested date with someone, it’s with a man who has the same name as her father, which is clearly on her mind as she makes this slip in his name during her meltdown. The man who wants to help her and love her has the same name as the man who is the root of Claudia’s issues, and this is analogous to the moment with the madeleine for Marcel, because it brings up the past concurrently with the present despite the belief that that past memory has been repressed and can be ignored. There is an imperative to understand what such a seemingly coincidental moment might mean, which is the same situation in Marcel’s encounter with the sensuous signs. Instead of articulating an experience of essence, however, Claudia’s need is communicated through her distress, and while she may not be able to express what it is she needs, it is clear that she must reconcile this past moment with the present moment in a way that creates meaning from her experience rather than leaving her damaged. I will now explain Frank Mackey’s similar situation, and then convey how Magnolia represents art in the scene where the sky rains frogs. This offers an analogous situation or metaphor to Marcel’s effort
to grasp essence, and this same desire for holistic meaning in present in *Magnolia* within each individual narratives as the protagonists witness and try to comprehend the rain of frogs.

Frank Mackey’s “Seduce and Destroy” program is repulsive, with the motto “Respect the cock, tame the cunt” at the forefront of his seminars. His disrespect for women is so extreme that it is no surprise to find out through an interview with a reporter named Gwenovier that his father abandoned him in early childhood and forced to care for his mother until her death alone. Gwenovier begins the interview casually and slowly forces Frank to acknowledge and admit this past trauma that colors his present day disposition, to which Frank becomes livid and stony, refusing to discuss the issue despite his previously histrionic display of confidence and misogyny in the interview and seminar. Intercut with this revelatory interview, we see Frank’s father Earl Partridge on his deathbed discussing his estranged son with his in-home nurse, Phil, who has gotten in contact with Frank’s assistant Janet who promises to help put Frank in contact with Earl. After he exits the interview with Gwenovier, Frank is put on the phone with Janet, who explains the situation and assures him that it is in fact his father on the other line. She expresses sympathy, saying, “I know this is really hard for you right now”. Frank loses his temper with her and screams “If you’re gonna give me things, Janet, give me things, give me the information.... What did he say? Because I am not taking care of him. What does he want?” (*Magnolia*). They fight and she finally responds that he needs to “fucking get on the phone” instead of continuing to take out his shock and frustration at his father’s re-entry into his life on her. The film cuts to Phil waiting on hold, with the Seduce and Destroy spiel playing in his ear. The juxtaposition of Frank’s confrontation with his father, who he has tried so hard to repress in the form of his seminar, with this voiceover of the very misogynistic doctrine that results from his childhood is powerful, as it is literally what is standing in the way of Frank confronting this past trauma in the
present moment. He turns stone faced and hangs up on Janet, returning to his seminar. The film cuts to Earl in bed, fading in and out of consciousness, dying. When the film returns to Frank on stage, he begins his next section asking, “What is it that we need?” and continues saying that when people blame their parents for what they do, he is disgusted: “Mommy wouldn’t let me play soccer and Daddy hit me, so that’s why I do what I do? Fucking bullshit! I will not apologize for who I am”. After saying this, Frank completely loses it and begins sputtering, then throws a chair in frustration. The interrogative that begins the seminar in conjunction with his disgust for people who blame their parents indicates his inability to reconcile his past with his present, although it’s clear that despite his attempts to keep this from happening, he is reacting very strongly to his father’s abuse and abandonment. The visceral reaction of throwing the chair and losing his train of thought shows that, like the madeleine for Marcel, the phone call from Phil bringing his father back into his present adult life has given him an obligation to determine exactly what it is that he needs, what the past trauma can mean for his life in a holistic sense. Following Frank’s breakdown on stage, the film cuts to Earl, who asks to Phil to talk with him. Phil has been disconnected with Frank and is crying, upset that he was unable to help reconcile Earl and Frank. Earl begins a voiceover that ushers each narrative into its climax, which, for each person, is the rock bottom of their unintelligible past experience and the way that it is wreaking havoc upon their present adult self. Earl explains how much he loved Lily, Frank’s mother, and how much he hates that he cheated on her and left her and Frank when she became sick. He explains, “This is the regret that you make. This is the … regret that you make, and the something you take, and the blah, blah, blah, something something”. It’s clear that Earl, like Frank, is confronted with his past and cannot understand how to proceed with its concurrent effect in the present, and resorts to uttering (consciously) the “blahs” and “somethings” because
words have failed him, and he does not know what to do. He expresses how great his “goddamn regret” is, and feels that he has no peace or sense of meaning despite the fact that he is on his deathbed. He generalizes his own struggle in a way that is exemplary of each of the protagonists’ struggles in the whole film, sobbing as he says,


The voiceover diverges from Earl on his deathbed and we see the other characters in the throes of their personal but related struggles. Earl’s lament that there is “no punch” (punch line) or “moral” to “this life” communicates the kind of meaning, or essence, of experience that each character is striving to find as their significant past moments resurface. They are seeking something that will give their story a moral, but they are not able to find it; they are all exhausted and desolate, the very picture of Earl’s words that life is “so fucking hard” and “long”. Earl begging Phil for help and to help him understand this moral, to understand what he has done and how he can fix it, is analogous to Marcel’s gulping of the tea in an effort to gain essence. Phil is unable to help just as the tea was unable to help as an object, but in there is an interesting move on Phil’s part that hearkens to Marcel’s realization that essence lies in a creative act. Just as Earl intuitively understands that he wants the moral of his life as if it were a story or text, Phil’s initial outreach to the Seduce and Destroy company in an effort to find Frank communicates this move to treat life as if it were a story, or more specifically a movie, in order to reap larger meaning or essence. Phil is on the phone with a sales rep for Frank’s company, and he tells the representative that he has Frank’s father on the line. The representative is hesitant to help him, and Phil recognizes this but puts the situation in terms that convey the severity of the moment to the rep. Phil explains,
“I know this all seems silly. I know that maybe I sound ridiculous, like maybe this is the scene of the movie where the guy is trying to get ahold of the long-lost son, but this is that scene. Y’know? I think they have those scenes in movies because they’re true, because they really happen. And you gotta believe me: This is really happening. I mean, I can give you my phone number and you can call me back if you wanna check with whoever you can check this with, but don’t leave me hanging on this – please – please. See: see: See, this is the scene of the movie where you help me out” (Magnolia).

Phil likens the overwhelming, chaotic, strange situation to a scene of a movie to help both himself and the sales representative understand the significance of the situation, to give them instruction in that moment, and to express what Marcel noticed in his own experience of essence through the madeleine, which is that he was “face to face with something that did not yet exist” but which could be brought into existence in a creative act. There is a difference between the creative act that Marcel engages with, which is art itself, and the creative act that the characters in Magnolia engage with, but the important thing to note from these passages is the tendency for the characters to liken their experience within the film to a work of art, to a story or a movie, in an effort to grasp the essence intimated in the concurrent past moment of trauma and present moment of desolation. There is an interesting disparity between the shooting script for Magnolia and the produced film in Frank’s dialogue before he goes back on stage after he hangs up on Janet that ties together this theme of life-as-text in the Earl/Phil/Frank confrontation. In the film, he walks quickly down a hallway on his way back to the seminar, with an angry face and clenched jaw but without saying anything. In the script, however, Frank says, “I haven’t spoken to this asshole in ten years… What did I do? What did I do today for this? For all of this? … what, is this, is this a movie?” (Magnolia Shooting Script, 140). I understand why this was cut from the script, because it does come off as heavy-handed and it is uncharacteristic of Frank’s character to be so self-aware (while it is appropriate for Earl to be self-aware and reflective, seeing as he is about to die), but it is important to mention in the context of this essay because it provides direct textual insight into the mindset of Frank that is otherwise only implicit. Just as
Phil resorted to considering the strange, seemingly coincidental but clearly largely meaningful situation of Frank and Earl’s reconnection a scene from a movie, so does Frank consider it to be a movie. The nature of the situation is so fantastic, like the impression from the madeleine, that he knows that it requires analysis, but analysis of the situation in his own life is too overwhelming and he can only beg, like his father does, “What did I do?”, without any answer. He resorts to considering the situation like he would consider a movie in the same way that Marcel resorts to creative acts and art to make sense of his own impressions of essence. Furthermore, Earl has a cut line in which he says, “Oh fuck, this fucking story has fallen apart and I don’t even think I can… I got no punch line --” (Magnolia Shooting Script 150). This is the same frame of mind that his dying father resorts to in the overwhelming experience that intimates essence as a larger, eternal meaning from a past moment that has arisen in the present, and expresses his need for a “punch line” or “moral”, as his father puts it, to bring his “story” back together in a way that makes sense. This is analogous to Marcel’s turn to art in an effort to grasp essence, but here is where the plots differ, because Marcel is able to engage with art in his role as a writer, whereas the characters in the film only suggest their desire to make sense of their lives through art but do not have the opportunity to do so. Instead, the text performs this desire through the moment when frogs rain from the sky. In explaining the film, Paul Thomas Anderson, who describes Magnolia as his way to make sense of the death of his father. This will be more developed after I have explained the way that Marcel engages with Vinteuil’s piece and the “Wise Up” sequence in Magnolia, both of which will further align the characters’ desire to grasp essence through the creative act, and better define all that entails.

II. Music
*Magnolia* is a three-hour movie with an undeniable climax found in the scene where frogs rain from the sky. However, before this happens, there is a similarly crucial scene involving all of the characters in the film as they are nearing this crux of their personal conflicts. Paul Thomas Anderson wrote the script while listening to Aimee Mann’s songs, and her music comprises most of the film’s soundtrack as well as some of the lines that the characters exchange (Anderson writes in his introduction to the shooting script that his film could be “an adaptation” of Mann’s music and that he “owes her some cash, probably” (*MSS* viii)). Before the ultimate scene where frogs rain from the sky, the characters are realizing that they need to reconcile their past traumas, which are resurfacing in their present moments. They are each alone in their respective narratives, and begin singing the song “Wise Up” by Aimee Mann, whose lyrics read that, “It’s not going to stop til you wise up” (*Magnolia*). The scene communicates the desperation of each character in their unresolved personal conflicts while simultaneously suggesting that the conflicts are not meaningless, and that there is a holistic and shared essence that they simply are not able to grasp but which music intimates. Because each character is singing the same song at the same moment, the sense of a holistic meaning uniting the seemingly chaotic and overwhelming personal lives of the characters into a larger essence is presented, even though it is not understood by the characters, to the viewer. In this way the film vouches for music as a way for the characters to access the essence that is in their lived experience but which they are oblivious to. The turn to music in Anderson’s film in the face of an attempt to grasp essence is found in Proust’s narrative as well, and Marcel realizes that the composer Vinteuil’s “little phrase” that gave him the same joyous sensation of essence is more capable of delivering essence to him than Albertine, whom he has been convinced is the object that will give his life meaning and significance. I will examine the way that music works in Marcel’s relationship with
Albertine as seen in the fifth volume of Proust’s work, *The Captive*, and then turn to Nietzsche’s *The Birth Of Tragedy* in relation to both Marcel’s experience with the Vinteuil phrase and the way that “Wise Up” is used in *Magnolia* to further define essence and align Marcel and the protagonists of *Magnolia*, and finally to transition into a discussion of film spectatorship and figuration in understanding why art is able to reveal the essence of lived experience.

A. **Proust**

Deleuze explains that the signs of love are approached, as all signs, with the hope that they will deliver essence. He describes it saying that, “In love as much as in nature or art, it is not pleasure but truth that matters”, and that as Marcel interprets his lovers actions, the process is analogous to the way an “interpreter” would approach the task of “translating a complicated text” (Deleuze 15). Just as Deleuze suggests, Marcel’s relationship with Albertine is approached as an avenue for truth, which ultimately disappoints Marcel in its failure to deliver truth. In Volume V, *The Captive*, Marcel and Albertine are living together. Marcel has a lot of anxiety about whether or not Albertine is in love with him, and this anxiety stays with him until the end of the volume. His biggest concern is that she is engaged with other women – which is the ultimate nightmare for Marcel, because it would indicate that Albertine as someone that he will never be able to possess or engage with by the very nature of her own desire, or the ultimate Other. At the beginning of Volume V, Albertine is an all-consuming obsession for Marcel. When he discovers that she may be a lesbian, this obsession is exacerbated. He is resolved to marry Albertine, and takes her back to Paris to live with him. He doesn’t let her go anywhere alone or without his knowledge, and still experiences crippling anxiety that she is cheating on him with other women or is dissatisfied with him as her lover. Essentially, Marcel’s desire for Albertine is fostered by his uncertainty that she desires him, or is disposed to desire a man at all, and is perpetuated by
the moments in which her love and fidelity are in question – jealousy fuels Marcel’s obsession with Albertine.

In the second part of Volume V, Marcel goes to the Verdurins’ house for a concert. He doesn’t bring Albertine because he suspects that she has had a sexual relationship with Andrée, the composers’ daughter, and wants to keep them apart in his jealousy. He hears a piece of music and is moved tremendously by what he hears despite a lot of social commentary that is imbued in the visit. When he comes back to Albertine, Marcel admits that he has visited the Verdurins’, which makes Albertine really upset and she ends up divulging women that she has slept with that Marcel would never have imagined her to have been with. Their relationship is mended in some respects but the fact that Albertine will not kiss him goodnight is an Oedipal move by Proust to reveal that their relationship will never be the same again. Albertine is unhappy in the house and Marcel wants to go to Venice, but neither can experience these freedoms because of their relationship. Ultimately, Marcel reflects philosophically on their relationship in relation to his experience with Vinteuil’s piece that he heard at the Verdurins’ concert, and it becomes clear that he does not want to be with Albertine anymore. Before he breaks the news to Albertine, she has already left the Parisian apartment, and Marcel is left with conflicting feelings of jealousy and relief.

Towards the end of their relationship, Marcel’s reflections on his desire for Albertine reveal that she is never what he actually wanted. She is playing a Vinteuil piece by Marcel’s request, and he is looking at her and thinks of comparing her to a work of “precious art”, but then reconsiders:

“I looked at her. It was strange to me to think that it was she, she whom I had for so long thought it impossible even to know, who now, a wild beast tamed, a rosebush to which I had acted as trainer, as the framework, the trellis of its life, was seated thus, day by day, at home, by my side, before the pianola, with her back to my bookcase. … made me feel
her more my own, because it was from myself that [the pianola she played] came, pressed her shoes of cloth of gold” (Proust V.521).

As he observes Albertine, Marcel realizes that he has captured her – there is no doubt as

Albertine sits in his apartment, playing on his piano in the midst of his belongings, that he has possessed her. But she is not attracted to her anymore, as he expresses when he admits that Albertine was not like a work of art, as Swann would describe women to Marcel when he was younger. Marcel explains that, instead of engaging his “taste and intellect” in the way that works of art do, Albertine and the “pleasure and pain” that she inflicted upon him were based on something else. He struggles to determine what that might be, and in doing so concludes that his feeling regarding Albertine end up reflecting himself. He explains that his feelings for her are not logical:

“when I began to regard Albertine as an angel musician glazed with a marvelous patina whom I congratulated myself upon possessing, it was not long before I found her uninteresting; I soon became bored in her company, but these moments were of brief duration; we love only what we do not possess, and very soon I returned to the conclusion that I did not possess Albertine” (Proust V.523).

His feelings for her oscillate between desiring her when she cannot be possessed, and being bored with her when he feels he has successfully captured her. Marcel feels that he can’t fully possess Albertine as a result of her relationships (past or present) with other women, which makes him feel, “immense uneasiness. This love of woman for woman was something too unfamiliar; nothing enabled me to form a certain, an accurate idea of its pleasures, its quality” (Proust 525). Thus, he either feels like he possesses her and is underwhelmed, or feels he can never possess her and grieves: “I felt that my life with Albertine was, on the one hand, when I was not jealous, mere boredom, and on the other hand, when I was jealous, constant suffering” (Proust 537). He concludes that his Albertine-related affects are not contingent on Albertine herself as object, but instead always reflect himself. Marcel explains this saying, “As we have no personal knowledge, one might say that we can feel no jealousy save of ourself. … It is only
from the pleasure that we ourself have felt that we can derive knowledge and grief” (Proust V.526). In the attempt to understand the other, Albertine, the essence that Marcel feels when he engages with the Vinteuil phrase is not transmitted, but instead she either upsets him or bores him, a vacillation that relies on jealousy grounded in desire. Gilles Deleuze explains these “signs of love” and their inability to deliver essence in *Proust and Signs*. He says that, “To fall in love is to individualize someone by the signs he bears or emits” (Deleuze 7), and that as we try to read the signs of another person, to determine their “soul” or “essence” we attempt to “explicate, to develop, these unknown worlds which remain enveloped within the beloved” (Deleuze 7). The issue, which Marcel explains eloquently, is that the reliance of love on signs of an “unknown world” requires the intrigue of that “unknown world”, desire without possession, or the desperation at the inability for that world to be known, which is jealousy. If Marcel feels that he possesses Albertine, he ends up projecting himself onto her and her “world”, which can be seen as he looks at her playing the pianola and sees himself and his possessions as his, as extensions of himself. Thus, the signs of love “are deceptive signs which can be addressed to us only by concealing what they express: the origin of unknown worlds, of unknown actions and thoughts which give them a meaning” (Deleuze 9). Signs of love only point to the unknown and unknowable Other, and ultimately alienate Marcel in his subjectivity because he either understands himself through the Other without understanding Albertine herself. In his jealousy and in his possession of Albertine, he is threatened by and excluded from knowledge of her. Marcel expresses this before he wants to leave Albertine, saying that in being with her he,

“… felt that I was touching no more than the sealed envelope of a person who inwardly reached to infinity. How I suffered from that position to which we are reduced by the division of bodies, never thought of making possible the interpenetration of souls (for if her body was in the power of mine, her mind escaped from the grasp of mine). … urging me with cruel and fruitless pressure to the remembrance of the past” (Proust V.527).
Marcel’s desire for Albertine is a part of his desire to grasp essence, as his desire for the Other is ultimately an attempt to escape his subjectivity and achieve the “viewpoint” of essence that Deleuze describes. However, he realizes that these desires are not going to be fulfilled by Albertine, or in the signs of love, and are instead available in “works of art”, which contrasts with Albertine and can be seen in his musings as he listens to Albertine play the Vinteuil phrase.

As Marcel listens to Albertine playing the Vinteuil phrase, he wonders why he is able to feel essence, true experience, which mirrors those madeleine moments of involuntary memory, in art but not in didactic materials. He explains that instead of explaining an emotion, the musical piece “recompose[s]” “what we feel in life”. Art, rather than an attempt to translate and explain experience, serves “to reproduce that interior and extreme point of our sensation which is the part that gives us that peculiar exhilaration which we recapture from time to time” (Proust V.510). Thus Marcel privileges the productive and creative “recomposition” of life, not the analysis of it. He makes the claim, as Richard Allen does in his definition of “projective illusion” in relation to cinema, that art is “a more real, more fruitful exhilaration” that is able to provide the “profundity and truth” that he felt when he sipped the tea and ate the madeleine (Proust V.511). Even so, Marcel has a tenuous relationship with these reflections on art, in that he does not know how genuine they are because he cannot explain them intellectually. This is a similar issue found in the cinematic identification arguments, because the overwhelming aspect of essence in art is that it defies explanation and is largely emotional. Marcel explains this saying,

“… there was nothing to assure me that the vagueness of such states was a sign of their profundity rather than of our not having learned yet to analyze them, so that there need be nothing more real in them than in other states. And yet that happiness, that sense of certainty in happiness while I was drinking the cup of tea, or when I smelt in the Champs-Elysées a smell of moldering wood, was not an illusion” (Proust V.520).

It is no surprise that Marcel transitions to his rewarding experience with Vinteuil’s phrase from his confusing and frustrating experience with desire and Albertine. Desire is fundamental to
one’s relationship to the Other, which in turn is fundamental to the understanding of oneself and ultimately, essence as Deleuze describes it in *Proust and Signs*: “Essence, according to Proust, as we have tried to show… is not something seen but a kind of superior viewpoint, an irreducible viewpoint that signifies at once the birth of the world and the original character of a world” (Deleuze 133; 110). Essence as this “viewpoint” thus requires the Other and the self to merge in a way that envelops every facet of one’s ontological experience. This viewpoint is achievable only in art, which is the premise of Deleuze’s reading of *In Search of Lost Time*. However, this premise achieves new levels of validation when paired with an understanding of the cinematic spectator. Just as Marcel subverts the subject/object dynamic presented by Lacan in his experience with art, so does contemporary film theory adjust previous Lacanian models of film spectatorship discourse. This is a helpful starting point for the discussion of these evasive emotional experiences, because in cinematic spectatorship theory we see a discussion of the art of film that mirrors Marcel’s own philosophical realizations about art (whether it be text or music). Marcel’s realization that essence is available in art combined with his inability to achieve similar essence in his relationship with Albertine is elucidated in the adjusted cinematic identification theory that follows.

**B. Magnolia**

In the scene where the characters are all singing “Wise Up”, it’s obvious that they are singing the song at the same time, almost as if it were on the radio and they were all listening to the same station, though the song is not diegetic. Each character is given a different, specifically appropriate line, and they are each about to confront their past traumas in their present - Claudia is preparing for her date and a real human connection with Jim, who shares her fathers/assaulters’ name, Jim is doing the same, about to meet Claudia on his first date since his
divorce three years ago, after having just lost his gun and feeling lame and that he is a bad cop. Donnie is sitting in front of his check from when he was a child genius, deciding if he should steal money from his company in order to get braces to impress the man he is in love with, Brad, etc. In the script it is confirmed that the shots of the different characters singing the lines of the song are happening at the same time, with the slugline for each of these separate scenes reading “THAT MOMENT”. The significance of this is related to the connection between music and essence. Here Justin Sperb’s book *Blossoms and Blood* about Paul Thomas Anderson's’ films is particularly helpful. He explains this scene saying, “The “Wise Up” sequence embodies the film’s larger narrative logic of “trying to find a moment, more than a structure, and unapologetically going with it, hoping that the that moment somehow points to a deeper emotional truth” (Sperb 127). This “deeper emotional truth” is the essence that Vinteuil’s phrase delivered to Marcel when Albertine could not, and is the truth that Proust is after in his search for lost time. It further aligns the plight of the characters in *Magnolia* with Marcel, because as is seen in their similar resort to music, their relationships to their pasts is also a search for the essence that they, like Marcel, know is there but cannot grasp. Very briefly I will turn to *The Birth of Tragedy* by Friedrich Nietzsche, who offers insight into the way that music delivers essence and further verifies and clarifies what Marcel and the people in *Magnolia* are after.

Nietzsche’s first work from 1872 offers an analysis of drama, and is much in keeping with the thesis presented in this project, with a focus on music and Greek tradition. He presents an idea called the “Dionysiac art” which provides the reader with essence though under different terms. Nietzsche explains that a Dionysiac urge requires that “subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self” (Nietzsche 17). Already we are close to what Marcel explains in his experience with the Vinteuil phrase and Deleuze’s presentation of the realm that exists outside of
the subject and the object in favor of essence, as well as the holistic perspective in the face of personal narrative that the “Wise Up” sequence displays. Nietzsche goes on to say that,

“In the Dionysiac dithyramb, man’s symbolic faculties are roused to their supreme intensity: a feeling never before experienced is struggling for expression… Oneness as the source of form, of nature itself. The essence of nature was not to find symbolic expression. A new world of symbols was required, the whole of the symbolism of the body … the rhythmic motion of all the limbs of the body in the complete gesture of the dance” (Nietzsche 21).

Nietzsche presents Dionysiac art in the same way that Marcel explains essence, as something that “struggles for expression” and is singular in experience. This struggle is seen on the screen with each of the characters in Magnolia, and presented cleanly in the framing narration of strange events that must mean something. It communicates “oneness” outside of subjectivity and thus outside of objectivity; it assures the individual that there is meaning that is present beyond their own perspective and that this meaning imbues their life with truth. His insistence that it is not “symbolic expression” but real expression, grounded not in lack but in the actual, further aligns his description with the essence of Deleuze’s work. It also insists upon a “new world” that is only made actual and available in art, offering up another version of our reality that is able to access essence because of its newness. It essentially confirms that real, lived experience is bursting with meaning waiting to be discovered, but since the habitual object-subject dynamic of real lived experience hinders that discovery, art is available to allow that dynamic to be subverted in favor of essence. Nietzsche later explains that music is,

“the immediate language of the will, and feel our imagination impelled to give form to the spirit world that speaks to us, invisible and yet vitally stirring, and embody it in an analogous example. … Thus Dionysiac art tends to exert two kinds of influence on the Apolline artistic faculty: music encourages a symbolic intuition of Dionysiac universality, and then endows that symbolic image with the highest level of significance” (Nietzsche, 79).

Through music, as seen in Marcel’s experience and the “Wise Up” sequence, we are able to indulge our “symbolic intuition” that the world is full of meaning in the creation of a new world
of dense symbols based in reality, and in turn, because of the newness of that world and because
of the relationship between these new symbols to the signs and symbols we see in our daily lived
experience (see the first three worlds of signs explained by Deleuze), we are able to garner the
“highest level of significance” in art, which then applies to our larger real life. This is what the
“Wise Up” sequence demonstrates in Magnolia, and what the Vinteuil phrase demonstrates to
Marcel, and in a larger sense what is demonstrated in all art throughout Marcel’s narrative and in
our own relationship to Magnolia as viewers, especially as we relate to and see the characters’
experience with the frogs falling from the sky. To elucidate these points, I will turn to an
explanation of figuration in Proust’s work and in Magnolia through the frog scene, ultimately
demonstrating Nietzsche’s point that, “Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art”
(Nietzsche 18). In this project, this statement means that man understands his greater meaning,
his “highest level of significance”, in the ways that he harbors the essence of his own life through
works of art -- in the way that the work of art is inscribed with the viewer’s real experience just
as it is inscribed with the author’s real experience, and how through art man is able to access the
holistic sense of meaning, or essence, in his personal narrative. Here I will turn to an analysis of
the frog scene in Magnolia in conjunction with cinematic spectatorship theory to establish the
reader, as seen in Marcel and as seen in our own experience with the film, as a creative
component of the work of art and thus its essence.

III. Figuration and Images

In this section I will talk about the frog scene in Magnolia and how it relates to the
cinematic spectator. I will then transition to a discussion of Marcel and “figuration” as Margaret
Gray presents it in her book Postmodern Proust. This will convey how Marcel works to
communicate his experience through narration, and will explain why and how art is effective in
allowing the reader-as-creator to grasp the essence of his everyday lived experience. It will thus compare the spectators within the movie and the spectators of the movie to Marcel’s works of creation in forging his text. Finally, it will situate the spectator in relation to *Magnolia, In Search of Lost Time*, and works of art in general to elucidate both Marcel’s position and that of the characters in *Magnolia*, ultimately aligning both spectator/reader of the texts with the characters in these two texts as writers/readers/spectators, transitioning into an explication of the metaphor of the frogs falling from the sky in relation to the autobiographical information of Marcel Proust and Paul Thomas Anderson.

A. **Magnolia**

The frogs that fall from the sky in *Magnolia* works as a metaphor for art in the way that Deleuze and Marcel describe it on two levels -- the first level is elucidated in the moments in which the characters themselves are spectators, seen in the presence of screens and frames within the film, in the frog scene. The second level relates to us as cinematic spectators, and will illuminate the way that Marcel engages with art in his own narrative even further as we examine the way that the reader views *Magnolia*. First, I will examine the pivotal scene in which frogs fall from the sky very closely, and establish the two levels that the frogs work as a figuration for the characters in the film and for the spectators of the film. From here, I will examine specific moments of cinematography within the frog scene in *Magnolia* with the theory of Vivian Sobchack which will establish the manner in which cinema is expansive and creative in the same way that Hallward frames Deleuze and thus Proust, rather than limiting and illusionistic. I will tie the frogs as figurations to the ways in which cinema provides a creative, productive reality as an art, and ultimately validate the essence that is made accessible in art because of this creative, productive nature. Once I have done this, I will turn to the autobiographical aspects of both texts,
ultimately establishing the implications that this thesis has on our daily experience as proven through the lives of the authors that created my two primary texts.

First I need to establish the state of the characters before the frogs begin to fall from the sky and how this situates the frogs’ meaning, and then I will be able to turn to their reactions and an analysis of the images as the characters see them and the images as the spectator sees them to solidify this meaning. Claudia is going home from her distressing date with Jim. She is crying, and covertly snorts more coke. Jim is driving home, looking concerned, when he sees Donnie, who he has never met but who we have been following, climbing up a ladder. Donnie is trying to sneak into his workplace to steal money for corrective oral surgery to impress and win the heart of Brad the Bartender, who he believes he is in love with and who has braces himself. Jim sees Donnie climbing and his cop instincts kick in. He turns his car around to investigate, and before he reaches Donnie, a frog hits the windshield of his car. We see this from behind Jim, so we are seeing what he is seeing, the frog, but we also see his face in the rearview mirror, as shown in figure 1. He stops his car, looks around, and then countless frogs fall from the sky, as if it were rain but instead of water drops, frog bodies, and we see this from the same perspective as before, as shown in figure 2. From here, we move to Claudia, who has made it home and is arranging lines of cocaine in front of her, with a large window behind her. While her shades are drawn, we can still see the silhouette of the trees outside, and when the rain of frogs comes, we see their shadows as well -- first only a few, as seen in figure 3, which she hardly notices. She stares directly at the camera, which turns around to see what she is looking at, which is the same TV that she has watched her father’s show on while sobbing at earlier points in the film. This time, however, it is off, and we see a reflection of what was previously the camera’s point of view, which is what Claudia is seeing; her point of view. In this reflection, we see the same silhouette
of the trees in the window shade behind Claudia, but this time, there are many frogs falling, which Claudia notices in the reflection of the black screen of her TV (figure 4).
The camera cuts from here and we see Claudia freak out as it rains frogs from the sky. Following these shots, there are shots of the other characters at this time: Jimmy Gator attempts to kill himself only to have a frog fall through his skylight and knock his gun from his hand, Donnie is hit in the face with frogs and falls off the ladder he was climbing to steal from his workplace, ironically smashing his teeth on the pavement, Frank is lying next to Earl and notices the frogs but turns back to his father to watch him breathe his last as the frog-shower passes. The actions of the characters during the shower of frogs in conjunction with an analysis of the cinematography in Claudia and Jim’s particular frog experience will elucidate that the frogs in Magnolia serve as a metaphor for art in the way that Marcel engages it in In Search of Lost Time. The way that Claudia and Jim specifically see the frogs is important because it mirrors the spectator’s own viewing of the film, further solidifying the frogs as a metaphor for art making meaning of our own lives outside of ourselves -- or art as access to essence.

I would like to begin my analysis of the frogs with a discussion of “interface”; a term coined by modern theorist and philosopher Slavoj Zizek. Zizek scholar Matthew Flisfeder explains in his essay Between Theory and Post-Theory; or, Slavoj Zizek in Film Studies and Out that Zizek has an “ambiguous relationship to film, as “ideology and subjectivity” are the primary themes of his discourse (Flisfeder 76). However, it is precisely in Zizek’s reflections on subjectivity that his philosophy is applicable to spectatorship theory and my larger thesis. Zizek sees cinematic form as analogous to “general form of ideology,” and specifically in the way that it engages Fantasy and the Symbolic –

“Fantasy is what structures our effective, everyday, practical relationship to the authority of the Symbolic order. In Zizek’s (Lacanian) terms, ideology thus exists between the level of fantasy and the level of the Symbolic. This is how we have to approach Zizek’s interpretation of cinema” (Flisfeder 79).
Already there are clear connections between desire and the cinema – the gap between Fantasy and the Symbolic is the gap in the “look” between subject and the object that he desires. There are thus two “levels” at which the text works – at the “Symbolic level”, and also at the “sublime level of fantasy”, which would come closer to identification with the apparatus as it engages the fantasy of the individual spectator, showing him what he desires on screen. However, these two levels are not distinct but rather engage each other in favor of the careful way that spectatorship is able to achieve the “objectively subjective”, or the “object in the subject, the noumenal object, which subjectivizes the objective world for the subject” (Flisfeder 79). This is coined the “fantasy object” by Zizek, and is the “invisible frame which structures the way in which the subject perceives the visible, Symbolic frame” (Flisfeder 79). Cinema provides an understanding of this invisible, fantasy frame as it interacts with the Symbolic visible frame in a familiar succession of types of shots that Zizek calls “interface”. Zizek explains how “cinema still functions in the absence of some subjectivized perspective”, where the subjectivized perspective is assigned to someone within the film. He explains that a shot will begin from the perspective of a character in the film, and this will cause the spectator to “find pleasure in it in an immediate, imaginary way, and [become] absorbed by it”, only to have his perspective shaken by an “objective” shot – or rather, a shot composed by the “Absent One”, the director or the Other in a larger sense, as the spectator himself is not directing the camera. This will cause the immersion of the spectator to be “undermined by the awareness of the frame as such”, but will be subsequently returned to a character in the film, “its fictional owner”, “allocating” “the place from which the Absent One is looking” back to one of the film’s “protagonists”. In this way, the shots pass from “imaginary to symbolic”, and the two worlds of imaginary and symbolic as portrayed in the oscillation between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ shots in cinema which are
meaningful in this interaction – they are “signified” by each other (Flisfeder 80). Flisfeder summarizes interface saying that it is the,

“relation between the objet petit a and the Master-Signifier, or the relation between the invisible and visible frames, passing through the subject. Here, we find three levels of Imaginary (fantasy), Symbolic (Master-Signifier), and Real (subject), coming together to form the necessary link of subjectivization” (Flisfeder 80).

In other words, when the “gap of the Real”, the desire of the subject, can no longer find an appropriate Symbolic stand-in (“an additional (Master-)Signifier, the “spectral element of the fantasy object” steps in (Flisfeder 81). This “gap of the Real” is the very “gap” that Marcel is left with at the end of The Captive, when Albertine as an object (in the Symbolic order) is not able to touch his desire, and the little phrase from Vinteuil’s work becomes a more successful stand-in.

This is linked to our earlier discussion of essence in relation to Lacanian theory and Proust, in that the “fantasy object”, or objet petit a, is the “original symptom of subjectivity” – it addresses, and ultimately is, the “lack” that results from the realization that one is subject and object, from the inability to know the object and the inability to know yourself as subject outside of a representational illusion. This fantasy object is thus also an “objective element within the subject – an element that is ‘objectively subjective’ – which attaches the subject to the Symbolic Order” (Flisfeder 81). It is the objectively subjective viewpoint that tries to conceive of the self as the object conceives of the subject, subverting the representational or illusory aspect of one’s subjectivity while remaining within the subjective confines. Flisfeder provides a succinct explanation of this, saying that, “Objet petit a, the sublime object, the fantasy object, is the object in the subject which is directly the subject herself. It is that part of the subject with which she cannot identify”, and further explains that through its attachment to the Symbolic Order, the Other, it allows the subject to “disavow some supplemental fantasy object which remains unknown to her” (Flisfeder 81). In another book by Flisfeder called The Symbolic, Sublime, and
Slavoj Zizek’s Theory of Film, he explains an example of interface in A Short Film About Love. There is a scene that shows two lovers talking, which the spectator observes unfold in their reflection in a window. There are many films that feature reflections and mirrors, and in terms of Lacan’s fundamental essay, it is a helpful situation for discussing interface. The spectator at once sees the ‘subjective’ perspectives of the characters in the reflection, from an objective perspective that is controlled by the “Absent One”, the Other. It shows an ‘objectively subjective’ point of view, which is supported by a “disavowed supplemental underside” of the lovers – the characters within the narrative do not have the ‘objective’ perspective of their own conversation, it has been “disavowed”, though the spectator is able to see that it does exist. This ‘objectively subjective’ perspective which is the fantasy object is able to be achieved only on the level of fantasy, but fantasy which “constitutes a Symbolic relation of the subject to the Real” – the “invisible frame” of fantasy thus mediating the “visible frame”, the Real or subjective, to the Symbolic, or the Other (Flisfeder 82). In this way, desire is not absent from art but is instead not focused on an object: “Cinema ... is the medium of our desires... It functions ... not by giving us that which we desire but by teaching us how to desire” (Flisfeder 82). The “gap” that is desire, desire for knowledge of the Other, is object-centered in life, but in art, it involves a “fantasy object” which does not involve possession but rather incorporates itself into the experience of the subject and the Other, suspending that desire to possess the Other in an effort to grasp essence in favor of merging the Symbolic with the Real, the object and the subject, through fantasy. Moving from this point, it is clear how the artistic text is able to deliver essence in the way that it plays with the standard, habitual subject/object relationship in a way that is “expansive” and not “substitutive”, “disclosing” and not “deceptive” as Sobchack proposes. A large part of the “expansive” and “disclosing” properties of cinema and art more generally arise from the very
fact that it is a newly created Symbolic rather than the habitually experience Symbolic which is
the Other, or objects. Flisfeder explains this saying that, “Spectatorship differs from subjectivity
in the degree to which we create a distance between ourselves and the cinematic text”, which has
a delicate relationship to the idea that it also “interpellates the subject … by activating desire, not
by producing subject positions” (Flisfeder 82). The subject at once distances himself from the
text while at one and the same time allowing that text to ‘activate his desire’ in the same way that
his desire is activated in the real world, thus engaging his fantasy with the Symbolic and the Real
in a way that interpellates him as subject in a holistic and expansive, rather than isolated and
limited, sense.

During the frog scene, the characters in the film establish their own “objectively
subjective” understanding of their personal conflicts and narratives, while the spectator views the
scene unfold through interface shots, thus aligning themselves with Claudia, Jim, and the other
characters as we see the scene from an objectively subjective perspective. The frogs themselves
are framed in such a way in relation to each character’s personal narrative that we can easily see
them as a figuration for the characters’ desires to reconcile the past event that haunts them with
their present selves, and thus establish their narratives with meaning that extends outside of
themselves while simultaneously including them in the larger meaning -- in short, to confirm the
essence of life which they are a part of. In Jim’s case, as seen in figures 1 and 2, the
cinematographer chooses to engage interface, where we see from Jim’s perspective but also see
Jim from an objective perspective through his reflection in the mirror. This shot establishes Jim
as both subject and object, and thus gives the spectator a sense of both the objective and the
subjective existing at the same time, giving the sense of the eternal essence which positions the
subjective and the objective into a meaning that incorporates both into a third, all-encompassing
perspective that confirms that the experience is imbued with meaning. This perspective is symbolically incarnated in the way Jim reacts to the rain of frogs, and establishes the frogs themselves as a form of figuration in the film.

As Jim is driving home from his date with Claudia, he feels defeated and confused, because the date ended so abruptly and he’s not sure what he did wrong. In the hours prior to their date he loses his gun, which is very embarrassing for a cop. Claudia explains to him that, “I’m really nervous … that you’re gonna find out stuff about me soon, and then you’re gonna hate me”, to which Jim tells her that he lost his gun earlier that night, and that he “is not a good cop”, and is scared that “once you find that out, you might not like me” (Magnolia). Before he loses his gun, he is driving in one direction on the road and sees a sketchy figure cross the road, so he does a U-turn and pursues the character, only to lose his gun moments later. In the frog scene, Jim does the same thing -- he is driving in one direction, sees Donnie climbing on the side of a building, and decides that the right thing to do as a cop is to investigate the suspicious character. He literally mirrors the same action that had caused his worst nightmare, the most embarrassing thing that could have happened, to occur. As he commits this same action that is a parallel to the past moment of him losing his gun, incarnating his fears that he is not good enough for anyone as a cop or as a lover, he is stopped in his tracks by the frog that splats on his windshield. Instead of using the usual voiceover that Jim is so prone to in the previous scenes, in which he analyzes whether or not he has done the right thing, been a good cop, or acted as a decent person, Paul Thomas Anderson makes it rain frogs, thus pulling Jim out of his isolated subjectivity and giving him a sense of experience in the way it involves not only Jim but Jim in the context of a much larger, unified, and meaningful narrative. In the parallel scene where Jim loses his gun, he is searching for it and sobs, “Why is this happening to me? Oh lord help me
understand what’s happening to me…” (Magnolia). The frogs in this scene beg the same question from Jim, but instead of feeling like his narrative lacks meaning, he sees through the frogs that the answer to “what is happening” to him is larger than himself, while assuring him that there is a meaning to these events which he is a part of. The fantasy element of this scene with the frogs for Jim specifically can be seen in the moments after the frogs begin to rain, in which Donnie falls from the ladder and smashes his teeth on the ground, and Jim goes to help him, dragging him underneath a gas station’s roof to protect him from the shower. After the whole shower is done, Donnie and Jim are sitting under the gas station overhead, and Donnie is crying, his mouth bloody, and he tells Jim, “I don’t know where to put things. I really do have love to give, I just don’t know where to put it” (Magnolia). Donnie realizes that he didn’t need oral surgery before the rain of frogs, though he needs it now because his teeth were smashed on the pavement. Thus the rain of frogs made him realize that his desire to impress Brad was misplaced, and that Brad will not fulfill his anxiety about his value as a person in relation to his childhood of stardom. The frogs cause Donnie to examine his repressed past and its effect on his present without referring to Brad as an object but instead offering an objectively subjective perspective that permits him to see the meaning of his childhood in the holistic sense, as essence. Thus the frogs operate as figuration for Donnie, and the other characters in the film -- after the conversation with Donnie is over, Jim’s gun falls from the sky and lays amongst the frog carcasses in front of them. In this way, it is clear that the frogs work as figuration for Jim, offering Jim the same objectively subjective view of his personal struggle. It’s not about being a cop for Jim but about seeing that he is doing the right thing and doing meaningful things outside of himself, but his own anxieties about his past failed marriage and failures as a cop were getting in the way of him seeing the larger essence of life. The frogs work as figuration because they
allow him to see his narrative without analyzing his narrative, and in doing so Jim escapes his isolated subjectivity and sees the essence of his experience in relation to the eternal, holistic experience he is placed in. The gun falling at the end of the frog shower is emblematic of this because he no longer needs the gun to reconcile his past with his present -- the frogs did that for him, in the shower that preceded the gun dropping.

This becomes even clearer in Claudia’s experience with the frogs. Looking at figure 3, we see Claudia framed by her shaded window, and we see the silhouettes of frogs dropping although she has not yet seen them. She looks directly at the camera before we see figure 4, in which she is staring at the TV that she usually watches her father’s show on and which reflects the frog shower and causes her to finally notice and consider the fact that frogs are falling from the sky. Once again, we have a moment of interface -- Claudia’s direct look at the camera followed by the direct look at the TV establishes that looking at the TV assumes Claudia’s perspective, and we see Claudia in the reflection of the TV, thus giving us both a subjective, point-of-view shot from Claudia’s perspective but also giving us the objective view of Claudia through the TV reflection at the same time. The objectively subjective gaze that the spectator is invited to share thus reveals the frogs falling from the sky -- a figuration that allows Claudia to see her own story from an objectively subjective perspective, offering her confirmation of her narrative’s greater significance and the essence of life, including her own, even though she cannot seem to reconcile her past with her present. The same screen that usually reminds Claudia of her past and separates her from essence in her desolate, overwhelmed, confused and painful remembrance of her father’s molesting her powerfully conveys to Claudia the frogs that will free her from this damaging perspective. This is the power of figuration in Proust’s narrative as well, which operates in the same that art delivers essence rather than the other signs one encounters in
experience. In revealing the frogs to Claudia on the screen, the frogs as essence-vessel are further developed as a metaphor for art as able to make essence known and accessible to its viewer. In the same way that the frogs were able to establish an objectively subjective lens for the characters in the film about their own narratives, art is able to do that for its readers/spectators.

During the storm, Claudia’s mom runs up to her apartment. Claudia is sobbing, “Mommy? Mom?” and Rose enters assuring her that “It’s OK, it’s going to be okay” (*Magnolia*). Given the fact that Rose has just left a conversation with Jimmy confirming that he molested Claudia, which was the initial reason that she was driving to Claudia’s apartment in the first place, when she says that “It’s going to be okay” it is clear that she is talking both about the frogs as well as the traumatic past that Claudia has not been able to confront and understand throughout the film.

Turning to theory for a moment, I will establish how the frogs are a metaphor for cinema and in the larger sense of this thesis, art. To begin, Richard Allen’s book *Projective Illusion* is particularly helpful in adjusting useful psychoanalytic film theory to reflect the productive and dynamic relationship between a film and its spectator(s). He coins and defines his term “projective illusion”, explaining that when the spectator experiences projective illusion they “perceive a fully realized though fictional world that has all the perceptual immediacy of our own” (Allen 107). This differs from the representation-based model that psychoanalysis provides because the film world “... is perceived no longer as a reproduction of that world (our world) but as an original world of its own, or our, making” (Allen 108). There is a creative element to projective illusion, and the spectator plays a part in the film itself as its enactor, and while the world is still considered “fictional”, it is “fully realized” and can “extend far beyond the boundaries of our own” (Allen 109). Allen continues saying that the photographic image affords “a more direct experience of reality” because what a photograph captures is not an “original” like
that of a sound recording but “rather, it automatically manufactures a sight of the world” (Allen 109). Therefore, even in the process of creating the film, there is a creative aspect rather than a representational aspect. The image that the apparatus provides is created with intention, and thus delivers something new, not from our reality, from the start. Projective illusion does not just rely upon the idea of the creation of a new world, but is also “based upon a denial of the fact that the image is an image of something at all” (Allen 110). The reality of the filmic world is the result of the apparatus and method of producing a film, as opposed to other art forms, and is also the result of the identification with the drama in the film. Allen explains that a spectator under projective illusion is “entertaining the thought that what [s/he] perceives is real” (Allen 119), but that instead of being an empty representation as psychoanalysis would suggest, “Thought becomes fantasy” and the “…pictorial and dramatic representations …afford a fully realized object that conforms exactly to the qualities of the object of our fantasy” (Allen 119). Vivian Sobchack, contemporary film theorist who also seeks to challenge the finality of psychoanalytic theory in relation to cinematic spectatorship, further explicates this point. She explains in her essay *Phenomenology and Film Experience* that the metaphor of the mirror, window, and picture frame for film have consistently shown up in identification theory, and agrees that the metaphors are sound in that they account for the “screen rectangle” and the idea of a “film as a static viewed object”, but states that these metaphors weaken because they “indirectly [relate] to the dynamic activity of viewing that is engaged in by both the film and the spectator, both as viewing subjects” (Sobchack 64). This is an important distinction to make, and the idea that the film itself is a “viewing subject”, positioning both the film and the spectator as both object and subject. As an image that has been “manufactured”, as Allen describes, the film itself is a viewing subject just as the spectator is. This relates to Claudia’s relationship to the screen in *Magnolia* because,
as she is watching her father host the kid quiz show, she is engaging what she sees as a projective illusion – she is watching the film and her father, and sobbing as if he were really in front of her. There is an interesting move cinematographically by Anderson that fits this idea of the image on a screen being “entertained as real” and as being a “viewing subject” in its own right. While Claudia is watching the show, the camera will move in on the screen until it enters it and suddenly the film has transitioned to a scene featuring Stanley and Jimmy Gator on the show – establishing that the image on the screen is real, is made intentionally and thus placing the spectator of Magnolia in a position to consider the same for what they are watching on their screen. Furthermore, watching her father engage with the kids on the show is clearly painful for her, but she continues to do it, which is confusing initially for the spectator. However, with Allen’s statement that the fantasy object is on the screen, combined with Zizek’s concept of interface and the realization of the fantasy object in the entertained-as-real world of cinema, Claudia’s spectatorship can be read in a new light. She is searching for the fulfillment of her own spectral fantasy object, or the very part of her from her past that she cannot reconcile as it is confronting her in the present. Claudia’s fulfillment of this desire doesn’t come up in her viewing of the show, but rather in the screen on her TV when she first sees the frogs falling from the sky and confronts these frogs as figurations for that fantasy object.

B. Proust

The important connection between Marcel’s relationship and his attempts to “regain lost time”, access essence, and communicate that to others and himself in his novel is that, rather than possessing an object (an object of “truth”, of “essence”), Marcel must engage in a process of “play and exercise”. This “exercise” is the entire novel, the process of committing his life’s events to narration. However, Marcel’s difficulty to make the jump from experience to narration
ends up becoming a part of his narration itself. He acknowledges that his experience with truth, as understood through involuntary memory or the “sensuous signs” as Deleuze describes them, lose their essence as soon as he translates those experiences to text. As he is listening to the Vinteuil phrase before deciding to leave Albertine, he realizes that music is powerful for him because it defies analysis, but has a natural anxiety about this realization:

“… there was nothing to assure me that the vagueness of such states [of involuntary memory] was a sign of their profundity rather than of our not having learned yet to analyse them, so that there need be nothing more real in them than in other states. … In any case, whispered the spirit of doubt, even if these states are more profound than others that occur in life, and defy analysis for the very reason that they bring into play too many forces which we have not yet taken into consideration, the charm of certain phrases of Vinteuil’s music makes us think of them because it too defies analysis, but this does not prove that it has the same depth; the beauty of a phrase of pure music can easily appear to be the image of or at least akin to an intellectual impression which we have received, but simply because it is unintellectual. And why then do we suppose to be specially profound those mysterious phrases which haunt certain works…?” (Proust V.520).

Gray discusses this in relation to Marcel’s narration style, explaining that he creates images in his metaphors that force such an “unintellectual”, “profound” translation of his experience which ends up confounding the actual experience that Marcel is relating in favor of forging a “playful exercise” out of his life, in an effort to find essence. Gray explains that Marcel’s relationship with involuntary memory “depends precisely upon those contingencies thrown up whimsically by time, the chance coincidence of imagination and sensation, past and present” but that in his effort to translate that to metaphor, he must “deaden the spontaneous coincidence”, the “contingencies”, that imbue those signs with their initial profundity and power (Gray 117).

Deleuze also relates this in Proust and Signs, saying that sensuous signs (synonymous with the “apparatus of involuntary memory), “are true signs that immediately give us … joy; signs that are fulfilled, affirmative, and joyous. But they are material signs… their meaning, as it is developed… remains material” (Deleuze 13). This is clear in the madeleine sequence, for example, where Marcel experiences the profundity of involuntary memory and immediately
begins sipping more tea, scarfing down the madeleine – as if it were the madeleine and the tea itself that held the essence he is looking for. The sensuous sign must introduce itself and dismiss itself in a matter of moments due to its “contingency”, and that is what gives it is power – “their development” removes the essence from the sign because the nature of the sign is its evanescence; or as Gray puts it, the ““necessary rings” of metaphor would seem to deaden the spontaneous coincidence that empowers involuntary memory” (Gray 117). Marcel’s narrative is conscious of the violence that translation of experience can do to the essence of that experience, and his relationship to art suggests that he would be particularly sensitive to this situation in creating his own oeuvre. Gray explains that Marcel avoids this damage in his novel through the use of “figuration”, or “ordinal metaphor”, instead of “ornamental metaphor”, as “an attack on the narrative’s confining esthetic and intellectual domination” (Gray 117), and in this way is able to make “essence” of his life’s narration.

“Ordinal metaphor” differs from what Gray terms “ornamental metaphor” in that it defies representation in favor of “auto-représentation”. Instead of hoping to convey a referent, and failing to do so (as with the chasing of the madeleine in an effort to experience essence once more), the ordinal metaphor “point[s] instead to its own mechanisms” (Gray 118). Already we can see a close resemblance between the metaphor that Proust employs to translate Marcel’s experience and the cinematic signifier – the “absence” of the cinematic signifier is in fact this same dynamic we see in the ordinal metaphor, in which the signifier points to real-life actors playing roles in fictional scenarios, not an actual “Real” event that has passed. In this way, the cinematic signifier, like the ordinal metaphor in Proustian narration, “privileg[es] the logic of the signifier … over the logic of the signified” (Gray 119). Instead of relying on a referent, an object that he hopes to translate essence, Marcel ditches the referent in favor of the signifier – a
metaphorical image that will operate as the object did, but not in the interest of preserving the object itself but rather in the interest of re-achieving access to essence through the dematerialization of the object which intimated essence, which does not rely on that object outside of that one contingent moment of time in which it did. In this way, Proustian ordinal metaphor sets up another object, but because they are fictional, one with an “absence”, that can stand in for the madeleine for himself and others reading his narrative, in search of essence. Gray explains that, “Proustian figuration functions even more subversively in blocking, immobilizing, and suspending temporality itself, the very trajectory of interpretation”, which is found in Marcel’s metaphorical descriptions of events that create an “image” that is entirely new rather than attempting to translate or analyze the event for his reader, or himself. An example of Marcel’s figuration can be found in Swann’s Way when he encounters the Combray church steeples in the evening on a carriage ride. He is working on becoming a writer, and as he looks around preoccupied with anxiety about his writing, Marcel says that he would “suddenly” notice a specific sensation that “would make [him] stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing, beyond what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to come and take but which despite my efforts I never managed to discover” (Proust I.251-2). This hearkens back to his experience of essence through the sensual signs, but his inability to understand that “something… found in them” (Proust I.252). At the root of his literary anxieties is this disparity between acknowledging that there is essence in his surroundings and even his inane experiences, but being unable to “perceive what lay hidden beneath” these impressions (Proust I.252). The element of distraction comes into play here and works with Gray’s discussion of figuration, because in his attention to the objects that he knows conceal and contain essence, he becomes ensnared by the object rather than that essence, and
therefore shuts out the essence which naturally eclipses the object it is sheathed in. When he becomes distracted, however, he is able to avoid the “aggressive” interpretation that his focus on the object demanded, and instead could experience, “a thought came into my mind which had not existed for me a moment earlier, framing itself in words in my head” (Proust I.255). In this way, when Marcel sees the steeples from the carriage and senses their essence, he turns from the object and instead begins to write, to create, rather than to rely on the object for access to the steeples’ essence. In the passage that Marcel writes, included within Proust’s narrative, he explains that the steeples begin to fade away as he gets farther from them in the carriage, and that as he looks at them once more, thus far still evading comprehension, they seem to be “no more now than three flowers painted upon the sky above the low line of the fields” (Proust I.256). The transformation of the steeples into flowers in Marcel’s transcription of his essence-experience forms into a complete figuration, in which the steeples become three maidens from a “legend” who are

“abandoned in a solitary place over which night had begun to fall; and as we drew away from them at a gallop, I could see them timidly seeking their way, and after some awkward, stumbling movements of their noble silhouettes, drawing close to one another, gliding behind one another, forming now against the still rosy sky no more than a single dusky shape, charming and resigned, and so vanishing in the night” (Proust I.256). Marcel’s anxieties that he will not become a good writer and his anxiety that he will not be able to grasp the essence of his daily experiences, which he can sense is all around him but cannot articulate or grasp, are suspended in the transformation of his experience of essence through the steeples into the narrative of the three maidens fading away in the night. Marcel goes on to say that he didn’t think again of the piece of writing about the steeples, but says that after he had written it, “I was so filled with happiness, I felt that it had so entirely relieved my mind of its obsession with the steeples and the mystery which lay behind them, that… I began to sing at the top of my voice” (Proust I.257). This joy is the sensation that follows a moment of essence, as
can be seen in Marcel’s joy when he consumes the madeleine and has a fleeting, unintelligible moment of essence through the sensuous sign. However, this time, he was able to capture the essence in an act of creation rather than sense essence briefly and despair as it quickly faded from experience. This was made possible because of figuration -- because Marcel created something new from his experience with the steeples. Rather than looking at the steeples and attempting to analyze them and determine the essence that they intimated, Marcel took the material object which contained essence and dematerialized it, which allowed him to escape the insufficiency of the object and the compensatory action of the subject in favor of a third world in which essence thrives. In this way, Gray explains that Marcel’s ordinal metaphors offer “a displacement or substitution of experience in favor of image…. rather than locking in experience, [this displacement] effectively locks out the aggressions of interpretation” (Gray 119-20). By creating a new, unrelated image-metaphor for what Marcel hopes to express, he is able to avoid the violence of analysis that befalls translation of experience. There is a serious problem with Gray’s analysis of figuration, however, and this can be seen in Marcel’s experience with the steeples. Gray is strictly postmodern, as the title of her book suggests, and because of this she “privileges” the signifier, but not in the same way that Proust does. Gray’s signifier is based on lack in the Lacanian sense, suggesting that there is not a referent that the signifier in reality but that the world is entirely representational and symbolic. This is clearly not the way that Proust’s narrative operates, which can be seen from Marcel’s experience as he walks amongst commonplace natural phenomenon and feels an overwhelming sense of essence just waiting to be unlocked. The entire premise of Marcel’s problem, as laid out by Deleuze and this thesis, eliminates the possibility of an entirely symbolic reality. Peter Hallward explains this well in his essay “You Can’t Have It Both Ways: Deleuze or Lacan”, in which he explains that
“Deleuze rejects the category of the [Lacanian] subject for the same reason that Lacan embraces it. He rejects it as a dimension of negation and lack, on account of its radical disorientation, its exclusion from the domain of creation, being, or nature” (Hallward 41). Hallward is helpful in an adjustment of Gray’s version of Proustian figuration in this essay because he reveals that her lack-based model of a purely symbolic reality does not coincide with “Deleuze’s ontology” as laid out in *Proust and Signs*, in which Deleuze “equates being with creativity, or with inventive differentiation – being is creating, or to be is to differ” (Hallward 35). The inventive differentiation Hallward mentions is the act of creation found in figuration, found when Marcel engages the steeples as the three mythical maidens. For Deleuze, representation only gets in the way of reality, removing the subject’s ability to engage in “any immediately expansive or productive conception of desire, being, or reality” (Hallward 44). The creation of the three maidens in the face of the essence felt from the steeples is not purely symbolic or representational precisely because it relies upon the steeples to be conceived, and the inventive differentiation comes into play when Marcel realizes the essence is not bound to the steeples but that the steeples prompt him to access their essence through the dematerialization of the steeples in the creation of something different but which shares essence with the steeples. In this way, essence is even better defined -- the act of creation works within human experience to access the eternal of human experience, creating a world in which one can become “inhuman or extra-human… to move beyond the human condition” (Hallward 38). Therefore it is not reality that is lacking, or keeping essence from reaching Marcel, but rather the act of perception within the human condition. As soon as creation is involved, Hallward explains that ““the whole of our perceived world collapses in the interest of something else” (Deleuze 1969, 310), namely Reality” (Hallward 43). This adjustment of Gray’s version of figuration is accentuated in her
discussion of Marcel’s magic lantern, which I will explicate now before transitioning to Magnolia’s examples of figuration, carrying with us our new understanding of figuration.

The connection between Proustian “figuration” and the images in Magnolia that function in a similar way is furthered by Gray’s analysis of young Marcel’s lantern, seen in the first volume of his epic, paired with discussion of the apparatus employed in cinema. Marcel receives a “magic lantern” from “someone”, unspecified, who was hoping to help him with his insomnia while he stayed for the summer with his family at his grandparents’ house in Combray (Proust I.11). The lantern projects shadow-images on the walls of Marcel’s room as he is falling asleep in the dark, and tell a classic story of Golo and Genevieve. As Marcel is falling asleep and observing these shadows, he explains the way that the images would merge with the room itself:

“The body of Golo himself, being of the same supernatural substance as his steed’s, overcame every material obstacle – everything that seemed to bar his way – by taking it as an ossature and absorbing it into himself” (Proust I.11). Golo and the room are indistinguishable, though neither loses its distinctive identity in the process. The careful dynamic between the images and the physical room are further explained by Marcel who says that his doorknob, which was so familiar to him as his own, loses the position of being in his possession and instead is both a doorknob and an “astral body for Golo” as the image the magic lantern projects dances across his door (Proust I.11). Gray’s observation regarding the magic lantern in Marcel’s room is directly related to his continual use of ordinal metaphors and their relationship to Marcel’s actual experience, though she makes a few claims that do not align with his actual use of ordinal metaphor, as they seek to completely eliminate the presence of a “doorknob”, or Marcel’s actual experience in the analog, at all. Gray explains the images saying, “The image thus spreads itself out across the world, refusing to accommodate its contours; instead, the image stands out against
the roughness of depth, opacity, and experience” (Gray 121). However, it’s clear in Marcel’s
description that the room is still present as the images dance over its walls; there is not a
“refus[al] to accommodate to its contours” as much as there is an “absorption” of the room into
the image, and vice versa. Even Marcel’s use of the word “ossature”, which is a French word that
Moncrieff did not translate, means “skeletal structure” – therefore, when Marcel describes the
room as an ossature for the images from his magic lantern, he is not disregarding his room but
acknowledging the walls as the framework in which the images are allowed to play, to dance.
Closer analysis of Marcel’s relationship to his room will illuminate his relationship to these
images from his magic lantern, and offer an adjustment to Gray’s analysis of Proustian figuration
that will permit a larger understanding of the spectator’s relationship to text, filmic or not, and
that text’s relationship to the world which serves as its ossature.

To begin, I want to take a closer look at what the room signifies in the iconic first few
pages of Marcel’s narrative. Marcel describes his insomnia that plagued him throughout
childhood, and specifically the unsettling experience of waking up in an unfamiliar room, which
he endured when he would vacation at Combray. He explains that he would wake and would first
familiarize himself with his own body, which had become unfamiliar during his sleep, and then
he would understand the room in relation to his own body. He describes it as such saying,

“My body, still too heavy with sleep to move, would endeavor to construe from the
pattern of its tiredness the position of its various limbs, in order to deduce therefrom the
direction of the wall, the location of the furniture, to piece together and give a name to
the house in which it lay” (Proust I.5).

His description of waking in this way offers up the room as a metaphor for the world outside of
the subject’s own consciousness – or, in Lacanian terms, the Other. Marcel is waking from what
he himself describes the “world of dreams”, which he elaborates upon as something immanent
but profound: “When a man is asleep, he has in a circle around him the chain of the hours, the
sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly bodies” (Proust I.3-4). Upon waking, he is torn from this world of pre-conscious coherence and must establish himself first, and then the Other, or the room that is external to him, the room in which he finds himself (newly acquainted) to exist within. Because he understands his room only in relation to his body, he feels that he has a close-minded view of what things that are not him (the Other, collectively), are like, and what they are capable of: “Perhaps the immobility of the things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else, by the immobility of our conception of them” (Proust I.5). Though he is able to acknowledge that the other objects around him may have a consciousness all of their own, may exist as a subject in their own right, Marcel is painfully aware of his limited perspective, and longs to get out of it, though he cannot. The room is necessarily understood through the lens of Marcel, who explains that “my body would recall from each room in succession the style of bed, the position of the doors, the angle at which the daylight came in at the windows… what I had in my mind when I went to sleep and found there when I awoke” (Proust I.5). In the same way that the Lacanian Other is constituted through the self, and is understood to be what the self is not, so is Marcel’s room understood through the self, and the room serves nicely as a metaphor for the Other. Before turning back to the images from his magic lantern, it’s important to note that Marcel strives to become one with his room in his anxious, restless state. He expresses this blatantly before he brings up his magic lantern at all, explaining that in the throes of his insomnia, “my mind, striving for hours on end to break away from its moorings, to stretch upwards so as to take on the exact shape of the room and to reach to the topmost height of its gigantic funnel” (Proust I.8). In this sense, then, Marcel is kept up at night with thoughts of becoming one with the other, of being conscious of himself in his room but also joining the room to escape his own restless mind and its “moorings”. The images on his
wall from his magic lantern are able to do what he wanted for himself, as they merge with the walls as they are projected on them. Both the desire to merge with the room as Other and the successful merging of the images with the Other (room) are employed when Marcel cannot achieve the peace that is available through sleep, or the pre-conscious perspective on time and the world that Marcel describes. Thus the images are able to do what Marcel cannot, and through the images Marcel forgets his sleeplessness and is lost in the world of Golo, as it is presented on his wall, until he is interrupted by the dinner bell and returns to reality (Proust I.9-11). The key here is that the images merge with the wall in order to offer an experience that allows Marcel to escape his subjectivity and eventually return to sleep – or the essence. The metaphor then stands that the image merges with the Other, and as Marcel watches, he is lulled into the experience of essence. Gray has a thesis that differs in a subtle but very significant respect.

Where Gray does not accurately discuss Marcel’s experience with the projected shadow images and his desire that is reflected in them lies in her claim that the world is completely replaced by these images, rather than working in conjunction with them to produce the effect of essence that they have on Marcel. For example, she describes Marcel’s metaphors and figurations as “the projections of the imagination somehow hold off the world, distancing rather than absorbing it, turning against experience rather than incorporating it” (Gray 121). This doesn’t hold up in Marcel’s experience with the images on his wall or the examples of the metaphors he chooses to employ. The terms “absorption” and “incorporation” are necessary for the work that Marcel accomplishes through his metaphors, for the very trigger that set them off is the real-life, real-world experience. The term “ossature” that Marcel uses is especially important in understanding this diversion from Gray, for while the framework of something may not be its most noticeable feature, it is still crucial for the overall work to stand. Later on, Gray explains
again that “figuration seems here to work to hide, distance, and protect the world it claims to represent” (Gray 123), and in this sense her argument does coincide with the text. The images serve to “mask” the walls that Marcel finds foreign and scary, though Marcel is conscious the whole time that he is in the same room that was inducing his anxiety only moments ago. Gray continues in an unsurprising direction, considering her postmodern lens, and explains that these images that Marcel utilizes in his ordinal metaphors become simulacrum – a representation of the real that ultimately replaces the real: “The world no longer gives rise to an image that reflects it, returning the energy to the world itself; rather, the image, as simulacrum, now precedes the world, rendering the world an archaic artifact, a useless, obsolete reference” (Gray 134). This is a difficult claim to stomach in terms of Proust and in relation to other forms of figuration because the world cannot become an “obsolete reference” replaced with “simulacrum” when the world is, first of all, the entire reason that the figurations exist in the first place, and second of all, the sphere in which these figurations are both formed and received. To put this in terms of the magic lantern metaphor, the images on the walls would not be necessary if Marcel didn’t have real anxiety about the real room in which he finds himself in, and secondly, the magic lantern would not have a place to project its images without the walls of the room, or a projection at all without the real mechanism of the lantern itself. In this way, real life remains the framework or ossature, and is not ditched as an “obsolete reference” in favor of simulacrum. There are some valuable points left in Gray’s analysis, but it is important to understand that her argument fails at this claim that the world is completely absent once images as figurations are present.

Gray is right in her assessment that the images that Marcel utilizes in forging his narration “arrest time” and thus create “such glossy, hallucinatory images” which “act as protective shields against the narrator’s aggressive, “sterilizing” interpretive efforts” (Gray 133-
Rather than trying and failing to analyze his life’s events, which is to say trying and failing to fall asleep in the foreign room, the images allow for the mind to stop its “mooring” and offer themselves up “as a protective screen against interpretation’s aggression” (Gray 123). The “objective disappointment” as well as the “subjective compensation” that Deleuze explains impede essence are functions of the “aggressive interpretation” that Marcel feels he must apply to his real life experiences. However, in art, this is suspended, and the image is conjured to disrupt interpretation and assimilation into narrative -- it protects Marcel from that (from disappointment, disillusionment). Gray describes Marcel’s figuration as a “rival narrative” that is set up against his own narrative so that he can access the essence in the experience without its immediate dissolution as soon as he attempts to understand the experience itself in reality. Gray has the idea that the image will replace reality, when in actuality, as seen in the magic lantern, with the walls as an ossature for the image, it rather combines reality with the new image in order to achieve a new world that is “more real than life itself” (Gray 134). Here Richard Allen is useful again, because he makes a similar observation about the spectator’s relationship to the filmic world. Allen explains that the,

“lifelikeness of projective illusion is as complete as the lifelikeness of dream. This lifelikeness is not that of real life. It is ... a more than real world. It is a fully realized yet fictional universe that we experience with the quality of affect that characterizes our experience of dream” (Allen 125).

This “more than real world” is allowed in cinema and other texts, which operate the same as figurations, as seen in the frogs in *Magnolia*. The filmic text communicates its basis in reality, with the object-subject dynamic as its framework and using the very materials that make up the viewer’s own lived experience, while combining that with something new – fantasy, the image, the fiction – in order to subvert the “lack” that habitually keeps Marcel from accessing essence. The frogs in the film reflect this because they are based on scientific phenomenon. In the same
way that the stories comprise of strange events that frames *Magnolia* in the beginning narration are all allegedly from newspapers and clippings, the story of the frogs is based in a natural phenomenon that Anderson read about in the works of Charles Fort. The things the spectator witnesses in film, figurations, or fictions are real, but when fit into a narrative, become more than real. Gray explains at one point in her essay that, “The image as a disrupting mechanism forcing open the closure of desire’s appropriations, arresting and overturning time” (Gray 129), which already offers up the reality of the subject-object dynamic in the image without acquiescing to its negation, as Marcel must do in his real experience. Sobchack can be applied to this in our conclusion of this section and our transition to the autobiographical information that clarifies figuration for the spectator in relation to the authors themselves. She explains that film as an experience has a “correlational structure”, in which perception and expression mediated through the filmic narrative are both at once the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness – the expression of the film as a viewing subject being the act of consciousness for the filmmakers and the object of consciousness for the viewer, while simultaneously offering a venue, like the figurations of Proust, for the viewer to express their consciousness and the film to be the object of that consciousness. She clarifies this complicated structure saying that,

“Relative to cinema, the existential and embodied act of viewing becomes the paradigm of this exchange of perception and expression. That is, the act of viewing provides both necessary and sufficient conditions for the commutation of perception to expression and vice-versa. It also communicatively links filmmaker, film, and spectator by means of their respective, separate, and yet homeomorphic existential performance of a shared (and possibly universal) competence: the capacity to localize and unify (or “center”) the invisible, intrasubjective commutation of perception and expression and make it visible and intersubjectively available to others” (Sobchack 68).

In her explanation of the “commutative” film experience, Sobchack offers a model that posits the viewer as expressive and creative while also being passive and interacting with a creation. She also offers an understanding of interface, as presented by Zizek and Flisfeder, in different terms.
Her discussion of the link that is made between “filmmaker, film, and spectator” in terms of the “universal competence” of the “commutation of perception and expression” that founds consciousness is the very “objectively subjective” that cinema offers us in the interface shots. This sense of “a shared” and “universal” meaning in that commutation of consciousness is strongly related to the essence that Deleuze discusses and that Marcel seeks, perhaps coming as close to a definition as possible, but still evading the definition completely (see her parenthetical “and possibly…”). This is also the universal sense that is established through the frog scene and in the “Wise Up” sequence, establishing the frogs as a metaphor for figuration as Marcel utilizes it. Sobchack describes spectatorship saying that, “Filmmaker, film, and spectator all concretely use the agency of visual, aural, and kinetic experience to express experience -- not only to and for themselves, but also to and for others,” ultimately describing the experience of the filmmaker, film, and spectator as “intrasubjective and intersubjective performance” (Sobchack 68). This is seen in both the autobiographical relationship between Anderson and his text and Proust to his own text, and it is clear that the authors are performing this figuration that their texts reference in their own creation of the film, which in turn is performing as figuration for the spectators/readers that engage with it. Considering the idea of an “ossature” of reality in Proust’s experience with the magic lantern, we can see an analogous idea in Magnolia in the presentation of the frogs as figuration. As the frogs are falling, Stanley is studying in the library following an emotional breakdown on camera during the filming of the quiz show. He sees the frogs falling around him, their shadows on the wall behind him as if the images of the frogs are being projected onto him and the wall. He is smiling, and says, “This is something that happens”, referencing an open book on his desk that we had seen earlier in the film which tells about the strange tales of farmers waking up to a storm of frogs (Magnolia). Not only does this scene play
nicely with the projections of the magic lantern on the walls of Marcel’s bedroom, but it also
cleanly conveys in Magnolia, as has been done in Proust’s novel, that the “more than real” world
of art that delivers essence to its reader in the creative act of spectatorship uses reality as its
framework. This communicates that the essence we capture in art is also found in reality, but the
subject requires the creative act of figuration in art to realize this.

IV. Time Regained, or “So Now Then”

As for Frank Mackey, he has finally met up with his estranged father during the frog
scene. It’s a very powerful scene of the movie, both preceding the shower of frogs and following
it, as we watch from Phil’s perspective and from the shifting perspectives of Frank and Earl
while Frank calls his dad a “cocksucker” and screams how much he hates him, only to finally
stare into his eyes, shaking violently and fighting tears, begging Earl, “Why didn’t you call?” and
repeating, “Don’t go, please don’t go, you fucking asshole” (Magnolia). Right before Earl dies,
we see an objective shot of Frank and Earl, and as we hear the sound of the frogs falling outside,
hitting the roof and causing car alarms to go off, we are given a shot that includes both Frank and
Earl’s faces as Earl breathes his last breath and Frank is holding his hand, staring into his eyes.
Immediately after we see Frank’s face in a reaction shot, with the indescribable expression of
someone who has just watched their father pass away, still hearing the pounding of frogs hitting
things outside, the screen goes black. A title card comes up that reads simple, “So Now Then”,
and the narrator from the beginning of the film returns to conclude the film. After reminding the
viewer of the three strange tales he told at the beginning of the story, the narrator reminds us that,

“There are stories of coincidence and chance and intersections and strange things told and
which is what and who only knows, and we generally say, ‘Well, if that was in a movie, I
wouldn’t believe it.’ … And it is in the humble opinion of this narrator that these strange
things happen all the time. And so it goes, and so it goes, and the book says, ‘We may be
through with the past, but the past ain’t through with us.’” (Magnolia).
This is important in terms of the role that the frogs play for both the characters and spectators as figurations, because of specific autobiographical information about Paul Thomas Anderson in relation to his own explanation of what the frogs mean to him.

In the case of figuration, as seen in the transcription of his first encounter with the steeples on Guermantes Way, Proust once again creates a situation that subverts his own subjectivity as well as the perspective of Albertine as an object. He accomplishes it this time through the creation of a whole new narrative, which is different from what he is experiencing in reality but preserves the essence of his experience in the creative act and product. Within the narrative, there are cases of Marcel exercising figuration, but it is clear at the end of the seven volumes as Marcel is on his death bed that the entire epic is a figuration for Proust’s life in a real sense. This is also mirrored in the case of figuration that Magnolia offers its viewers, which is found in the climax of the similarly epic 3-hour film in which frogs are falling from the sky. The frogs worked as figuration for the characters in the film as their personal conflicts each come to their tensest point, and as figuration for Paul Thomas Anderson as a writer, who admits in his 2014 interview with Marc Maron that Magnolia is a movie about his dad, who had died right before Paul Thomas Anderson took the project seriously and completed the script. Maron prompts PTA with the question, “What is [Magnolia] about?”, and PTA responds without hesitation:

“My dad. For sure. I just lost my dad, and I wrote a movie, it was like that. I remember talking to an oncologist on the phone who was essentially telling me that there was no way my dad was gonna make it, and the first thing that popped into my mind was, you know, you’re telling me that frogs are falling from the sky. And I remember that just kind of popping into my mind. Cause Michael Penn had introduced me to the idea, so that was rattling around in my mind already” (PTA, WTF with Marc Maron, Ep. 565). He goes on to explain that, despite the esoteric, hidden 82’s referenced throughout the film, the root of the frog scene was “non-biblical”, though it found “precedent” both in the biblical story
of the plagues and in “folktales” or “clippings of stories where bizarre occurrences would happen and a farmer would wake up and there’s a field of frogs”. In an earlier interview with Chuck Stevens in 1999, PTA is less open about his father’s death, but does express that it was related to recent struggles and explains that, for the characters in the film, the frogs were a way of communicating that, “You get to a point in your life, and shit is happening, and everything’s out of your control, and suddenly, a rain of frogs just makes sense” (PTA Web). The characters were also going through conflicts that were analogous to the way that PTA speaks about the death of his father, in that they were overwhelming yet meaningful and hard to explain or understand. Just as the magic lantern’s images use the reality of Marcel’s room as the framework for their play and distribution, so do the instances of figuration in the case of the steeples, as they are grounded in “legend”. In the same way, the frogs falling from the sky in Anderson’s narrative are grounded in mythic tales of the same phenomenon really happening, though it seems to be too fantastic to be true. I want to challenge the way that figuration as presented by Gray is presented in her argument with an analysis of the frog scene in *Magnolia*. I will discuss the film in terms of the viewer as well as in terms of the characters within the film, because the way that the characters engage the frog scene can be read as a metaphor for the way that readers engage with a creative text. I will finally turn back to Proust and Anderson’s own autobiographical connection to their texts to display the way that essence is available in creative acts and products for all parties – within the film for the characters, outside the film for its readers, and in the film as text from the perspective of its creation by the authors.

In the seventh volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, Marcel finally feels able to write, the anxieties that surrounded his literary projects throughout the earlier sections of the book finally subsiding. He is nearing death, and is determined to write with the encouragement of Françoise,
a family servant who has been around for much of Marcel’s life. As he is feeling able to write, he reflects,

“How much more worth living did it appear to me now, now that I seemed to see that this life that we live in half-darkness can be illuminated, this life that at every moment we distort can be restored to its true pristine shape, that a life, in short, can be realized within the confines of a book!” (Proust VII.507)

In the preface to Swann’s Way, there is an introduction by Richard Howard, who writes his introduction as if it is a letter to Proust describing to him his new readers. Towards the end of the introduction, Howard says, “Finally, what your new readers will want to know is Who’s saying such a thing? Who tells it like this? Who is the discoursing person?”, and turns to the reader, reminding them that throughout his intro he has only used the name Proust, rather than Marcel Proust. He explains that Marcel Proust, the author, does not “speak in the Search at all. You’ll find that the discoursing person who is in fact the Narrator of the Search is hardly ever named, and if indeed he seems to be called Marcel once or twice, it’s extremely difficult to assign him the attributes of autobiography” (Howard xiii). Thus it is not as if Proust is writing down his life, transcribing his experience, when he writes In Search of Lost Time, but instead that the Narrator is “the self who writes”, and that as we go throughout the work we can see that this “self who writes” is “displaced”, and has an “uncertain” relationship to the actions of the Narrator we come to find out (Howard xiii). In this way, when we are confronted with Marcel’s impulse to finally start writing at the end of the novel, it’s clear that the book has been performative, showing figuration in its pages from Marcel’s point of view but also performing that figuration in its production by Marcel Proust, the man and author. He goes on to explain why he must “create” his book, because in doing so he will create “a new world” in which he will be able to understand his life in its totality, and be able to grasp its essence, which he explains saying that his work will divulge the “mysteries whose explanation is to be found probably only in worlds other than our
own and the presentiment of which is the thing that moves us most deeply in life and in art” (Proust VII.508). Marcel has realized throughout his lived experience that art and the act of creation is the only way that he will be able to grasp essence and have peace with his narrative and its status as meaningful. He needs the “new world” like Allen’s “more than real” world of cinema, in order to be able to imbue his own narrative with meaning. Turning this back to Proust the man, we see that his work is not an autobiographical transcription of his life, which would get in the way of essence, but is instead “a new world” informed by his life experience but necessarily different so that he can make sense of his own daily lived experience, past and present. This can be seen in Paul Thomas Anderson’s comment to Marc Maron in relation to Magnolia. He didn’t make a film about his dad’s death in the sense that he transcribed his life onto the screen, but instead created the new world of the characters of Magnolia, which was informed by his experiences, such as the death of his father. In the introduction to the shooting script, Anderson is not as self-aware as he is looking back on Magnolia in his 2014 interview, but he is aware that this movie is close to him. He writes that “for better or for worse, consider this screenplay completely written from the gut” (Magnolia Shooting Script, vii). He goes on to explain that he is from the San Fernando valley, where the action takes place, and that he wrote in an “honest and unashamed” way (MSS ix). It’s clear that he loves his movie, but it’s also clear that it’s wildly personal to him, and the way that Marcel describes his project he is about to embark on resonates with PTA’s idea of “writing from the gut”. Marcel puts it in his usually philosophic and poetic way, expressing that “a necessary condition” of his book

“...was a profound study of impressions which had first to be recreated through memory. ... The happiness which I was feeling was the product not of a purely subjective tension of the nerves which isolated me from the past, but on the contrary of an enlargement of my mind, within which the past was re-forming and actualizing itself, giving me --- but alas! Only momentarily – something whose value was eternal” (Proust VII.509-13).
He is referencing the expansive, clarifying power that allows him to experience essence, the “eternal” sense of the self in relation to the whole, and imbuing his narrative with meaning and the indescribable “happiness” of essence. This relates to PTA’s idea of the gut because it expresses that Anderson and Marcel have the same attitude towards their arts -- that the non-negotiable aspect of art (the “necessary condition”) is that it be a new world that allows the reader and the writer, both as creative positions, to access essence. In his book *Blossoms and Blood*, Jason Sperb analyzes the narrator’s claim in *Magnolia* that all of the strange events it tells “cannot be just a matter of chance”, asking that if it isn’t chance, “what is it?” (Sperb 135). He makes the claim that “The film doesn’t really know”, which I don’t agree with, because it is very clear that the film *performs* the meaning behind life’s strange events and life’s commonplace events in its depiction of the characters searching for truth and the director’s own creation-based process of searching for the “what” that Sperb asks for. Earlier in his essay, Sperb writes that the film is a “three-hour search for ‘that moment of truth’”, explaining that,

> “Altman held the camera on actors and improvised dialogue because that’s how he felt moments in life often were - fleeting, incomplete, perhaps even ultimately insignificant. Anderson, though, let the camera run on his actors and his lines of dialogue only because he felt that, somewhere in there, a deeper truth about life would emerge. He couldn’t bear to cut a second of any of it for fear of compromising the development of that elusive truth. And he even went so far as to frame the film with larger references to the Bible, accounts of weird scientific phenomena, and even a voice-over about the quirkiness of random fate -- all to make sure that, at the end of the day, his sprawling mosaic of characters in Southern California would *mean* something” (Sperb 129-30, 132).

This effort on Anderson’s part to make his narrative “mean something” to his viewers is mirrored in the characters’ lives, who are hoping that their past can be reconciled with their present to *mean something*, and to Anderson, who was “writing from his gut” and working to make his own life at the time that he was writing the script “mean something”. Thus, when Sperb says that the film doesn’t know, citing the narrator’s final comment that “for what I would like to say, I can’t” (*Magnolia*), he seems to have forgotten that the films’ performance is the answer to
the “what” behind the meaning of these events, offering a sense of essence to the viewer, displaying essence in the characters’ experiences with the frogs, and operating as a grand figuration for Anderson himself. The essence that is able to be demonstrated in art is only able to do so because it pulls from real life, and in this way there is an impression or sense of the overarching eternal and holistic significance of a personal narrative in the context of the larger mosaic of lived experience. The final moment of the film is exemplary of the essence in life that art reveals to us, and calls the viewer to examine their own experience with the film, performing the thesis that meaning is found in creative figuration. Jim comes into Claudia’s room, telling her that he cares about her and that they should give a relationship a chance. Claudia turns from Jim and looks directly at the camera, smiling the first genuine, joyful smile in the whole film (see figure 5). The only other moment when Claudia -- or anyone -- looks at the camera is the shot right before we see the frog rain in her TV’s reflection, and the difference between these two self-reflexive gazes, with the change evoked by the frogs, the metaphor for figuration and art’s ability to illuminate the essence in our lives. Her joyful smile to the viewers is important because it confirms her own confidence that her narrative is meaningful and her past can be reconciled with her present in the essence the frogs revealed to her. It is also important because it causes the viewers to consider their own position in relation to Claudia’s resolution -- we have been aligned with Claudia’s narrative this whole time, but we are also a part of it when she looks at us in this final moment. In this sense, the film assures us that the meaning in the characters’ lives and the joyful experience of essence that Claudia has is present in our own relationship to the film and in our real lives.

In ultimate conclusion of this project, I want to discuss the implications of essence revealed through art for human relationships. Throughout the film, there are various subtle
allusions to the number 82 -- on the plane that scoops up the scuba diver, on the roof that Sydney Barringer jumps from, on a sign in the bar that Donnie frequents, in weather forecasts, on screens, in countless moments throughout the film. In the scene with Jim in which we see the first frog fall from the sky, there is a billboard that he passes that blatantly, but so quickly it’s easily missed, advertises “Exodus 8:2”. The bible verse reads, “If you refuse to let them go, I will send a plague of frogs on your whole country” (Web) from the story of Moses freeing the Israelites from Egyptian rule through God’s power and divine plagues. Sperb mentions the allusions to the 82, saying that the frogs are a “clever inside gag, but what do they really mean?”, parenthetically pointing out the obvious connection between the Bible story and Anderson’s film that, “the ‘children’ in the film demand to be freed” (Sperb 134). The frogs are much more than an allusion, however, as this thesis has presented, and the story behind their integration into the film performs this point. Sperb explains that,

“Anderson reportedly didn’t know about the biblical frogs until he was informed by actor Henry Gibson of it. In the original script, the use of frogs was drawn from the work of Charles Fort. The 82s were tacked on during production to match the end, but without any clear sense of how they fit with the competing vignettes of random chance initially put forth” (Sperb 134).

In my opinion, the 82s are an excellent addition to the film’s larger themes and the way that the film performs these themes in its production. If art is able to illuminate the essence that surrounds daily-lived experience, and essence is something holistic and in a certain sense universal, positing the individual as a part of the whole, then true human connection is made possible through art as well. The 82s are a symbol for the frogs, which are Anderson’s figuration for his own life and the figurations for the characters in their own struggles. While the details of the frogs for each person in the film and each person viewing the film is the same, the experience of essence and the need to reconcile the past with the present and garner meaning of the whole of an individual life’s narrative is the same, and the feelings that are recomposed through art are the
same. In this sense, the fact that the frogs are a reference to Charles Fort for PTA and a reference to Exodus for Gibson is a testament to the connection made possible through essence in art.

Marcel concludes his narrative with a similar idea. As he is thinking about his own project to begin writing, he says,

“For it seemed to me that they would not be my readers but the readers of their own selves, my book being merely a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combray used to offer his customers – it would be my book, but with its help I would furnish them with the means of reading what lay inside themselves” (Proust VII.508). This is essentially what happens with the frogs falling from the sky and the floating signifier of the 82. Through the work of art, readers are able to read “their own selves”, and the work of art simply offers them the new world in which they can do that, ultimately positing the “self” that they read as greater than their own isolated subjectivity in the experience of essence. The connection between readers despite the details of their own lives involved in their readings of art is also communicated in Proust, who expresses “I should ask them whether the words that they read within themselves are the same as those which I have written” (Proust VII.508). This is a beautiful observation that is incarnated in the 82s, in my opinion, and speaks to the connection between people as made possible in essence and thus in art. The details of a reading might be different, but the essence that readings of art delivers is the same for everyone, and allows us to understand and connect with each other. Marcel observes that,

“The cruel law of art is that people die and we ourselves die after exhausting every form of suffering, so that over our heads may grow not the grass of oblivion but of eternal life, the vigorous and luxuriant grown of a true work of art, and so that thither, gaily and without a thought for those who are sleeping beneath them, future generations may come to enjoy their déjeuner sur l’herbe” (Proust VII.516).

Fittingly, this a figuration of Marcel’s feelings towards art on his death bed, and connects to Anderson’s observation presented in the introduction that “Movies can be a big influence on how we deal with death and relationships” while still being so seemingly different from our lived daily experience. It is through art and the creative act not only of producing art but of reading it
that we are able to achieve “eternal life” without any transcendence. We are able to make meaning of our own lives and achieve eternal essence without denying our real experience but in a way that illuminates the beauty and significance *within* our daily, lived experience. To make it more beautiful, this is an experience that is genuinely shared with others, defying the limitations of time and subjectivity to reveal the world and its holistic meaning. The image of “future generations” enjoying a lunch on the grass of eternal life, a figuration for the artistic work, communicates the same joy that we see in Claudia’s final gaze at the camera -- the promise of greater meaning, the experience of essence.

![Figure 5](image-url)
Works Cited


