

## **Lantana, Tandem Narrative and the Detective story element in Parallel Narrative**

I thought parallel narrative junkies might be interested in the following extract of this letter of mine to a US colleague on *Lantana* as an example of tandem narrative, and on the frequency of the detective story as a structure in parallel narrative generally (probably because it provides a solid spine). For a quick overview of parallel narrative see my article [What Parallel Narrative is and why writers need to master it](#) (this article first appeared as *Screenwriters: An Endangered Species*) in Urban Cinefile <http://www.urbancinefile.com.au>)

Detailed analyses of tandem narrative and parallel narrative generally are available in my book [Screenwriting Updated: New and Conventional Ways of Writing for the Screen](#)

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### *Lantana* and Tandem Narrative

Yes, I think *Lantana* is a great example of tandem narrative - a number of interconnected stories on the same theme. I'm planning to use it in the next edition of the book alongside *Traffic*. Interesting that you thought it took a while to get going, and only did so properly when the murder investigation started. It didn't bother me at all, but I see what you mean and I've heard others say exactly the same thing.

I think you're pinpointing the need in these tandem narratives for what I call a 'macro' - namely, a central plot that links all the stories and symbolises the theme, thereby providing energy and preventing the film from dropping into a series of simultaneous short films.

The more I think about it, the more I feel that the macro is an essential component in tandem narrative, both structurally and in terms of what the film is trying to say. In *Lantana's* case, where the theme of all the stories is loyalty and honesty in sexual relationships, the macro of a murder/attempted rape mystery is great because a sex-related murder is the ultimate betrayal of a loving sexual relationship. So, it sums up the film artistically.

But in cynical technical terms, a murder investigation is terrifically useful because a whodunnit is very high jeopardy, so helps with pace. And just as important, a police investigation on such an emotive issue provides a credible, natural and very economical way to permit characters to be asked questions which then permit them a) to be seen to lie b) to reveal their back story quickly and unobtrusively c) to describe deep emotions, d) to tell secrets.

I say that because so many scripts that want to be deep and meaningful end up as talking heads.

Your problem with the late appearance of the macro in *Lantana* is interesting. It suggests that the macro needs to be up and running very early - although to be fair *Lantana* did open on the woman's corpse, cleverly

not quite revealing which woman it was. In the end, when and how you get the macro going is probably a subjective issue, but I think one could certainly say that delaying the onset of the macro is dangerous and the issue should be taken very seriously. The question (your question) really is, how long can you keep the audience asking 'where is all this going?' before their patience is exhausted.

It's the absence of a macro that causes closure and connection problems in films like, say, *Magnolia* - where you think the theme is going to be coincidence and there's no coincidence at all, indeed, the separate stories rarely intersect at all. I also think *Short Cuts* suffers from the lack of a macro - whereas *Nashville* works much better because it has the built-in macro of the election campaign/assassination symbolising and summing up the film's study of American social and political mores. Of course, pace and connection is also helped by all the characters being linked via the Country and Western Festival. And of course, both *Nashville* and *Lantana* create strong cross-connections by making characters literally walk in and out of each others' stories.

One really interesting thing that comes out of all of this is the role of the detective story element in parallel narrative, particularly detective story as macro. You get a detective story as macro in *Lantana* and *Traffic*. Flashback can be thought of as a detective story of the human heart.

Multiple protagonist films like *Ordinary People* or *American Beauty* are detective stories and even *The Big Chill* is a whodunnit in a sense. So the detective story - specifically the murder investigation story - seems to be really useful in a lot of these parallel narrative forms. What do you think? Why do you think this is? Perhaps it's because a detective murder investigation story is the quintessential narrative. Is that a silly statement? Don't know. Certainly, a detective story has a very strong simple spine, which might be just what's needed in parallel narrative, where you have so many stories to handle that you don't have much time to mess about.

*Lantana* also reminded me of how much these parallel narrative forms overlap. Because, if you were devising a tandem narrative story like *Lantana*, it would be really helpful at times to think of the characters as being all versions of the same protagonist - the person seeking and trying to maintain a relationship. So you're getting into multiple protagonist territory.

It's probably very important to think of the characters like that at some point because when you start to create a story from a theme you get pulled towards stereotypical characters and action. You start to preach. All of this makes me wonder whether tandem narrative and multiple protagonist are just different perspectives on the same thing (i.e. theme-based v. character-based). That's probably not so, since tandem does usually span society whereas multiple protagonist is usually focussed on a small group within society. I suppose the bottom line is that for whatever

reason it would probably be a really useful circuit breaker at first draft stage to stand back from your multiple protagonist or tandem narrative and consciously ask yourself to rethink it from the other point of view