

Screenwriting: Escaping the conventions

by Linda Aronson

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In an era when audiences are so comfortable with multiple narratives that a mass market love story like *Sliding Doors* can play with parallel universes without anyone blinking an eyelid, it's still common for screenwriting experts to tell writers that flashbacks are too hard to do, or, in the face of substantial evidence to the contrary, that all films can be written via a one-size-fits-all approach, which involves a linear three- or four-act structure and one protagonist on a journey towards emotional and spiritual fulfilment. Who is the one protagonist in *The Big Chill*? What is the three-act structure in *The Sweet Hereafter* (which has eleven stories in nine different time frames)? How can we say there is a single journey in *Pulp Fiction*?

Rather than meeting the demands of audiences so fast on the uptake from video games that they can pick clues in a microsecond, writers are often told to seek inspiration in films fifty or sixty years old. Moreover, a myth seems to have arisen that somewhere out there exists the universal template for a film.

But art has to speak for its time and that means change. Also - and crucially - it is profoundly anti-art to hold up one or two films as the benchmark and the model to copy. It's like telling composers that the pinnacle of musical achievement was Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and what they must do from now on is reproduce it. Well, Beethoven's Ninth is great, but it's already been written. What's more, symphonic structures have come a long way since then - because art is about pushing the boundaries. Beethoven himself rejected the old three movement symphony and inserted another movement because he felt he needed it. Shakespeare took Elizabethan and Jacobean forms into whole new dimensions of the craft. Art that doesn't change is museum art, and cinema that looks only backwards will atrophy.

Pushing the boundaries is as much the job description of screenwriters as it is of painters, musicians and dancers. But, realistically, can we push the boundaries and still get our films made? Films that don't follow the conventions are risky for producers to take on, and many scripts that seek to break the rules simply fall apart before they even reach the screen. So where do we start? How do we find ways of handling these complex forms, and crucially, how do we do it to a budget? Isn't it too impossibly hard? For example, why do flashbacks in *Shine* work, whereas flashbacks in *Mr Saturday Night* are a disaster? Why do flashbacks in *Citizen Kane* illustrate that the individual is ultimately unknowable and more than the sum total of its past, whereas flashbacks in *Remains of the Day* do exactly the opposite? And how exactly do you go about creating a story like *The Sweet Hereafter* that has eleven stories in nine different time frames, or a film that involves an army of acting stars, each of whom wants a significant role?

The first thing you do is accept the notion that film structure is not fixed in stone and will change (you will notice for example, that while the first act turning point was

traditionally thought of as happening twenty minutes into the movie, these days it's more likely to be ten to fifteen). The next thing you accept is that rather than there being 'one-size-fits-all' in film structure, a variety of equally valid narrative structures exist in film to serve different sorts of story material, just as in music different moods and aims are served by, say, the symphony, the concerto, the quartet and the opera. So, while the fabulously-robust three-act structure can still give us fine films like *Being John Malkovich*, we are not locked into that three-act structure for everything we write, but can accept, explore, develop and intertwine a whole new range of parallel narrative forms to capture our increasingly-sophisticated audience. Another crucial factor here is that while the traditional Hollywood model of 'one hero on a single journey towards spiritual and emotional growth and fulfilment' is certainly a very robust and appealing model, many cultures, particularly those outside of the USA, are more interested in stories about individuals trapped in social roles and unable to grow, either because of social limitations (class, sexuality, gender, colour, repressive political regimes etc), or a more generalised notion of fate. Such cultures often like to use group stories and parallel narratives, so the one-hero model is simply not useful, indeed can damage the film because it pulls attention away from the story's actual point. Interestingly, many current US socio-political films (like *Crash*, *Traffic*, *Good Night and Good Luck* and *Syriana*) are now choosing parallel narrative because the 'single successful hero' model simply does not permit examination of the damaged and damaging society the filmmakers aim to describe.

For writers, the terrifying thing about parallel narrative forms is that they all have major problems with pace, meaning, connection and closure. The fascinating thing is that the successful ones seem to split and reconstruct the old rising three-act structure in very predictable ways, exploiting its proven capacity for dramatic build. So the good news is that there are patterns, and we can use our traditional storytelling techniques to make sense of them.

The first of the forms is the flashback family, a range of structures that suit material which is 'a detective story of the human heart' and makes the audience ask 'what happened in the past?' rather than 'what's going to happen in the end?' All flashback films are structured as concentric circles, with the action jumping between the past and present (and sometimes future) at specific and predicable moments.¹

The second parallel narrative form is the multiple protagonist form, seen in ensemble films like *The Full Monty*, *The Big Chill*, *Galaxy Quest*, *American Beauty*, *You Can Count on Me* and *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*. These films are usually missions, reunions or sieges (often social sieges, like *American Beauty*, where characters are trapped in a social grouping) and are much easier to write if you see each character as a different version of the same protagonist (in *The Big Chill*, for example, 'the radical student ten years on'). Structurally these films are about the survival of the group, and are held together by a web of story threads dealing with the group and its individual members

¹ Even flashbacks in ancient Greek novels (yes, they existed) follow this model.

in both past and present. Because the siege and reunion forms are inherently static they utilise a range of disruptive character types to energise the action.

The third form is Sequential Narrative, as seen in films like *Pulp Fiction*, *Run Lola Run* and *Amores Perros*, where stories are told in sequence, left on a cliff hanger and united in an exciting but unpredictable climax. These films typically deal with a violent subgroup within society, a microcosm. By contrast, the fourth kind of parallel narrative, Tandem Narrative, which tells a range of equally-weighted stories, seems to work best when dealing with epic themes as they impact on everyone in society from the ruler to the derelict. Films in tandem narrative are *Magnolia*, *City of Hope*, *Traffic*, *Short Cuts*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Nashville*, *Gosford Park*, etc. Increasingly, a new form of tandem is emerging, Fractured Tandem, as seen in films like *Crash*, *21 Grams*, and *The Hours*, where the equally important stories involve time jumps and truncation, even, in some cases (and amazingly) losing the crucial 'middle' of the story without loss of pace.

Another parallel story form is the Double Journey, seen in films like *Finding Nemo*, *The Proposition* and *Brokeback Mountain*, where the premise demands that each of two interdependent characters has their own emotional journey, so the piece becomes a dual protagonist structure. Films that are inherently double journeys but give only one partner a story typically meander, as do *Cold Mountain* and *O Brother Where art Thou*.

Intriguingly, certain sequential structures like *Pulp Fiction* hold because the lesser story contains the greater (I call them 'portmanteau structures' and, bizarrely, Homer's *Odyssey* is an excellent example), and tandem narratives stand or fall by virtue of a plot device I call the 'macro'.

Fascinating to write? Yes, because parallel narrative forms give you a limitless canvas. Hard to write? Yes, because the potential to lose control of all the stories is ever-present and, despite the fact that certain patterns and paths seem to work, you are essentially inventing the recipe as you go. Do you have a choice in whether you learn how to write them? Probably not. Parallel narrative is a natural storytelling mode for today's super-fast audiences. The speed of tomorrow's audiences can only be imagined. The only thing we can be sure of is that all filmmakers need to keep one step ahead of that audience - and screenwriters, above all others, ignore parallel narrative at their peril.

Linda Aronson

Linda Aronson's book on how to write traditional and parallel narrative is entitled *Screenwriting Updated: New (and Conventional) Ways of Writing for the Screen*. The book is published by Silman James, Los Angeles, 2001 and is available at bookshops. It is widely-used in the USA and Europe by both professional writers and teachers of screenwriting. Aronson teaches screenwriting all over the world