

What Parallel Narrative is and why writers need to master it

by Linda Aronson

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Unless screenwriters and screenwriting theorists take on the challenge of working out how to write complex parallel narrative films like *Memento*, *Run Lola Run*, *Shine*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Traffic* and *The Sweet Hereafter* screenwriters could end up existing almost entirely to adapt novels to the screen. A frighteningly high percentage of all of the multiple narrative films now on the market have their origins in novels, short stories or actor improvisation, not in screenwriter-initiated scripts. Novelists are driving the new movements in the film industry. And the alarming thing is that we, the screenwriters and the theorists, are partly to blame.

In an era when audiences are so comfortable with multiple narratives that a popcorn 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 massive 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. 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 forty or fifty 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 artwork as the benchmark. 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 copy 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.

Pushing the boundaries is as much the job description of screenwriters as it is of painters, musicians and dancers. And it is because we're not pushing the boundaries that we are getting left behind. Serves us right. Producers are naturally attracted to the best-selling novel because a proven success is a safer financial option than an original screenplay. As screenwriters we have to prove to producers that we can give them the interesting narratives they want as well as if not better than the novelists. What's more, we have to prove that we can do it on a sensible budget.

So, where do we start? How do we go about pushing the boundaries? 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 Malcovitch*, 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.

The terrifying thing about these 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 predictable moments.

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 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*, etc. Weirdly, 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 you are 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.