



Desire and Communication in *Lantana*

In Ray Lawrence's 2001 film *Lantana*, social order and the family unit are threatened because of two intertwined issues. The first threat to society and the family in *Lantana* is when people act upon their own natural, physical desires to the detriment of the wider social order. The second threat to society is a failure by people in relationships to communicate directly and physically with one another. As the film demonstrates, it is this failure to communicate 'naturally' that often leads to an acting

out of physical desires outside of committed, marital relationships. *Lantana* represents these two issues of natural desires and failed communications through its symbolic play on images of nature and communication technology respectively.

Natural dangers

Lantana begins by establishing strong visual links between nature and social disorder. In the opening scene of the film, nature is emphasized through the image of

lantana and the magnified sounds of cicadas. Nature is then linked to danger and disorder when the camera probes inside the *lantana* bush to reveal a woman's body lying in a haphazard state. The arbitrary power of nature is contrasted with the planned and structured world of human society as represented by the dead woman's smart, professional attire. The next scene reveals a couple, Leon (Anthony LaPaglia) and Jane (Rachael Blake), in the act of sex. This act of nature is posed as a threat to the

1931-2007

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social order when it is revealed that both of the participants are married to other people. By following their natural instincts, these people are breaking the codes of a society that disapproves of infidelity for its detrimental effects on marriage and family.

Lantana links these two scenes of sex and death by representing nature as a destabilizing force in society. In the first scene, a woman's body is framed by nature (the lantana bush) in a way that suggests that she died randomly and without warning. In the second scene, Leon and Jane's act of sex is followed by a moment of social awkwardness when the two characters stand on opposite sides of the bed and Jane looks for the missing earring that her estranged husband gave her. In both scenes, nature undermines the smooth and controlled workings of society by introducing an element of disorder and uncertainty.

If *Lantana's* opening is about nature and society in conflict, it is also about nature and society being inseparable. When the camera slowly moves inside the lantana bush, the transition from 'outside' to 'inside' is fluid rather than jarring. The camera smoothly explores the lantana bush just as it smoothly explores the body that is hidden beneath its surface. The woman's body is revealed in a gradual, almost sensual manner. The camera first depicts a foot before slowly exposing the rest of the body. By depicting the dead woman in the same way as it depicts nature, the film suggests a correlation between the two. Through the movement of the camera, we are told that society and nature are closely entwined. We cannot deny our natural urges, even as they threaten the workings of society. We must, therefore, seek to 'manage' nature in order to function effectively as social beings.

Too close for comfort

Throughout *Lantana*, the natural world is shown to encroach, both visually and symbolically, upon the world of civilization and order. The second time we see lantana in the film is when the camera rises above a lantana bush to reveal suburban houses nearby. The threat that nature poses to society is now clearly highlighted as we can see exactly how close the lantana is to the houses. If the opening image of the body in the bush showed how we can never escape the random hand of nature, the shot of the houses behind the lantana is a further reminder that civilization is always on the brink of succumbing to natural dangers such as those represented by physical human desires.

The film goes on to represent such dangers through the character of Jane, whose house we see behind the lantana. After dancing seductively to sexy Latin music, Jane watches her

married neighbour, Nik (Vince Colosimo), through the flywire door of her house. The danger of physical desire, as signified by the closeness of the lantana to the houses, is controlled, or at least stemmed, by the symbolism of the door as a human-made, social restriction against adultery. Jane will defy this restriction by opening the door and inviting Nik inside her house for coffee. At the moment when he is invited inside Jane's home, Nik is framed holding his small child and surrounded by greenery. Again, it is the proximity of society and nature (represented by the father and child framed by natural surrounds) that symbolizes the threat. Though society can attempt to contain the danger through visual symbols (the flywire door), it cannot control it completely when nature (Jane's physical desire/the lantana bush) is so close to home.

The film has already established the links between



nature and danger in its opening scene, where the lantana bush is visually associated with a dead body. When Jane is shown to desire a married man, the danger is specified as the threat to society represented by natural human desires. What makes this threat more immediate and threatening in *Lantana* is the visible proximity of nature (lantana/greenery) to society (home/family). Is the lantana over the road from Nik's and Jane's suburban homes the same lantana that hides a dead body? By refusing (at least initially) to answer such a question, the film deliberately situates nature as a problem for society through the image of the lantana bush and its closeness to the suburban home.

Social structures

The problem that nature poses for society in *Lantana* is specifically the problem of sexual desire for the character of Jane. Jane's extramarital affair with one married man

(Leon) and her desire for another (Nik) is dramatized by the film through style, music and *mise en scène* to underline the risks to society that her desire signifies. After their initial sexual encounter, Jane waits for Leon outside his work at night. The

young child's eyes reminds us of the family that is being jeopardized by Jane's actions. From a private act of sex between two consenting adults, Jane's now public attempt to lure Leon away from his family raises the stakes in terms of what is

him in the lantana bush as she searches for the shoe. Back within the security of her home, Jane now watches Nik through a window with apprehensive rather than desirous eyes. She calls her estranged husband, Pete (Glenn Robbins), and asks

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background music is ominous at this point, suggesting the threat that Jane's sexuality poses to Leon's marriage. When Jane then approaches Leon on the street, he is walking with a female colleague. The awkwardness of this moment seems to arise, in part, from the position of the colleague as a symbolic substitute for Leon's wife. In the background, a giant poster of a

being menaced: marriage, family and society.

Later, however, Jane will be forced to retreat to the safety of the home and marriage when nature gets too close. Jane will come to suspect her neighbour, Nik, of foul play after she witnesses him throw a woman's shoe into the lantana near her house. In trying to prove Nik's guilt, Jane is forced to hide from

him to come over. Jane's close encounter with nature (hiding in the lantana/sleeping with one married man and flirting with another) has seemingly led her to seek refuge in the social stability represented by marriage. When Nik is taken in by the police for questioning, Jane and Pete adopt roles as substitute family for Nik's children. Though neither the family nor the



marriage are permanent for Jane (Nik takes his children back when he is released and Pete reluctantly leaves Jane at the end of the film), it appears as if her experiences with nature have made her more aware of the dangers of acting on sexual desires: the last image of Jane is of her dancing alone in her home.

house and the balcony. John is framed by nature (the forest). John has no links to society: his wife is missing and his daughter is dead. Though Leon is in danger of losing his family also, he has not completely lost them yet. Hence, Leon is still framed by images of stability represented by the poles holding up the house and the

together (represented in this case by the structure of the house) is also lost.

Look at me

The idea of nature as a potential threat to society in *Lantana* runs parallel with the idea of trust and direct, physical communication as a potential remedy for social

and Leon talk, communication devices can be seen all around them. The appearance of these devices is understandable from a realist perspective, as we are seeing the two detectives in their workplace. From a symbolic perspective, the communication devices are also significant for the role technology will play in the communication/miscommunication between characters throughout the film.

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The presence of technology symbolizes a failure of communication between characters, even as it serves a communicative function throughout the film. In the scene directly after Leon and Claudia's discussion, Leon's wife Sonja (Kerry Armstrong) speaks to her therapist, Valerie (Barbara Hershey), about her inability to communicate with her husband. This failure to communicate is later expressed visually when Leon is shown listening to the tape-recording of Sonja's discussion with Valerie. Though technology

Other characters in *Lantana* are also framed by their relationships with nature and society. When Leon, the detective, interviews John (Geoffrey Rush) about his missing wife, the two characters are pictured on the balcony of John's architect-designed house in the bush. Leon is framed by the artificial structure of the

railing behind him. There are no supports behind John. When John talks to Leon about the dangers of trust being broken in a marriage, there is nothing behind him but nature. In this scene, trust is established as one of the key supports of marriage and relationships in society. When trust is lost, then the structure holding a marriage

dysfunction. Early in the film, Leon asks his work partner Claudia (Leah Purcell) if she is seeing anyone. She replies that she has exchanged glances with a man from the restaurant where she eats. Though Leon is dismissive of this kind of interaction, the importance of physical communication (looking) is being highlighted. As Claudia

represents the means by which Leon can now learn the truth about his wife's feelings, it also represents the problem of indirect and unnatural communication for his marriage. Leon must listen to a machine in order to hear what his wife really thinks about him. Technology represents a similar barrier to physical communication in the relationship between Valerie and John. When Valerie's car breaks down at night and she tries to phone her husband, the emotional gulf between the two characters is vividly captured by the static shot of the answering machine as Valerie leaves a series of increasingly desperate messages for help. The answering machine is surrounded by still photographs of the family. Clearly, there is no life left in this domestic space. For a family to function in the world of *Lantana*, it needs to have life and direct, physical communication between its members.

The only relationship in *Lantana* that is shown to be successful is the marriage of Nik and Paula. At one point in the film, this relationship is also threatened by Nik's 'encounter with nature' after Jane flirts with him and he is implicated in the disappearance of Valerie in the forest. After Nik is brought in for questioning by the police, he is distraught when he cannot speak directly with his wife. Eventually, Paula is reunited with Nik and he tells her that

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he did not touch the missing woman. At this moment, Nik looks at Paula directly when he speaks to her. Paula, in turn, accepts what Nik says without question. Direct, physical communication is prioritized over indirect communication as Paula sees in Nik's eyes that he is telling the truth. As a witness to this exchange, Leon is shown to be shocked at the level of trust in the relationship of Nik and Paula. Through Leon's reaction, we too recognize the importance of trust in *Lantana* as the key structure of the family unit in society.

In the concluding moments of the film, the themes of 'nature' and 'communication' are brought together as Leon listens to his wife's tape-recorded thoughts in a police car. In the background, we can see forest outside Leon's window. Again, 'nature' and 'society' are situated in close proximity to each other. When Leon reacts with strong emotion to his wife's words, he turns an unnatural and indirect moment of communication between himself and his wife into a natural outpouring of feelings within the controlled environment of the car. Inside the

car, such natural instincts can be contained. Outside the car, nature is as uncontrolled as the forest that we see outside Leon's window.

Leon needs to contain his natural emotions in order to make them safe for society. Earlier in the film, Leon is shocked when another man cries in front of him after they collide violently on the street. As he later explains to another man, you may feel like crying sometimes, but 'you don't, do you?' Leon's inability or unwillingness to show natural emotions because of social expectations causes 'nature' to manifest in other, more socially destructive forms: for example, in Leon's violent treatment of a drug dealer and his affair with Jane. When Leon is finally able to show his natural feelings in a socially controlled manner (in the safety of his car), the film demonstrates how nature (represented by the forest outside his car) can be managed through contained and appropriate displays of emotion.

In *Lantana*, nature needs to be managed rather than ignored in order for society to function effectively. Leon

threatens his marriage and his family when he fails to communicate directly with his wife and instead expresses his natural instincts in other, more dangerous forms (through violence and infidelity). Other characters in the film also endanger their links with society through indirect forms of communication (John and Valerie) and natural urges (Jane's desire for Leon and Nik). Social order in *Lantana* is dependent upon stable relationships. The key to such relationships are direct forms of communication (as displayed by Nik and Paula in their marriage) and socially appropriate displays of emotion (as displayed by Leon in the concluding moments of the film). Ultimately, for *Lantana*, the real danger is not the closeness of nature to society (lantana will always be 'just over the road'), but the failure of society to deal with this 'closeness'.

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