

Plot Points

"Writing a screenplay is in many ways similar to executing a piece of carpentry. If you take some wood and nails and glue and make a bookcase, only to find when you're done that it topples over when you try to stand it upright, you may have created something really very beautiful, but it won't work as a bookcase."

—*Adventures in the Screen Trade*
William Goldman

The hardest thing about writing is knowing what to write. When you sit down in front of 120 blank sheets of paper, the only way you can get through that intricate tangle of seemingly endless creative decisions, solutions, and choices is by knowing what you're doing and where you're going. You need a road map, a guide, a *direction*—a line of development leading from beginning to end.

You need a story line.

If you don't have one, you're in trouble. That's why it's so easy to get lost in the maze of your own creation. James Joyce, the great Irish novelist, once remarked that the experience of writing is like climbing a mountain: When you're in the middle of your climb, you can only see what's directly in front of you and what's directly above you. You can plan only one move at a time. You can't see two or three moves above you or how you're going to get there. Only when you reach the top of the mountain can you look down and gain some kind of an overview of the landscape you've negotiated.

It's a good analogy. When you're writing a screenplay, you can see only the page you're writing and the pages you've written. Most of the time you can't see where you're going or how you're going to

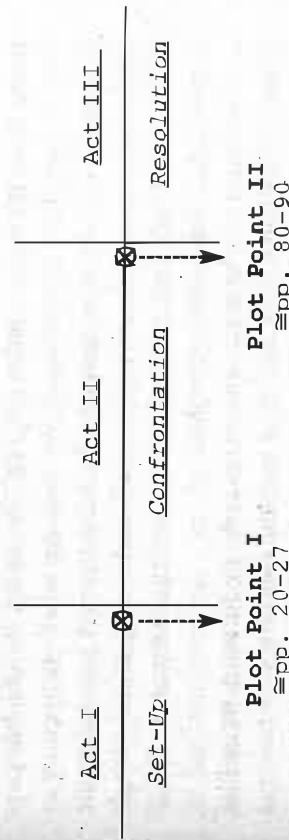
get there. Sometimes you can't even see that. The scene you're going to write next is only some kind of vague notion, and you don't know whether it will work or not. You literally have no objectivity at all—no overview.

That's why the *paradigm* is so important—it gives you a direction, a line of development. It's like a road map. On the road, driving through Arizona, New Mexico, on through the vast reaches of Texas, and across the high plains of Oklahoma, you don't know where you are, much less where you've been. All you can see is a flat, barren landscape, broken only by silver flashes of the sun bouncing off the windshields of passing cars.

When you're *in* the paradigm, you can't see the paradigm. That's why Plot Points are so important. As defined, the Plot Point is "any incident, episode, or event that hooks into the action and spins it around in another direction." There are many Plot Points scattered throughout the screenplay, but when you're confronting 120 blank sheets of paper, you need to know only four things to structure your story line: the ending, the beginning, and Plot Points I and II.

The function of the Plot Point is simple: *It moves the story forward.* Plot Point I and Plot Point II are the story points that *hold the paradigm* in place. They are the anchors of your story line.

Take another look at the *paradigm*:



If you look at the screenplay as a series of story points, or story progressions, your story line begins at the beginning and ends at the end, whether in linear form as in *Collateral*, *Thelma & Louise*, or *Million Dollar Baby*, or in nonlinear form as in *Cold Mountain*, *Pulp Fiction*, or *The Hours*. No matter what form your story line is

in, linear or nonlinear, it is anchored in place by Plot Points I and II.

Structure is the foundation, the base, the blueprint of the screenplay; as William Goldman says, "Screenplay is structure." If you don't know the basic structure of your story line, you're not really ready to start writing. That's why I stress the importance of the four things you need to know before you put one word down on paper: the ending, beginning, and Plot Points I and II. If you don't know those four points, you're in trouble. This does not mean that there are only two Plot Points in your screenplay. That's not the case at all. We're dealing with the preparation you need to make before you begin writing. Once you know what these two Plot Points are, they will anchor your story line, hold it in place so you can begin the writing process with freedom and creativity. When the screenplay is completed, it may contain as many as ten to fifteen Plot Points, most of which will be in Act II. How many you have, again, depends upon your story. The purpose of the Plot Point is to *move* the story forward, toward the resolution. That is its purpose.

In Michael Mann's high-powered thriller *Collateral* (tautly written by Stuart Beattie), the action moves forward on both a physical and emotional level. The Tom Cruise character, Vincent, has a job to do—five contracted murders in one night. He forces Max (Jamie Foxx) to be his driver, makes physical threats on his life, but pays him well to drive him around. We discover what's happening as Max discovers what's happening. The action moves forward to the final shoot-out with clarity, ingenuity, character insight, and change. The film itself is "clean, lean and tight"; there's not an ounce of "fat," or padding, in the entire screenplay.

The thrust of the script moves relentlessly forward from Plot Point to Plot Point. As a matter of fact, the characters' arc and the arc of the story line impact each other, so that each physical incident reveals a different aspect of the characters. Foxx's cabbie goes through a strong dramatic arc: from passive wimp to man of action; from dreamer to achiever. And the irony, of course, is that Max is forced into these changes by the villain of the piece; when Cruise destroys his old life, Foxx is forced to grab the new.

The script opens with Vincent arriving at LAX and exchanging a black bag with an unknown accomplice; then we cut to and set up Max cleaning his taxi as he readies himself for the night shift. He picks up a fare, Annie. (Jada Pinkett Smith)—the inciting incident—and during the ride downtown they develop an easy-going familiarity, an attraction, for each other. He delivers Annie to the Federal Building, and as she gets out she tells him she's a prosecutor working an "all-nighter" on a big case and gives Max her card. He picks up another fare, Vincent, who hires him for the night to make the five stops to get "signatures" on a real estate deal he's closing. So far, it's just another night in L.A.

As Vincent and Max banter about the state of L.A., they get to know each other a little more. They make stop number one, and Max is waiting in the alley behind the building when suddenly there's a loud crash and a dead body plunges onto the front windshield. Shocked, stunned, disbelieving, Max is astonished to learn that Vincent killed the man, though the hit man claims "it was the bullet and the fall that killed him."

That's Plot Point I, the key incident of the script. This is the incident that sets in motion the entire screenplay, because Max is now forced against his will to drive Vincent to his other "appointments." He's virtually a prisoner. Now, the true story begins.

Two physical actions are going on in this story: (1), Max trying to escape from Vincent as they roam through the city; and (2), Vincent doing his job and honoring his contracts. As they make their appointed rounds, we watch Max reacting to the physical action by going through an emotional change that, step by step, leads to his transformation. In the beginning, he's passive and weak, a wimp, afraid to stand up to his boss at the cab company. Then he begins to gain a little courage and tries to escape, but winds up watching helplessly as Vincent kills two guys trying to rip off his briefcase. They make a "random" visit to a nightclub, ostensibly to listen to some good jazz, but in fact it's a cover for Vincent to score his next hit. This is a nice touch, setting us up to expect one thing, then turning it around. Then Max is made to visit his mother at the hospital, and once again tries to escape by running away with

Vincent's briefcase and, in defiance, tossing it onto the freeway. His attitude, his strength, is beginning to emerge; he's starting to stand up for himself.

After the briefcase episode Vincent forces Max, as a sort of punishment or test, to pose as him and meet Felix, the crime boss, to get the new information about the last two hits of the night. Max, in a tense and dramatic moment, rustles up his strength, threatens Felix, and manages to walk out of the meeting alive. This is another incident where the physical action triggers an emotional response.

The cops, who think Max is the hit man responsible for all these murders, follow him to a nightclub, and there, on a crowded dance floor, there is a violent shoot-out. Max tries to get away, and when he is spotted by a cop who believes in his innocence, he's hustled off to safety. When Vincent sees him with the cop, however, the hit man kills the cop and "rescues" Max.

There's one more hit for Vincent to fulfill. At this point, two things are left unresolved. One, how is Max going to get away from Vincent alive? And two, how is he going to prevent Vincent's last hit? Racing away from the big shoot-out at the nightclub, Vincent says that Max's dream of starting a limo company is only a dream, a "someday" excursion into a fantasy that will never happen. Max, for the first time, realizes that he has been living a dream for twelve years. Now his dream shattered, and knowing he'll probably be killed by Vincent when this ordeal is over, he decides to give it all up and live for the moment. Otherwise, "What's the point?" It is this insight that gives him the strength to put his foot on the gas for a wild speed run through the streets of L.A. He loses control of the wheel and crashes the car, hitting a divider. The car leaps into the air, hits the ground with a tremendous crash, and rolls. Plot Point II.

Vincent crawls out of the torn and twisted wreckage, and runs. Max manages to crawl out of the overturned taxi, sees a picture of Annie, the woman he met earlier that evening, and realizes that she is the last victim on Vincent's list. Which happens to be the reason why Vincent was at the Federal Building in the first place: She was supposed to be his first hit of the night. Max races on foot to warn Annie, and then we go into a chase sequence that ends the film.

These two Plot Points anchor the story in place. Plot Point I is the true beginning of the story: the first murder and Max's realization that Vincent is responsible for it. At Plot Point II, he crashes the car and stands up to Vincent, ready to kill him if need be, in order to save Annie. Each Plot Point is geared by both the emotional and physical forces working on the character; the outside events affect the interior, emotional life of the character and move the script to its next level of action.

Once again, a Plot Point is a function of the main character and moves the story forward. It amps up the action and underscores the arc of the character: Vincent is a cynical, amoral person with no values of right and wrong; he's merely doing a job, and he's very good at it. He views the world and everyone in it as "a cosmic accident," the product of random chance. There's no meaning or significance to our lives because we're nothing more than an infinitesimal speck of dust in the vast universe. If there's no meaning to our existence, then our lives mean nothing, so taking a human life has little consequence. As Tolstoy said, without God, without a moral system of right and wrong, "anything is permissible."

Collateral is a very good example of how Plot Points hook into the story line and move it forward, influencing both the emotional and physical arc of the characters. The choices your characters make may very well determine the course and outcome of the story. The interplay between Max and Vincent and the choices they make bind them together in a unique and unusual situation that expresses the story's dynamic in a visual, suspenseful way.

The connections and interplay between the characters, of course, are essential to the movement and plotline of the story. Let's take another look at *Chinatown*. As a mystery-detective story, *Chinatown* is structured from Plot Point to Plot Point, each Plot Point carefully moving the action forward from the beginning, when Gittes is hired by the phony Mrs. Mulwray, to the end, when Evelyn Mulwray is killed.

The script opens with the question: Who is Mrs. Mulwray's husband having an affair with? Gittes follows Mulwray to a number of the city's reservoirs, then discovers him in the company of a young

woman. He takes pictures and returns to the office, and as far as he's concerned, the case is closed. But the next day, he learns someone has released the story, along with his pictures, to the newspaper.

Who did it? And why?

When Gittes returns to his office he finds a woman waiting to see him. "Have you ever seen me before?" she asks. She then tells him she is the *real* Mrs. Mulwray; since she did not hire him, she's going to sue him and take away his detective license. But if she's the *real* Mrs. Mulwray, who hired him to find out who Mulwray was having an affair with? And why? With the "love scandal" front-page news, he knows he's been set up—framed. Someone wants him to take the fall. He's going to find out who set him up. And why.

End of Act I.

What moment in this block of dramatic action hooks into the action and spins it around in another direction? When the real Mrs. Mulwray shows up. That's the key incident in the story line.

When the real Mrs. Mulwray enters the picture, the action shifts from a job completed to possible legal action and the loss of Jake's license. He'd better find out who set him up—then he'll find out *why*.

Act II opens with Gittes driving up to the Mulwray house. Mrs. Mulwray tells him her husband might be at the Oak Pass Reservoir. Gittes goes to the reservoir, and there meets Lieutenant Escobar, a former colleague, who tells him that Mulwray is dead—drowned, apparently in an accident.

Mulwray's death presents another problem, or obstacle, for Gittes. Remember, the dramatic *context* for Act II is *Confrontation*.

Gittes's dramatic need is to find out *who* set him up, and *why*. So screenwriter Robert Towne creates obstacle after obstacle to keep the action going. Remember, if you know your character's dramatic need you can create obstacles to it, and the story becomes your character's overcoming these obstacles to achieve his/her dramatic need. Mulwray is dead. Murdered, Gittes finds out later. Who did it? And why? This is a Plot Point within the structure of Act II to keep the story moving forward. There are ten such Plot Points in the second act of *Chinatown*.

Mulwray's death is an incident that *moves the story forward*. Gittes is totally involved now, whether he likes it or not. Later, he

receives a phone call from a mysterious "Ida Sessions": the phony Mrs. Mulwray. She tells him to look in the obituary column of the paper for "one of those people," whatever that means. Then she hangs up. Soon after, Ida Sessions is found murdered, and Escobar is certain Gittes is involved.

The theme of water has been introduced several times before, and Gittes follows it. He checks out the owners of the land in the Valley and discovers that most of the acreage has been sold within the last few months.

Gittes investigates, but is attacked by farmers who think he's the man who's been poisoning their water. When he regains consciousness, Evelyn Mulwray is there—called by the farmers. As they drive back to L.A., Gittes discovers that one of the names in the obituary column mentioned by Ida Sessions is cited as being the owner of a large parcel of land in the Valley. Strange. He died at a place called the Mar Vista Home for the Aged. Together, Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray drive to the retirement home. Gittes learns that most of the new owners of the land parcels in the Valley are living at the home, unaware of their purchases. It's phony—the whole thing's a giant scam. As they're leaving, his suspicions confirmed, thugs attack him, but Evelyn drives up, steps on the gas, Gittes jumps on the running board, and they manage to get away.

These incidents, episodes, and events are all Plot Points, all story progressions that move the story forward.

Back at her house, Evelyn cleans Gittes's nose wound (for being "too nosy"); he notices something in her eye, a slight color defect. He leans over and kisses her. They have sex.

Afterward, they lie in bed making small talk.

The phone rings. She answers it, suddenly becomes agitated, hangs up. She tells Gittes he must leave. Immediately. "Something important" has come up.

At this point in the story, we still don't know two things: (1) who the girl was who was with Mulwray in the beginning before he was murdered; and (2) who set up Gittes, and why. Gittes knows that the answers to the two questions are related. There's a good chance that whoever killed Mulwray set him up. Why, we don't know yet.

Something has come up. What? Gittes wants to find out, so he

tails Evelyn to a house in the Echo Park section of Los Angeles. When he returns to Evelyn's house, he discovers a pair of bifocals in the bottom of the fish pond. He returns to the Echo Park house and confronts Evelyn. She tells him the girl is her sister, then says she's her daughter. Gittes slaps her. "I want the truth," he says. He slaps her again, and she finally confesses that the girl is "my daughter and my sister." At fifteen, she was the victim of incest, and now cares for her daughter and refuses to speak to her father, Noah Cross. So, now we know who the girl is. The second point: Who wore the bifocals, victim or killer? Once Gittes learns the truth, he wants to help Evelyn get away. But before he leaves, at the end of the scene, in what seems to be a throwaway line, she tells Gittes that her husband did not wear bifocals. There is only one conclusion: The glasses were worn by the killer. Now Gittes knows the truth: Noah Cross had a motive for murder. It is the final answer he's seeking and the *Resolution*, the solution of the story.

Gittes calls Noah Cross and tells him he has "the girl," and to meet him at Evelyn's house. And here Gittes learns that the man responsible for the death of Mulwray and the others, the man responsible for the entire water scandal, is Noah Cross. Why? "Because it's the future, Mr. Gittes. The future." The way to create it, Cross says, is simple: "Either you bring the water to L.A., or you bring L.A. to the water."

That's the dramatic hook of the movie. And it works, beautifully. The premise that money, power, and influence are corruptive forces is established; as Gittes says: "You gotta be rich to kill somebody, anybody, and get away with it." If you've got enough money and power, you can get away with anything—even murder.

Gittes, now a prisoner, is taken to Chinatown so that Cross can claim his daughter/granddaughter. When Evelyn dies at the end of the film, Cross spirits his daughter/granddaughter away, and does indeed get away with murder. Ironically, the incident that drove Gittes off the police force in Chinatown has repeated itself: "I tried to help someone and all I ended up doing was hurting them," he had said earlier.

Full circle, turn. Gittes can't deal with it. He has to be restrained; the last words of the script are forged in filmic consciousness: "Forget it, Jake.... It's Chinatown."

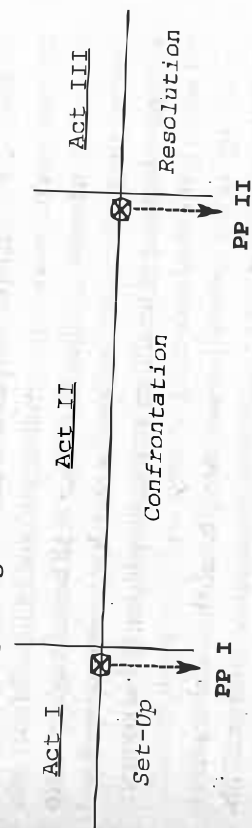
The Plot Points at the end of Acts I and II are there to hook in the action and spin it around in another direction. They are the hub of the story progression, amp the story up to the next level, and move it forward to its dramatic resolution.

As a simple exercise, the next time you go to the movies or watch a film on DVD or cable (without commercial breaks), see if you can locate the Plot Points at the end of Act I and Act II. Every film you see will have definite Plot Points; all you have to do is find them. If you want, take a look at your watch anywhere from twenty to thirty minutes into the film (depending on its length, of course) and see if you can determine what the action point is; ask yourself what's happening, or what's going on in the story around this point in the action. There will be some kind of incident, episode, or event that will occur. Discover *what* it is, and *when* it occurs.

Do the same for Act II. Around eighty or ninety minutes into the feature, check out what's happening in the story line. What incident, episode, or event occurs that will lead us into Act III, the *Resolution*? What happens around this time in the movie? It's an excellent exercise. The more you do it, the easier it gets. Pretty soon it will be ingrained in your consciousness; you'll grasp the essential nature of the relationship between structure and story. Then you'll see how the definition of dramatic structure—"a series of related incidents, episodes, and events leading to a dramatic resolution"—guides you through the story line. Plot Points are those incidents, episodes, and events that anchor your story line; they provide the foundation of the narrative line of action.

Let's take a look at the Plot Points in a couple of other films: *The Matrix* and *Thelma & Louise*.

Here's the *paradigm*:



We're looking for the Plot Points at the end of Acts I and II.

In *The Matrix*, the opening scene shows us that this is no ordinary action sequence of flying fists, fired shots, and a few explosions. This is a totally unique sequence; it pits Trinity, a lone woman, against several armed policemen, all wearing bulletproof vests. Right before our eyes, in the most amazing physical feats, Trinity leaps up, is suspended in midair, then runs up walls and across ceilings in order to escape. She leaps from rooftop to rooftop, building to building, totally disregarding gravity as she flies through the air to reach the other side. From there, it's a race against a huge garbage truck to reach the ringing telephone. She makes it in the nick of time and answers the phone just as the truck slams into the telephone booth.

Whoa... if that's not a grabber, I don't know what is. In terms of information, we don't know who Trinity is, whether she's a "good guy" or a "bad guy," nor do we know what the story's about, or how she managed to escape the way she did. But as an opening this inciting incident certainly grabs our attention.

At this point, we don't know *what* the story is about or *who* it's about. We need some exposition here, defined as *the information needed to move the story forward*, and that's exactly what we get next. Neo, the main character, wakes up to the words "Follow the white rabbit" on his computer screen. There's a knock on the door; it's a girl with a white rabbit tattooed on her shoulder. He follows her to a club. There he meets Trinity and asks her about the Matrix. But she doesn't explain anything; she only warns him that he's in danger: "They're watching you." And, she stresses, "The truth is out there, Neo, and it's looking for you and will find you, if you want it to." Then she's gone.

What is the Matrix? Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) explains later that we're inhabiting a parallel universe and the Matrix is a state of virtual reality, an illusion that we've all been programmed to accept as *real*. The truth, the "real" world, has been destroyed and re-created by a race of machines, artificial intelligence, and computers into a form of virtual reality.

So begins the heroes' journey. Morpheus, the rebel leader, is dedicated to waging war against the Matrix to reveal "the truth," liberating humanity from the bondage of the machines. Morpheus

believes in the prophecy that their only hope of winning is by finding "The One," a human being endowed with godlike powers who will lead them in their war of liberation. And he believes Neo is "The One." As Morpheus tells Neo, the mind and body are intertwined, and even though they are separate entities, if you can control your mind you can control reality, and thus control your destiny.

That's an ancient teaching from Eastern philosophy, brought into a contemporary situation, futuristic in thought and execution. Neo, like Hamlet or the warrior Arjuna in the classic Indian tale the Bhagavad Gita, must choose his own destiny. This theme of choice, of choosing the reality you wish to inhabit, is a recurring motif throughout the film. When Neo goes to work the next day, he is told he has to make a choice: to either be Thomas Anderson by day, or Neo, the self-styled rebel, his true self, by night. When he gets to his office, Neo receives a package and a cell phone pops out, ringing. Morpheus is on the line. He tells Neo, "They're after you. There are only two ways for you to leave the building—either you choose to leave by the scaffolding hanging outside the window, or you choose to leave as a prisoner." Like Hamlet and Arjuna, Neo embodies the stance of the reluctant hero: Before he can rise to another, higher level of consciousness, he must first accept himself and his destiny.

He leaves as a prisoner, and is later wired, a bug planted deep within him. Trinity and the others pick Neo up under the bridge, but only after he is "debugged" will he be taken to meet Morpheus. This fusion of the ancient and the futuristic is embodied in the various names used in *The Matrix*. The rebel ship, the *Nebuchadnezzar*, for example, is named after the famed Babylonian king of the fifth century B.C. who is credited with tearing down and rebuilding the ancient temples; so he's both a destroyer and builder. The name fits the ship's destiny, for it houses the small rebel band determined to destroy the Matrix. In Greek mythology *Morpheus* is the god of Sleep, responsible for weaving the fabric of our dreams in the deep sleep state. *Neo*, of course, means "new," and *Trinity* has several religious implications. These mythological echoes are simply a way of adding more insight and dimension to the story line.

At this point, the story progresses by action and explanation. Only when Neo can accept being "The One" can he really *be*. "The

One." In other words, what we believe to be true, is true. And this sets up Plot Point I.

He has his first face-to-face meeting with Morpheus at Plot Point I. During the meeting, the key incident, Morpheus offers Neo a choice: Either take the Blue Pill and get ordinary reality or take the Red Pill and get the truth. Neo doesn't hesitate—he takes the red one. Reality distorts as he falls between the corridors of virtual reality and the netherworld. In a sequence as bizarre and evocative as an H. R. Giger painting, Neo is reborn as a man freed from the restraints of his limited mind. As the embryo of himself, Neo must retrain both his body and his mind until he is capable of exploring the untapped resources of his unlimited self as seen in martial arts contests with Morpheus.

Plot Point I is the true beginning of the story; it is the incident that hooks into the action and spins it around into Act II. The context of Act II is *Confrontation*, so Neo encounters obstacle after obstacle to achieve his dramatic need: to know the Matrix and to be self-realized. Plot Point I fulfills this function.

Neo's encounter with the Oracle is the Mid-Point of the story. She's a great character. When I first saw the film I expected an old, old man, extremely wise, with white hair and possibly a long straggly beard. Instead, I was delightfully surprised to discover a middle-aged woman baking cookies. When she casually asks if he believes he's "The One," Neo shakes his head and says, "I'm just an ordinary guy." Once again, his belief systems, the limitations of his mind, imprison him. Too bad, she says. Why? Neo asks. "Because Morpheus believes in you, Neo, and no one, not even you or me, can convince him otherwise," she says. "He believes it so blindly that he's going to sacrifice his life for you. You're going to have to make a choice. On one hand, you'll have Morpheus's life... and on the other hand, you'll have your own.... One of you is going to die.... Which one, will be up to you."

She is his "mirror," reflecting what he believes, telling him what she sees within him. His struggle guides him to the understanding that he can wear the mantle of "The One" only if he chooses to. Only when we can give up the concepts of our limited self can we attain enlightenment and liberation. The reluctant hero must

accept the challenge of being who he or she really is, in much the same way that Hamlet and Arjuna must choose to honor themselves and accept their destiny. Whether he likes it or not, Neo is "The One" who has been chosen to "set the times right."

When Agent Smith takes Morpheus prisoner, Neo makes his decision to rescue him. "The Oracle told me this would happen," Neo says. "She told me I would have to make a choice...." He pauses, and in an early draft of the script says, "I may not be what Morpheus thinks I am, but if I don't try to help him, then I'm not even what I think I am.... I'm going in after him." When he declares himself in this fashion, it is the first step of accepting himself as "The One." This, then, is Plot Point II. It leads to the *Resolution* of the story.

At Plot Point I, Morpheus had asked Neo if he believed in fate. No, Neo had replied—"Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life." Whether he believes it or not, whether he knows it or not, he's now in the hands of his fate, his destiny.

After rescuing Morpheus, Neo doesn't make it out of the Matrix in time and, in a tremendous fight scene, dies at the hands of Agent Smith. As Trinity stands over Neo's inert body, she tells him what the Oracle has told her: that she would fall in love with the man who was "The One." Even though Neo's dead, she believes with all her heart that love is stronger than the physical body. She kisses him, then demands that he "get up." Neo's eyes flip open, and he's resurrected. A miracle? Of course. But as Joseph Campbell states in *The Power of Myth*, the true hero has to die in order to be reborn. Once again, Neo has died so he can be reborn. How? It doesn't matter. Either we believe it or we don't; it is the willing suspension of disbelief. He has overcome the limitations of his mind; he has chosen to wear the mantle of "The One."

The Matrix was one of the first blockbuster films influenced by Asian filmmaking, and it portends a future direction in movies: technology integrated into a classical, mythical story line that is larger than life. It's too bad that *The Matrix: Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions* don't live up to the quality or creativity of the original.

Thelma & Louise, like *Collateral*, is a story that deals with character change and transformation. When the film begins, Louise is

finishing up her night shift at the restaurant where she works. It is early morning, and she calls Thelma, who is in the kitchen preparing breakfast. We immediately see who Thelma is. Her breakfast is a bite out of a frozen candy bar. From our very first glimpse, Thelma appears to be a little bit ditzy. Louise asks if she's ready to go for their weekend trip to the mountains. Thelma replies she hasn't asked her husband Darryl yet, but when he appears, she hangs up hastily. Our impression of her husband is that he's a pompous, self-centered ass. Thelma hesitates to ask him, finally decides not to, and makes up her mind on the spot to go away with Louise for the weekend anyway.

After her husband leaves for work, Thelma starts packing, and, in a beautiful display of film as behavior, we see two people doing the same thing in totally different ways; we see who they are by what they do. Here's the way Thelma packs: She stands in front of her closet, and though she's going away for only a couple of days, she doesn't know what to take. So, she takes everything: bathing suits, wool socks, flannel pajamas, jeans, sweater, T-shirts, a couple of dresses; she grabs most of her closet and dumps it in her suitcases. Then she takes a lantern and several pairs of shoes, and, as an afterthought, grabs a gun by the handle, holding it like a rat by the tail, and drops it in her purse. What do we know about her from the way she packs?

Here's the way Louise packs: She puts the suitcase on the bed; everything is perfectly ordered. She neatly folds, as the script puts it: "three pairs of underwear, one pair of long underwear, two pairs of pants, two sweaters, one furry robe, one nightgown. She could be packing for camp. Her room is as orderly as the suitcase. As an afterthought, she throws in an extra pair of socks and closes the suitcase." On the way out, she calls her boyfriend Jimmy, and when his answering machine picks up, she angrily turns his picture facedown. She goes to the sink, rinses the only glass that's on the counter, wipes it, puts it back in the cupboard, and leaves in her beautiful T-Bird. Spotless. What do we know about her character from the way she packs? Film is behavior.

She picks up Thelma and they drive toward their weekend retreat. But along the way Thelma here to other

something to eat. They pull into a bar called, appropriately enough, the Silver Bullet. That occurs on about page 10 of the screenplay. We already know who the story is about, as well as their relationships with the men in their life. We learn they are on this weekend holiday because Louise wants to prove a point to her boyfriend Jimmy. A musician, he's been on the road for three weeks, and has not called her once. She's so pissed that she's not going to be home when he returns. Let's see how he likes that!

In an interview I had with writer Callie Khouri for my book *Four Screenplays*, she told me, "Jimmy is a guy who's afraid to make a commitment. She wants to get married, wants all the conventional things, yet she's being denied them because of the choice she's made in this man. Basically, his shortcoming is holding her back from what she really wants."

"I wanted to show her feelings because she feels responsible for everything that happens. She plays a game with him; when he comes back from his trip, she's not going to be in town, and this is what happens when she's not being honest."

Not being honest in her relationship leads to what eventually happens. It's not dharmic, meaning it's not the "right action" based on the moral and ethical principles of the universe. In other words, it's uncool. Thelma and Louise go into the bar, order drinks, talk about their relationships. Then a stranger named Harlan approaches, makes himself comfortable at their table, and starts hustling Thelma. Louise shoos him away, but later he comes back and he and Thelma step onto the dance floor. He plies her with drinks, gets her so dizzy she thinks she's going to be sick, then takes her outside to the parking lot.

And there, what starts as a "friendly" little kiss turns into a pretty ugly scene. He attempts to rape Thelma, and almost gets away with it. After slapping her around, he flips up her dress, knocks her legs apart, unzips his pants. We hear the crunch of gravel, and then a gun enters the frame at his head. Louise. She tells him to stop, adding, "You've got a pretty fucked-up idea of fun." He mouths off to her and says one thing too much, and Louise "raises the gun, and fires a bullet into his face." He's killed instantly.

episode, or event that hooks into the action and spins it around in another direction." What began as a nice weekend trip to the mountains ends up in an attempted rape and murder. From here on out, Thelma and Louise are on the run, and as they race down the highway, like so many other characters in so many other movies, they come to grips with themselves, find out who they really are, and ultimately end up taking responsibility for their lives and actions. *Thelma & Louise* is a road movie, yes, but it's really a journey of enlightenment and self-discovery.

Their dramatic need has changed now and there is no turning back as they race toward Mexico a step ahead of the law. As they drive through Monument Valley in Utah, Louise stops the car. In the vast and towering silence, she steps out of the car and drinks in this most memorable sight. She now knows that this might be her last night on Earth, at least in this lifetime. That realization, experienced in total silence, is Plot Point II. In the next scene, she shares this insight with Thelma. Thelma thanks her for what she did, because Harlan was hurting her. The two women are bonded together in friendship and forgiveness.

It's a beautiful moment. In silence, underneath a blanket of stars, in a place that exists beyond time, they accept themselves and their destiny. For the first time, they understand there may be no way back. The stillness of the scene is the pause before the storm, and the silence works better and more effectively than words ever could.

This little scene is the Plot Point at the end of Act II. It spins the story line into Act III, the *Resolution*, because at this point in the story, we don't know what's going to happen. Will they get caught or escape safely to Mexico? More important, will they live or die? From now on, through the rest of the story line, they resolve their feelings for each other and take full responsibility for their actions. From here on, there's no turning back for Thelma and Louise. There are no options left: It's death or it's death.

It should be noted that a Plot Point does not have to be a dramatic moment, or a major scene or sequence. A Plot Point can be a quiet moment, as in Plot Point II in *Thelma & Louise*, or an exciting action sequence, as in Plot Point I in *Collateral*, or a line of dialogue, as in *The Matrix*, or a decision that affects the story line, as in

Chinatown. A Plot Point is whatever you choose it to be—it could be a long scene or a short one, a moment of silence or of action; it simply depends on the script you're writing. It's the choice of the screenwriter, but it is always an incident, episode, or event that is dictated by the needs of the story.

Knowledge and mastery of the Plot Point is an essential requirement of writing a screenplay. As you approach the 120 blank sheets of paper, the Plot Points at the end of each act are the anchoring pins of dramatic action; they hold everything together. They are the signposts, the goals, the objectives, the destination points of each act—forged links in the chain of dramatic action.