

**LIFE OR MOVIE:
WHICH COMES FIRST?**
An aspiring screenwriter's
discovery of...

mickael rozwarski |

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LIFE OR MOVIE: WHICH COMES FIRST?
AN ASPIRING SCREENWRITER'S DISCOVERY OF...

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MANY THANKS TO DR. ROBERT SHUPP FOR HIS PRECIOUS HELP

This book is dedicated to my friends
Michael Nekora and Jean-Michel Bettembourg.
They believed in me long before I did myself.

Without their support, the following pages would not exist.
They've been my guardian angels, and a true blessing to my life.

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"There is nothing you can tell me that I can't
read somewhere else.
Unless we talk about your life."¹

Now, I know it wasn't a part of the plan, but I made the decision to leave a copy of the map. I'm not gonna say it was the best decision I ever made. I told myself that spreading news was a part of a traveler's nature, but if I was being completely honest, I was just like everybody else, shit-scared of the great unknown, desperate to take a little piece of home with me.

– Richard, *The Beach*

¹ Matt DAMON. Ben AFFLECK. Good Will Hunting: A Screenplay. New York: Hyperion, 1997, p. 72.

FADE IN:

“On a summer day, a father looks out at the family lawn and says to his teen-aged son: ‘The grass is so tall I can hardly see the cat walking through it.’ The son slopes off to mow the lawn, but the interchange has been witnessed by a team of live-in social scientists, and they interpret the father’s remark in various ways. One sees it as typical of an American household’s rituals of power and negotiation. Another observer construes the remark as revealing a characteristic bourgeois concern for appearances and a pride in private property. Yet another, perhaps having had some training in the humanities, insists that the father envies the son’s sexual proficiency and that the feline image constitutes a fantasy that unwittingly symbolizes (a) the father’s identification with a predator; (b) his desire for liberation from his stifling life; (c) his fears of castration (the cat in question has been neutered); or (d) all of the above.”²

Introduction

The following pages report our meandering experience with movies. Before the first word was written, we had no idea where we were going, if we would find anything interesting, or if there were anything to be found. Setting up for this journey was like hoping to find a place that might not even exist, which is all the more difficult when one does not have a roadmap. Today we can say the place we were looking for does exist. But very few people know about it. It is a secret place, like THE beach. It has been the most mysterious, fascinating, and exhilarating journey. We might not have taken the shortest pathway, we might have missed some shortcuts, some detours, but perhaps it was needed. Still, here is our testimony of this journey.

² David BORDWELL. Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 77.

What is the relation of fiction to reality?

Our first thought was to delve into books aimed at screenwriters and dealing with the very craft of writing screenplays since we thought they are at the core of any movie. One can mainly find two kinds of books on the subject: on the one hand, professors, movie consultants, or studio readers speculating on the best way not to have a screenplay being directly thrown away (the main emphasis is always on the presentation of the screenplay, how many pages it should have, what kind of types to use so that it is easy to read, etc.); then on the other hand, one finds screenwriters who write books to congratulate themselves. We have not found a single book dealing with the real Craft of Artists.

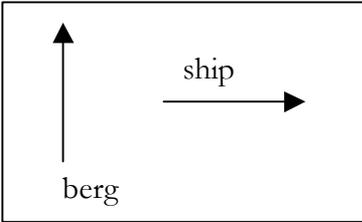
There seemed to be a recurrent pattern in all stories. That is how we were drawn to Carl Jung and his concept of the archetypes of the collective unconscious, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, etc. At long last some people were talking about the inside of storymaking.

Sigmund Freud was another highlight. As we discovered HIS version of the unconscious, it threw a completely new light on the relation between life and movies. It became even clearer when we saw *Jurassic Park* for the umpteenth time. We realized that the film had primarily two foci: children and dinosaurs. In some way, screenwriter David Koepp tried to identify the first with the latter. Why? It seemed that everything boiled down to Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neil), that he was the center of attention, that everything was seen from his point of view. So, HE mistakes kids for dinosaurs. In the same way, he fears them both, studies them from aloof, and thinks he knows everything about them, in the movie, he will know their true nature. The whole movie is constructed around this metaphor. Every mainstream movie is constructed around such metaphors. But they have to remain unconscious, repressed. Movies mimic our minds' map: there is the narrative, the conscious part on the one hand. And there is the subconscious, the repressed part

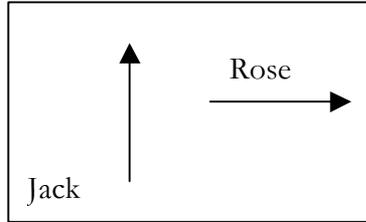
that needs to remain that way for the purpose of the story. The more relevant, sophisticated, and used to its full potential the metaphor is, the greater chance a movie has of catching the public's attention.

To take another vivid example, consider *Titanic*. Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio) stands for the iceberg and Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet) stands for the ship. When Jack and Rose kiss for the first time, it represents the fatal collision between the ship and the berg, for in the Freudian symbology, the iceberg is the male penetrator, and the ship the female recipient. The movie also plays on the horizontality of the ship, and the verticality of the berg.

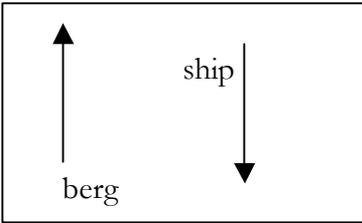
LIFE OR MOVIE: WHICH COMES FIRST?



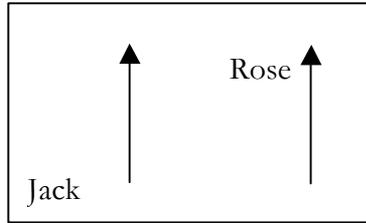
Before the collision, the ship sails on the ocean, and the berg floats upright.



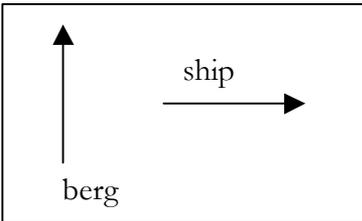
Jack, seated, draws Rose, who lies on a bench.



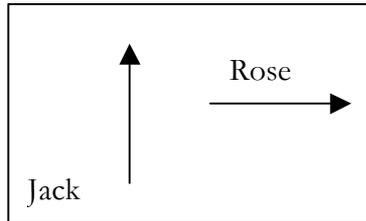
"The weight of the bow pulls the stern up vertical."



Jack kisses Rose on the prow of the ship; they are both standing and dissolve into ghosts.



The stern lands on the bottom of the sea, the berg still floating upright.



Rose floats on a piece of wooden debris. Jack remains in the water.

Finally we scanned the latest theories of deconstruction.

In the end, we concluded that the real answer is not to be found in books but in one's personal experience.

We decided to limit our field of exploration to high-concept movies released around the turn of the millennium.

High concept: when the title says it all

Amblin Entertainment and DreamWorks Pictures founder Steven Spielberg defines **high concept movies** as ideas “you can hold in your hand.”³ His movie *Jaws* is said to be the first high concept movie, or “event” movie:

“The movie *Jaws* was released on June 20, 1975, and, according to Sylbert, then Paramount second-in-command, ‘Everything changed forever. Suddenly the studios were trying to make something that had never been known before – the summer blockbuster. It changed the level of everything.’ American audiences had never been exposed to that type of movie, released with that kind of national campaign. Previously, movies were released in selective cities and rolled out gradually around the country. *Jaws* was a wall-to-wall national release, opening in every available theater Universal Pictures could book. It was a national sensation and broke every standing box-office record. The summer blockbuster – the ‘tentpole’ or ‘event’ picture that would become the principal focus of every studio executive in the industry – was born. So, in essence, was the **high-concept movie**. Previous executives had attempted to boil down plot and character to easily encapsulated ideas – warning writers and producers not

³ Justin WYATT. High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994, p. 13.

to proceed with anything that couldn't be written down on a single piece of paper or the back of a book of matches. Now it had really been done."⁴

According to Disney president Michael Eisner, high concept refers to "a unique idea whose originality could be conveyed briefly."⁵ We would even go as far as to say that a high concept is a movie whose title says it all. For example, consider the movie *The Beach*. What comes to mind when one hears the words "the beach"? Perhaps one thinks of a real shore, with palm trees and sun – only pleasant things. But one might also think of another word which is "the bitch," which has a rather derogatory connotation, and which is feminine. Alex Garland plays already on this ambiguity:

"He had an accent, but at first my sleep-fogged head couldn't place it.

'Bitch,' he said again, spitting out the word.

A Scottish accent. Beach."⁶

So, we might very well induce what kind of story this movie will be about: the searching of a beach, and of women which have both positive and negative aspects. And, since the definite article "the" is used, it is going to be the one beach or the one woman or both. We would not be very far from the real plot. The whole story is contained in the title.

It is very important to understand that the title must be sufficiently ambiguous, but at the same time it must cover as much as possible of what is actually to be found in the movie. That is why, we are sure, writers often start first with a title, then brainstorm and write anything they can think of, anything

⁴ Charles FLEMING. High Concept: Don Simpson and the Hollywood Culture of Excess. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing, Inc., 1998, p. 29, emphasis added.

⁵ Justin WYATT. Op. cit., p. 8.

⁶ Alex GARLAND. The Beach. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1997, p. 7.

that the title may suggest to them. Finally, they construct a plot around these elements only, and along the classical three-act structure.

Indeed, we must be given by the title at least a hint about the plot, if not the whole premise. “High concept refers to a plot-oriented premise.”⁷ Audiences are only willing to pay if they know what to expect. High concept movies are excruciatingly expensive, and the audience’s money is wanted. And of course, for a \$200-million-plus movie like *Titanic*, no chance can be taken. At such a cost, it is not a movie anymore; it is a “monster”⁸ as Charles Fleming terms it.

Many movies fail because they do not address these points (e.g. *Waterworld* or *Battlefield Earth*). Their titles are not evocative enough to give us a sense of what to expect and provide no useful information to stimulate our imagination and our interest.

And the title can draw on anything that conveys meaning and is in connection with something audiences relate strongly to: Video games (*Dungeons and Dragons*, *Tomb Rider*, *Final Fantasy*...), books (*The Firm*, *Sphere*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, *A Knight’s Tale*...), comics (*Superman*, *Batman*, *Spiderman*, *X-men* ...), TV serials (*The Saint*, *Mission: Impossible 2*, *Charlie’s Angels*...), cartoons (*Inspector Gadget*...) previous movies remade or readapted (*Psycho*, *Meet Joe Black*, *The Mummy*, *Hollow Man*, *Bedazzled*...), real events (*The Prince of Egypt*, *Erin Brockovich*, *Titanic*, *The Perfect Storm*...).

⁷ Ken DANCYGER. Jeff RUSH. Alternative Scriptwriting: Writing Beyond the Rules. Boston: Focal Press, 1995, p. 3.

⁸ Charles FLEMING. Op. cit., p. 197.

If a title, or a **pitch** (industry term for story idea), were given to several professional screenwriters who were asked to write a high concept **spec script** (speculation script), would they all come up with roughly the same development? Very likely. That is why collaborative work goes so well and seems so fruitful in Hollywood. As James Cameron talking about *Titanic* said:

“It is like the Vietnam War. You could do a hundred films on that subject and each would be different. But ultimately circle the same themes, because of historical consensus. The public already has a consensus opinion of what *Titanic* means before the facts. . . . Human nobility, tempting fate, arrogance and hubris, and to a lesser extent, the class inequities. You have to deal with those themes either supportively or do an alternate version but you can’t **not** deal with it.”⁹

Movies which focus on topics, and especially characters, actors, or genres, that are unknown to audiences, for whom therefore the title is meaningless, are all **low concept** (or auteur movies): *Magnolia*, *The Five Senses*, *Wonderland*, *The Broken Heart’s Club*, *The Opportunists*, *Requiem for a Dream*...

⁹ Randall FRAKES. *Titanic: James Cameron’s Illustrated Screenplay*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1997, p. xiv.

Foundation of Screenwriting

“Screenplays are three things: structure, structure, structure!”¹⁰
– Bill Goldman

“Drama is more **organized** and compressed than real life.”¹¹

Tarzan: in the jungle of classical conventions

Movies that most respect the classical convention of the American cinema are Disney’s features. Indeed, there is absolutely no limitation to what can be drawn so that the structure does not suffer any defect. Moreover, the story always comes first, so that the timing is perfect; the dialog and the music are added later on.

A **scene** is the smallest unit.

“A scene is an action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character’s life on at least one value with a degree of perceptible significance. Ideally, every scene is a story event.”¹²

Scenes are then organized thematically.

¹⁰ Rich WHITESIDE. The Screenwriting Life. The Dream, the Job, and the Reality. New York: Berkley Boulevard Books, 1998, p. 252.

¹¹ Jurgen WOLFF. Kerry COX. Successful Scriptwriting. Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 1991, p. 50, emphasis added.

¹² Robert McKEE. Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1997, p. 35.

A set of scenes is called a **sequence**: “A sequence is a series of scenes – generally two to five – that culminates with greater impact than any previous scene.”¹³ A set of sequences is called an **act**. “An act is a series of sequences that peak in a climactic scene which causes a major reversal of value, more powerful in its impact than any previous sequence or scene.”¹⁴

Consider the first sequence of the movie *Tarzan*, beat by beat:¹⁵

SCENE 1: A dark eerie jungle. As we move swiftly through the dense jungle night, the word “Tarzan” appears carved into the slab of a thick brown rock. A giant ship is in flames. A baby held tightly in the arms of his mother; they sit in a tiny dinghy, which is being loaded into the raging ocean. A man struggles to lower the rope attached to tiny dinghy while the ship disintegrates all around him. He barely escapes the flames, diving off the ship down into the water, and swims to the dinghy where the mother still clinging tight to her frightened baby helps him up and into safety. As the dinghy floats away from the ship, the young couple embraces warmly, watching with horror as the ship sinks into the ocean.

SCENE 2: Deep in the forest, two fur-covered apes, Kerchak and Kala, playfully take care of their small mischievous child.

SCENE 3: On a beach not too far away, the young human couple and their baby trudge across the wet sand, their eyes full of sadness. Busy lifting timbers from the shipwreck into a huge twisting tree, they erect what will be their tree-house; high above the ground.

SCENE 4: As Kerchak and Kala sleep soundly, a passing frog awakes the young baby who leaps out his mother’s arms and darts after it. Nearby, an orange muscular black-spotted leopard crawls through the trees and stumbles upon the tiny ape. The parents wake to the sound of their child crying and immediately dart into the forest, but they are too late. The leopard catches up to the baby in a frond of bushes. Kala leans her head against Kerchak heaving breast, as the huge ape comforts her with his arm.

SCENE 5: In the bright jungle morning, Kerchak and Kala are moving solemnly through the jungle foliage, when Kala pricks her ears up at the sound of a baby crying in the distance: could it be her son? Following the

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 40.

¹⁵ This summary is loosely based on the descriptive voiceover for the visually impaired.

sound, she races through the forest and emerges from the jungle maze onto the beach. She looks up and wanders at the large tree-house looming high against the clear blue sky. Kala opens the door of the tree-house and ventures inside. Under a small broken table, the bodies of the young mother and father lie lifeless. Following the cry, she discovers in a chest, and underneath a tiny blue blanket, a pink human baby. The baby reaches out his arms affectionately towards Kala. She takes the baby in her arms.

SCENE 6: Sabora, the leopard is in the tree-house. Kala runs for her life as the leopard charges after her. The beast rams his body into her, causing both to crash through the wood and fall down out of the tree. They land on the top of an awning. They fight furiously until the awning rips. Kala loses grips of the baby who bounces off the platform and out of sight. Sabora makes a run for the infant and on to the net. Kala grabs the baby and leaps into the boat, which is suspended by ropes, and which instantly begin falling towards the ground. As Sabora charges, the rope gets caught around his ankle, yanking him upwards. As the boat crashes to the jungle floor, Kala leaps out, baby in hand. She looks up and sees the now struggling Sabora, poised and tangled in a mass of ropes tied to a beam at the top of the tree-house. Relieved, Kala bounds into the forest with the baby in her arms.

The first sequence lasts approximately 10 minutes. It is very important to note that a first sequence is a miniature for the whole feature. It sets the tone, the themes, and the structure for the movie. The unit of the first sequence will be developed on a larger scale in the rest of the feature. For instance, in the movie *Urban Legend*, the first sequence plays a trick on the audience. We are to expect the same kind of trick to be built up in the movie.

In the first sequence of *Tarzan*, the nemesis – nature’s darkest instincts – is defeated. It is a bittersweet beginning because after all Tarzan’s parents are dead. The “family” theme is strongly instilled. Kala adopts the baby immediately and she is ready to cope with the consequences it might lead to. It already foreshadows the irrationality of love at first sight. The man vs. nature theme is also introduced. Some other patterns are established, like the “hand” pattern; the baby plays with Kala’s hand, the same way Tarzan and Jane will put their hands together in several scenes. Finally, Phil Collins’ voice as a manifestation of the characters’ feelings is set up.

This first sequence creates a strong empathy for Tarzan on the part of the audience. The most effective way of inducing the audience to care for a character is to have him undergo blatant injustice. In this story, it all boils down to Tarzan being left an orphan. During the course of the movie, other devices of creating empathy are used: for instance, when Tarzan says, “I’ll be the best ape ever!” and he actually becomes skillful, stealthy and the “king of the jungle,” in other words, good at what he does and in touch with his power, it can only generate admiration on the part of the audience. As the following table shows, when people in the audience admire the hero, it creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy. Moreover, the more powerful and endangering a nemesis is, the more the hero is respected if he wins over it. Even more if the consequences of this respect are shown on the other characters. When Tarzan kills Sabora, the whole ape community cheers, and this is projected on the audience as well.

Empathetic Emotion	Comparison of Situational Meaning for Character and Viewer	Action Tendency
Compassion	C: weak V: greater than C	Seek intimacy, giving, protection
Sympathy	C: strong and weak V: equal to C	Seek intimacy, giving and receiving, sharing
Admiration	C: strong V: less than C	Seek proximity, receiving and giving

Similarities and Difference among Sympathy, Compassion, and Admiration.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ed STAN. Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1996, p. 179.

Director Animator Kevin Lima notes:

“There really is no traditional villain in our film. Ultimately Tarzan is his own villain. He brings the downfall of his gorilla family himself. His conflict is really internal and we had to look for ways to take that internal journey and make it external. We didn’t want him to be someone sitting around contemplating his fate all the time. We had to find ways to physicalize that.”¹⁷

And Producer Bonnie Arnold observes:

“One of the things we did in all of our brainstorming sessions with the writers was to try and come up with themes in everyday life that contemporary audiences could relate to. And the theme we kept coming back to was ‘what defines a family?’ Tarzan is really an adopted child. He’s adopted by this ape family and grows up thinking that he’s one of them. When he meets Jane and the other humans for the first time, his dilemma is, which family does he really belong to? Is it the family that raised and nurtured him or the family that he was born into?”¹⁷

High concept movies have three acts: “They have a definite beginning, middle, and end. It is the foundation of dramatic structure.”¹⁸

¹⁷ From the DVD.

¹⁸ Syd FIELD. Screenplay: The Foundation of Screenwriting. New York: MJF Books, 1994, p. 16.

conditions defining the nature of the speech act (for example, to ‘promise’ you must be able to deliver).”²¹

Telling the truth is a rhetorical device: if you read a book written by an historian, you believe it not because it is true, but because you were provided a structure to fall onto and which is based on the way we think. “What makes a story interesting is creativity, what makes it believable is form.”²² Likewise,

“storytelling is the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action. A story’s event **structure** is the means by which you first express, then prove your idea... without explanation.”²³

What is *Tarzan*’s structure?

Inciting incident for the central plot: Tarzan’s parents are killed.

Catalyst: Kala adopts Tarzan.

Act 1: Tarzan learns to become an ape.

Plot point (or pivotal point, or point of no return) **1:** Tarzan meets other human beings like himself for the first time (30 minutes after the beginning of the movie).

Act 2: Tarzan learns to behave like a human.

Plot point 2: Tarzan discovers his real origins. (at 1 hour.)

Act 3: Tarzan decides he prefers to stay with his ape family.

Climax: Kerchak calls Tarzan his son (at 78 minutes). For the structure’s sake, and to wrap it up, the movie’s ending differs from the book’s²⁴ where Tarzan actually leaves

²¹ Jerome BRUNER. Acts of Meaning. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 63.

²² Carlos DE ABREU. Howard SMITH. Opening the Doors to Hollywood. How to Sell your Idea, Story, Book, Screenplay, Manuscript. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1995, p. 170.

²³ Robert KcKEE. Op. cit., p. 113, emphasis added.

²⁴ Edgar BURROUGHS. Tarzan of the Apes. The Adventures of Lord Greystoke. New York: Ballantine Books, 1963.

the island and where Jane is engaged to Clayton. Of course, Tarzan and Jane eventually tie the knot in the second volume.²⁵

Any story starts with an inciting incident, with something that drastically changes the protagonist's life. In *The Sixth Day* for instance, Adam Gibson (Arnold Schwarzenegger) is mistakenly cloned. In *Proof of Life*, Alice Bowman (Meg Ryan)'s husband is abducted by anti-government forces. A catalyst comes up (a character or element that helps the story move forward): freelance professional hostage negotiator Terry Thorne (Russell Crowe). In *Bedazzled*, Elliot Richards (Brendan Fraser) plucks up his courage and asks the love of his life on a date, but he is turned down. Then, he meets his catalyst – the devil (Elizabeth Hurley) – with whom he strikes up a deal and who promises Elliot seven wishes in exchange for his soul. In *Bounce*, Abby Janello's (Gwyneth Paltrow) husband is victim of a plane crash. In *Tarzan*, the protagonist's parents are killed.

For the sake of symmetry, there is usually a mid-act climax (or mid-point), right in the middle – or so – of the film (in the second act). Usually, it appears when the hero thrives on being in control of the situation for the first time. In *Tarzan*, this moment occurs when Jane encounters Tarzan's gorilla family for the first time while the apes destroy the camp, at 44 minutes, the movie's length being exactly 88 minutes. In *The Truman Show*, it is when Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) eventually summons up his courage and contrives to cross the bridge, something he could not do before because he is terrified of water. In *Titanic*, it is when Jack and Rose kiss on the deck of the ship; as seen earlier, it echoes the ship hitting the berg. In *Se7en*, it comes “when [the detectives] get Victor's

²⁵ Edgar BURROUGHS. The Return of Tarzan. The Adventures of Lord Greystoke. New York: Ballantine Books, 1963.

name.”²⁶ However Kristin Thompson explains the legitimacy of the mid-point still needs to be proven:

“How that link [the Mid-Point] differs from all the other links that make up the dramatic chain of events remains unclear. In the one film that I have identified as conforming to Field’s proportions, *Speed*, the mid-point would be the moment when Howard makes phone contact with Jack, a significant event because a subsequent conversation will tip Jack off to the fact that video camera is present and in turn allow him to trick the bomber and save the passengers. That moment does seem to be significant, but it is hardly a turning point.”²⁷

To increase the pace of the third act and introduce a feeling of urgency, screenwriters usually introduce a “clock” or time limit. In other words the “protagonist is faced with time limitation to reach [his] final goal.”²⁸ The most effective clock ever is to be found in *Back to the Future*: the deadlock is the lightning, the only possibility for Marty Mcfly (Michael J. Fox) to escape from the past. In *Se7en*, it is the hour (7:00 p.m.) Jonathan Doe agrees to disclose the truth to the police. In *Meet Joe Black*, it is the fact that William Parrish (Anthony Hopkins) is revealed the moment of his death... by Death (impersonated by Brad Pitt) itself. In *Tarzan*, the main protagonist is told that Jane’s ship has to leave shortly.

²⁶ Linda COWGILL. Secrets: Screenplay Structure. How to recognize and emulate the structural frameworks of great films. Los Angeles: Lone Eagle Publishing Company, 1998, p. 260.

²⁷ Kristin THOMPSON. Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 31.

²⁸ Carlos DE ABREU. Howard SMITH. Op. cit., p. 162.