

Story Analysis

Coverage for: Tracking Board

Title: PRIVATE
Writer(s): PRIVATE
Draft Date: N/A
Pages: 120

Genre: Heist
Period: Modern
Setting: Urban
Locale: New York + Various
Budget: High

Story: So-so
Structure/Pacing: Good
Dialog: So-so
Writing Style: Good
Commercial: Good
Visual Elements: So-so
Title: So-so
Characterization: So-so
Set Up (First 15 Pages): Good

Consider for:
Writer: PASS
Script: PASS

Analyst: PRIVATE

Logline:

When a hacker is recruited to support what appears to be a fairly basic a heist, he discovers far too late that his employer has something much bigger in mind that he is now an accomplice to a plot that could destroy the country or even the world.

Comments Summary:

PRIVATE is a fun action packed heist-thriller set in the world of cyber-criminals. The structure is sound, the writing clear, and there are some wonderful set pieces. The characters are varied and interesting, but the lead suffers from being too nice and clean-cut. This results in the movie having the same tone. While it does feel like a movie - and many movies are made this way, full of implausible events and movie logic – I really feel the subject matter and story line would have much more impact if it were written with a dirtier, edgier tone. And this really begins with our lead – JOHN. He's an ex-hacker, a criminal; so don't be afraid to make him a more flawed. Give him room to improve, to arc. He can still be likable, but an edgier version would be more interesting and emotionally engaging. Think more JASON BOURNE, less NOW YOU SEE ME. On top of that a heist film is all about big twists and reveals, but this one is basically what it seems like from the beginning.

Premise:

The premise is good, but not great. I can see an interesting trailer, but not a catchy tagline for the poster. The idea of a cyber-heist with a hacker-protagonist is good. But the lead character is too unremarkable, too generic, and unspecific. He's just a hacker asked to hack. I would rather see some irony, or a contradiction of sorts. The most obvious choice would be to somehow involve the private. His father was involved with private, now his son is taking down private. Somehow those two things need to be more involved. I think when the big reveal comes, that Doe wants to take down Private, and John actually wants to do that. He blames private for destroying his family. Maybe it drove his mother away, or drove her to commit suicide. Maybe he was brought up rich and spoiled because of his father's lies, then, when it was all taken away he resented the entire system. I'm not exactly sure, but the premise needs to be catchier and it needs to involve some interesting specific quality of John. On top of that, this would all lead to John having a better final choice – revenge on private, or saving Jane.

Story:

The story revolves almost entirely around John, which is a great start, as there are no real point of view issues. We follow the same story from start to finish. The only times we jump away to his father or to James is to show an event directly effecting the main story. So I commend you on that.

The content was interesting, but was unfortunately not the most emotionally engaging. A lot of that is to do with the character work, specifically John (will be discussed in the character section), but also from the tone. Like I mentioned earlier I got a real NOW YOU SEE ME vibe. That was a heist film with a difference (magicians) and really focused on big set pieces, while also stretching plausibility. It was a nice spectacle and a reasonably successful movie. But your story is not about magicians, it's about the dirty underworld of cyber-criminals. And I think it needs a grittier tone to suit. Therefore, I would prefer to see less snipers shooting and missing, and more tricky little twists with John and Jane using their wits more than their technology. Instead of relying on the spectacle, a movie like THE BOURNE IDENTITY relies on real world situations, actually avoiding big landmark events and shiny new cars that explode. Instead using old beat-up cars in normal streets, and fights with rolled up magazines. The hacking itself would be hard to show cinematically, so it doesn't seem to suit the big flashy style.

While the writing was clear, the story didn't always come across as such. I found myself asking too many questions that should have been answered. I believe this is one of the things that gave it the 'unreal' tone. Things like Jane getting her photo taken. She was a long way away from the others in a crowded street, why didn't she just flee? Go for help. Do something. I couldn't see her

motivation for going along with it all, especially after what had happened to her. She is introduced as feisty and strong, but attempts very little in the way of escape.

Tone aside, the story just needed more ups and downs. Twists and turns. Big reveals, for both plot and character. We learn who John is at the beginning and that's basically him, and this holds true for the rest of the characters as well. We already know his 'job interview' is not what he thinks it is. There's no real attempt to make us believe Victor is out to steal stuff. You could make it a reverse of the twist in Die Hard (and Die Hard 3) where the villain appears to have a political agenda, but is really just there to pull off a massive robbery. Mix it up, do the opposite. Instead of preaching from the beginning, what if it was supposed to be a big heist? That's why John is helping, for the money. He's poor and jobless; maybe he actually goes along with the plan out of greed. Then Victor's true intentions are revealed before the third act. Preferably with John working it out on his own, or something like that. Give us more twists and turns from start to finish. In the current story John is hired to hack something big, and then that's exactly what happens.

And really work on the setups. It seems whenever they needed a place to hide from the signal, or a giant laser transmitting device, it just happened to show up. You need to take all these items and seamlessly integrate them earlier into the story. And try not to just mention them then forget about them. The audience is savvy; when you show something and don't use it, they'll mentally make a note that it will be used later. Like the hotspot where they could hide their phone signal; it was mentioned, but not really used. All in all they relied too heavily on the available resources and not enough on their wit and guile to get them out of tricky situations. Make them work for it. He's a great hacker, don't leave things lying round that he can use. Make him use something in an ingenious way. I'd rather see him use something we see every day in an unusual and outside of the box manner, than some special technical device I've never heard of or seen before. Again, it would make the world feel real. Hell, they have the Internet on some fridges these days. What about a sequence where he hacks something with the fridge? That would be a great trailer moment. People associate better with stories involving people and things they already know about. His reliance on technology could even be his flaw. To show his true character, make him solve his problems without the technology.

Structure/Pacing:

The structure is good. The story opens with John already having a goal – to get a job. This gives the story momentum and direction from the get go. It really starts well and ultimately organically leads into his entry to the main story. The 'job interview' sequence acts as a mini mission. This is the first act, and structurally it's great.

Same goes with the first half of the second act. The smaller missions to eventually break out

Victor. All great. But after they break him out, there's a real stall in the story before we get to the big Private heist which is basically the third act. There needs to be more mini missions here. Like the job interview and breaking out Victor. Getting Jane and the plane seems like the obvious choice. But instead of the usual hacking and intrigue, they just bully her to pilot them. It doesn't match the rest of the story, and it's very slow. This same issue is present with the build up to the big Private heist. There's too much talk and too much preaching. Instead, break up the big heist into some smaller missions beforehand. Getting the camera info and stuff. They currently do it, but it's not dramatically structured like the earlier missions.

For example: What if Victor already had his own personal pilot arranged to meet them (which seems more plausible. Again, it's movie logic to say this well organized super-villain would have snipers on Private, but no pilot to fly him there?). So have John work this out and somehow sabotage it. Maybe he hacks into the airport tower control and diverts the plane. This shows his skills and makes us like him more. But Victor's reaction is to just grab the nearest pilot (Jane) and bully her on board with threats. This matches his character better as he seems like a plan things immaculately first kind of person, only resorting to bullying when necessary. This would of course add the wonderful twist that it's now John's fault that Jane is on board. Therefore ramping up the chemistry and emotion between those two. Adding real kick to his later attempts to save her.

Main Characters:

For me the story rests solidly on the shoulders of our lead character – John. Unfortunately he's just too nice and unforgettable. He's a hacker who hacks, and nothing more. There are a few different things you could try. You could make John seem like a real stand-up guy, then later reveal how dark his hacker past is. Or, (preferably) why not just make him a selfish or egotistical guy. Don't be afraid to make him flawed. That gives you more room to move, to arc. I couldn't really see his flaw. He was a good hacker to begin with, and that's basically all he had to do, it was the only skill he showed. He needed to exhibit a flawed behavior early on, that he reverses later to show his improvement as a human being.

I liked the opening scene at the time I read it. It establishes his skill, while also making him likable. It establishes his good morals. But what if he were more selfish? Instead of just stopping the guy at the coffee shop, he instead counter-hacked him shutting him down with a virus (foreshadowing his later skills and task) while doing it in a mocking smart-ass way; which makes us still like him. You could make it a twist. He looks like a nice stand-up citizen and we fear he's being hacked by the other guy, but then twist – he's not the sheep he's the wolf and he totally owns that guy. Just make it clear he's more interested in saving himself that everyone else. Or even make it an ego thing where he wants to prove he's the best. Then later someone could say Private can't be hacked and he would have to do it just to prove he can. To prove he's the best.

That's a more organic motivation than wanting to save his father, which at this point is just too convenient and corny.

In fact, you could do something similar with his father. There's a hint they don't get along, but on screen they mostly do. What if they seemed to hate each other, but John still does the job to save his father and it's later revealed that John was involved but his father kept quiet about it and kept him out of jail. Integrate the mother storyline I mentioned earlier if you want. Basically don't be afraid to make John a little dirtier, grittier, edgier. He sets the tone for the movie. You don't want him unlikable, just flawed so we feel a rush of emotion when he changes. When he helps the girl, or the economy.

Again to compare it to Bourne. He was a bad guy. He was a killer, but he made the decision to change later on. To save the girl. John could be similar. He could be greedy or egotistical and actually want to complete the mission but change his mind and want to save Jane. She could even point out that he's selfish. Or if you go with the story where he wants revenge on Private, she could help him realize how many people he's going to hurt and not really get any revenge. Basically the most important moment in a character's story is late in the movie where they have to make a big decision. But it has to be between two good choices, or two evils. Otherwise the decision is too easy and has no impact. Make John more flawed and let him change.

Minor Characters:

On the good guys side we have Jane, Rob, James and Ron. James and Ron filled their role nicely. They didn't play a big part so not a lot of time to show more of them. They were functional and that's works well. Rob was similar, but as I discussed earlier, I think you could do more with him. His relationship with John feels too straight forward. He feels like he's just in the story because the writer needs an excuse to motivate John. I prefer the more twisted storyline where John is motivated by less selfless reasons to begin with, then later when he realizes how bad things are and there's a chance that he may quit, the bad guys then use him as motivation. And I would still go with some more twists and turns with us questioning whether John even likes his father enough to care.

As for Jane. She starts off with some real personality. She doesn't feel like the stock standard generic female to be rescued by the hero. But all that quickly fades and soon that's exactly what she becomes. You have a very male heavy cast, so she really needs to shine. Strengthen that attitude, and if you want it to go away, show them crushing it out of her. Show that behind the mask of strength she's still vulnerable. As the side-kick and romantic lead she's the third most important character behind John and Victor. Make the most of her. And having her point out John's flaws and push him to triumph would be the ideal role for her.

As for the bad guys, we have Victor, Bo, Harry, and Tim. Harry was my favorite. The character that starts bad and turns good usually creates the strongest emotional reaction. But not only that, he's the perfect foil for John. He's old school. He's everything John's not and vice versa. Normally I would recommend the main villain be the opposite, but in this case it works perfectly with Harry because he becomes an ally later on. I found Tim unmemorable and soon forgotten. I couldn't really see the point of having him. So he can be shot by Bo? I also couldn't see the point of that scene. To make Bo bad? He was already bad. I guess it was enough to push Harry over to the good guys, but I still would prefer if you have John somehow involved in the scene. Even if he's just tied up and watching. I didn't like Bo. But probably not for the reasons you were hoping for. Sure, he's an asshole, but he didn't feel real. He was another one of the reasons this felt like an implausible movie, rather than a gritty realistic thriller. He was just bad for no real reason. He didn't have an agenda like Victor. He didn't have ideals that he was trying to force onto others. I'd focus on him and really play up his jealousy. Something like that, choose a trait and really focus on it. Have him actually trying to one up John. Trying to prove he's more important. If he used to be the golden child but had been replaced, that would make his actions more believable.

And lastly Victor. I really like how he has an ideal he's striving for. But I didn't like how often he preached it. A lot of his dialogue building up to the big heist was very on the nose because of that. Like I mentioned earlier, it would have more impact if we thought he was a common crook trying to steal a lot of money, then we discover he just wants to bring down the system because that's what he believes in. But do it quicker, in one speech to John. And make it charismatic. Make us actually consider his argument. If he's just bad for the sake of it then we dismiss him immediately. If he makes sense to us and John, then things are real and exciting. We understand the dilemma. Otherwise you make him too much like the villain from Die Hard 4. He too was often bland, and constantly spouted preaching's about bringing down the evil system that wronged him. We get it. And it's a hot topic with all the world's troubles over the past few years. But make him more cunning and charismatic like Hans, and less preachy than no-name unforgettable sequel bad guy. If anything, I would make him the shadow opposite of Rich. John grew up with Rich who spouted positive things about making big money. He resents his father for this. So when a father-figure comes along who spouts the opposite ideal, we would understand why John would really consider it. It makes sense to him. In the end it's just the execution of the plan that holds him back. And the involvement of the girl.

Originality/Creativity:

I wouldn't say this film has a lot of artistic merit. It doesn't really suit the genre. The visual elements are more important. Having said that, the gritty style I keep referring to would at least allow a good director to make some clever artistic choices. How the hacking is handled and so on.

Visual Elements:

The script has several wonderful set pieces, and plenty of potential for creative ways to display the somewhat un-cinematic hacking sequences. Breaking out Victor was a great sequence. The information coming up on the big screens another, but not really anything that we haven't seen before. I don't think it's necessary for you to come up with a new visual way of showing him hacking into things, that's more of a director's choice. But I would think about adding a twist to any of the set pieces you already have. Like I mentioned, hacking with a fridge. Or something better than just spray painting the vans. Come up with something fresh. Something that people see in the trailer and decide they have to watch the movie.

Commercial:

Again, I'm going to go back to the tone. I understand they've decided to make a sequel to NOW YOU SEE ME, but I just think that silly movie-logic tone works because it's about magicians. They're all about show and spectacle to begin with, so it makes sense to use that tone. Having said that, THE PRESTIGE was the realistic version and it did it better. And both BOURNE, and DIE HARD, went on to start franchises. The market is flooded with movies full of movie logic and implausibility, but it is changing. Not only did Bourne redefine the way they make Bond movies, but Christopher Nolan even started making comic book movies in this gritty style. They realized that audiences weren't stupid. And that if it feels fake, we won't have a real emotional reaction. If it feels real, we start asking ourselves "What would I do if I was in that situation?" – and that's where we become emotionally involved. Giving John a more satisfying character arc would also make for a better resolution to the story. Therefore better word of mouth. And the previous mentioned ideas about using more real world items and less gadgetry would bring in a greater audience. Adding irony and a real hook to the premise would create more attention. But the one thing you really have going is the theme which is still a hot topic. It seems all similar movies these days are either about the haves vs the have nots, or the battle of security vs privacy. I wouldn't imagine it's a situation that's going to change anytime soon. And most importantly, it feels like a movie. I can see posters and a trailer.

Dialog:

The dialogue needs work for a number of reasons. Firstly, they just don't sound like individuals. Their voices have moments of being distinct, but too often blur together. A few suggestions to curb this. Decide how smart people are. Victor is smart; make sure he always talks in long well formed sentences. Tim, not so much; so make his dialog short, abrupt and not proper English. Give them a background trait that defines their metaphoric family. For instance, maybe Harry is a baseball fan so he often discusses things using baseball metaphors. While someone like Victor

could discuss baseball using business metaphors. It doesn't have to be every sentence, just now and then to remind us who's who.

And Harry is your best bet for contrasting dialog. Again, play up the difference between him and his old school style and John and his new tech-savvy approach. I don't mind John, and sometimes the others, using jargon and tech-speak. In fact, it's an important part of setting the tone of the story, but remember the audience doesn't necessarily understand and you don't want to alienate them. Make sure things are clear from the context of the story, and if they're not, and he's saying something a layman wouldn't understand, make sure he has to explain it to Harry or Jane in layman's terms. There are a few instances where important plot mechanics are discussed and it could be easy to miss them, which made parts of the story hard to follow. Therefore making the next scene less dramatic because we don't understand what's going on. I often felt the characters were saying things that went over my head, and I'm not a tech dinosaur. A little flavor is nice, but cut out anything that's unnecessary. If it doesn't move the story forward or reveal something about the character, then cut it.

And lastly, the preaching. I really found that was what bogged the story down between breaking Victor out and taking down the stock exchange. It's one of the main reasons he feels like a comic book style cardboard cutout villain. It's important he has ideals, but it was too on the nose to have him vocalize it so often. Instead, show him doing things. Show him being cunning and charismatic. The preaching gets old real fast.

Writing Style/Presentation:

The writing was crisp and clear. It moved along at a brisk pace. And felt for the most part very professional. I wish the dialog was as clear as the action descriptions. Time wasn't wasted describing unnecessary details, and the numbers of errors were very low. Well above acceptable rates and certainly nothing that would interfere with the read. If anything, I would just go through and make everything as clear as possible. Dialog can be on the nose, but action really can't. And it's hard because you (the writer) already know and understand the story so well; it all makes sense to you. So get others to point out anything that could be confusing. I have a couple of examples. Page 104: The Scarred FBI agent pockets a thumb drive, and then in the next paragraph it's blinking. I thought it was in his pocket? And the same thing happens with the virus. You can't really just tell us that part 2 of the virus is in. How would we show that on screen? Instead of Victor's phone just saying "Confirmation" – have it say more. "Confirmation – part 2 of 3 installed." Little details like that so it's absolutely clear.

Title:

I'm not sold on the title. I can see how it relates to the story in several ways. They use other

people to unwittingly install the virus. And they often hide in actual real crowds for cover. So it makes sense and I could see it on the poster. It does its job, but not much more. To be honest, I think your time would be better served working on little story issues. The title is unmemorable for now, but if the movie was memorable it would become memorable through attachment.

Conclusion:

The premise and story are very movie worthy. It's easy to visualize a trailer or poster. This is a great step, but it means the script needs to stand out from the crowd for other reasons. The market has moved away from the implausible over-the-top movie logic riddled spectacles, and elevated the gritty realistic version of stories. To push this to the next level it needs a grittier tone and a more engaging and interesting lead character. Both issues go hand in hand. The fate of this script rests squarely on John's hacker shoulders.

Market Analysis:

Currently this script most resembles NOW YOU SEE ME (2013), which is by no means a bad thing. This was a very successful film that has already garnered a sequel. This is a good film to watch before the next pass of this script because it will let you know if this is in fact the tone you are looking to achieve with your script. As mentioned in my notes above, I do not believe that this is the direction that this script should go in, but there is always a place in the market for lighthearted heist films. Several other more lighthearted heist movies that should be looked at (especially if this is the direction you choose to go with this script) would be: OCEAN'S ELEVEN (2001), THE ITALIAN JOB (2003), or more recently WHITE HOUSE DOWN (2013).

On the other end of the spectrum would be the gritty, hard, or more action oriented heist films, which in my opinion fits PRIVATE better. If this is the direction you decide to take your script I would suggest looking at THE PRESTIGE (2006), any of the BOURNE (2002, 2004, 2007, 2012) films, or OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN (2013).

Just looking at the last two suggestions, WHITE HOUSE DOWN vs. OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN will give you a good idea of where the market is at in terms of light vs. gritty. These are two films that are practically the same story, released at the same time and respectively did both poorly and well at the domestic box office (\$75 Million {over \$150 million budget} vs. \$100 Million {over \$70 million budget}).

I would love to see this story be grittier, and I believe the writer could take great inspiration from other heist films such as THE TOWN (2010), HEAT (1995) and THE THOMAS CROWN AFFAIR (1999).

If the writer can bring down the budget to the mid-range, while keeping some of the spectacle and grandeur that currently fills this script, I believe it will be an easy sell as a gritty, "this could actually happen" story which audience are eating up and will be doing so for quite some time.

The Grid:

	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	GOOD	SO-SO	NOT GOOD
Originality /Creativity				X	
Commercial			X		
Premise			X		
Story				X	
Structure/Pacing			X		
Main Characters				X	
Minor Characters				X	
Dialog				X	
Writing Style/Presentation			X		
Visual Elements				X	
Set Up (First 15)			X		
Title				X	

(SCRIPT) RECOMMEND:

CONSIDER:

PASS: XX

(WRITER) RECOMMEND:

CONSIDER:

PASS: XX