

Jared M. Gordon Script Analysis

Title: Massacre of the Innocents
Writer: Jack Taylor
Pages: 99
Coverage Date: 11/11/2012
Period: Present
Form: Screenplay
Genre: Crime Drama

Logline:

When the robbery of a priceless painting goes off-track, a good cop and his retired cop grandfather must go up against the Russian mob and crooked FBI agents to recover the painting and exact justice.

Initial Thoughts:

Your dialogue is outstanding and the kinetic pace of your story is off the charts. This was a fun read. That said, the multiple-protagonist angle hurts the script more than helps, as we're never given enough of a chance to relate to a complex, sympathetic protagonist before he's either killed or introduced too late in the story. Additionally, lack of a complex antagonist also shifts the focus around too much, regarding who your protagonists are really fighting. So let's jump in the squad car and drive right in:

Structure/Format:

Everything on the title page should be standard, 12-point courier. The title and byline are centered, no quotes around the title. Any contact information should be left-justified in the bottom left of the page. Remove any copyright or WGA information. If it exists in tangible form, it already possesses copyright protection.

There should be two lines between scenes, as opposed to one.

Middle of two: "I'll be a steward to up and coming artist."
Should be "artists."

Middle of four: you have a parenthetical that indicates that Mr. Steinbek stammers. Parentheticals are only used if it's otherwise unclear who a character addresses. Example:

The teacher walks in. The students fall silent.

TEACHER

(to Alana)

You. Come here.

If you have a character stammering, write in their stammer (i.e., "W-what the? How dare you!").

Bottom of page four: Mr. Steinbek "is visibly appalled" but that's unplayable. Show us how he's appalled. Does he roar, groan, scream? What do we see?

Top of page six: "front of him an rises" should be "and"

Towards the bottom of eight: Tuxes and Gowns should be all caps. Even if they're minor characters, they need to be capped, and at least give us their age range (i.e., 25-75).

Middle of 13: whenever you first introduce a new location, give a short description of it. Use the Femino's description ("A small, but bright and airy gallery. Several dozen quirky, modern art pieces are on display") here, as opposed to the subsequent scene in which we see it.

Middle of 13: Nathan says, "At 0320 my time which is 0820 for you...cheers." Ellipses are really only used when a character either trails off or if a character begins a sentence and another character completes it. In this case, four periods between "you" and "cheers" is unnecessary. One period will suffice.

Bottom of 13: in the slugline, you call it "BRADMAN GALLERY" but a line later, in the description, you call it "the Bradmen Gallery." Keep consistent with the spelling.

Top of 14: iPod spelling.

Middle of 15: "with his show" - should be "shoe."

Middle of 16: "Nathan adjust his goggles" should be "adjusts."

Middle of 18: Nathan begins a line, "Is this is" - you have an extra "is" in there.

Middle of 27: "a dozen per-teen" should be "pre-teen"

Top of 28: "Sam's Mom looks embarrassed" - unplayable. How does she look embarrassed?

Top of 32: "A the folk music blaes" - should read, "FOLK MUSIC blaes." If we don't see the source of the sound (i.e., a telephone ring in the next room) then cap it.

As a general rule, try to avoid gerunds (verbs ending in -ing) in your action blocks. They can almost universally be replaced with

a shorter, present-tense verb. For example, "is checking" can be "checks," "is working," "works" and so on.

Middle of 39: a character who speaks over a TV, phone, or radio, would have an parenthetical:

FEDERAL AGENT 1 (O.S.)
(over the radio)
Roger that.

You do this correctly later on, so this is likely just a typo.

Top of 40: "one the gang members" missing an "of."

Middle of 41: you have Ricky tagged as "GANG MEMBER"

Bottom of 48: "traffic begins to move again." Try to avoid "begins to," "starts to," "proceeds to," and "continues to." "Traffic moves" is all you need. If it's doing it, it's given that it had to start doing it, at some point.

Action on 50: "Fred and Derrick depart for lane twenty. When they arrive, Derrick picks up his rental shoes." This all takes place inside the bowling alley, but in two different locations within it. You'd likely need a new slugline to delineate that:

INT. DANNY'S BOWLING ALLEY, FRONT COUNTER - CONTINUOUS

INT. DANNY'S BOWLING ALLEY, LANE 20 - CONTINUOUS

Or at the very least break up the action block between "depart for lane twenty." and "When they arrive"

Top of 53: "but is movement impeded by the panicked crowd" should be "his"

Middle of 53: "Todd wipes his gun drops his it"

Middle of 54: "Derrick YELPS" if we see the source of the sound, it doesn't need to be capped. Derrick yelps.

Middle of 54: "Wojciechowski last position" should be "Wojciechowski's last position"

Middle of 54: "Fred hears the distinctive forty caliber gunfire from Hawley's service weapon." As the audience, it will be unclear what a character hears, especially amidst so much chaos. Just have Fred duck down.

Bottom of 55: "struggles to breath" should be "struggles to breathe."

Middle of 59: "A black morning band" should be "mourning"

Middle of 62: Gramps says, "Get it all this straightened out"

Bottom of 67: "walk troughs" should be "walkthroughs."

Bottom of 68: "competitive to has" should be "competitive to have."

Top of 69: "No way to know until we get the the hired help corralled." Two "the"

Middle of 69: "How close are to finding them?"

Middle of 71: "I'll make sure he makes it tomorrow," should end on a period.

Middle of 71: you call Major Hawley "Major Haley"

Bottom of 71: "every Russian with a hundred-hundred mile radius." - guessing you meant, "every Russian within a hundred-thousand mile radius" or something similar.

Bottom of 71: "Why do you think that" missing a question mark.

Middle of 72: "Endicott city" - City should be capitalized. Also, not sure if this was on purpose, but there is no Endicott City in Maryland. There is, however, an Ellicott City.

Middle of 76: you need a new slugline for ROOM ONE-NINETEEN: (i.e., INT. MOTEL, ROOM 119 - DAY)

Middle of 77: "(point towards the Passenger's body)" should be an action, not a parenthetical.

Top of 78: "Gramps'" should be "Gramps's"

Middle of 82: "Gramps takes his cain off" should be "cane."

Top of 83: "You're being here means he's already dead." Should be "your"

Page 87: when a character is interrupted, the convention for that is two dashes:

GRAMPS (O.S.)
You raised him good. He was trying to do
good when we lost him and--

You're also missing an (over the phone) parenthetical in the above dialogue.

Top of 88: if we only hear one side of a phone conversation, the convention is:

AGENT ELDRON
(into his phone)
Special agent Cullen
(pause)
really? Okay we can do that. Did he
leave a callback number?
(pause)
No? Okay we'll meet him then.

Bottom of 91: don't underline words for emphasis. An actor will almost certainly choose his or her own way to read it, and it should be obvious through the context how a line is to be read.

Top of 91: "dark a half bottle of whiskey." Should be "drank."

Middle of 91: if the action switches from the parking garage outside of the car to the parking garage inside of the car, we'll still need a new slugline, such as INT. FBI AGENTS' CAR - CONTINUOUS.

Bottom of 92: "Gramps FIRES point blank at Agent Eldron's face" I think you meant Cullen.

Character/Plot:

The scene inside the house, on page three, can be cut. We don't learn anything new about the characters, and the dialogue doesn't advance the story. Just showing them removing the Monet (or perhaps breaking up the prior conversation so that it spills into the Monet theft scene) should suffice.

On page four, Todd informs Mr. Steinbek, "You got robbed." And Mr. Steinbek doesn't seem to take it too badly. He looks appalled and goes into his house. He doesn't struggle with Todd and Nathan? He doesn't back away and scream for the police? Unless Todd or Nathan pulls a gun on him, why wouldn't he try to stop these guys in their tracks?

The scene at the top of five can end with Todd's, "Don't quit the day job." As written, they then go on to essentially say, "We have to be careful to not be caught," which is precisely what we see them doing in the following scene. You show it, so there's no need to announce it beforehand in the dialogue.

Middle of 11: the security guard says, "They are turned off for private functions," but that's exactly the sort of information that a security guard wouldn't just say. If Nathan needs to know that information, then it's surrendered to him too easily.

Make it clearer that the fitness center's steel door isn't right on the street, otherwise the reader wonders, despite the

hullabaloo from the fire engines, why no one spots Nathan breaking in.

We later find out that Nathan's motive for stealing the piece is to pay Danny back for Danny's help with Melinda's fertilization. But that's precisely the sort of information that we should have early on, to put our sympathy squarely into Nathan's court. As of this point in the film, the theft seems to be without motive.

Bottom of 17: you can likely cut the patron's dialogue by half, as we already see the piece that he/she's talking about: "The Barbies represent the fake, idealistic image we force upon our daughters, and the toilet motif shows how we're defecating onto them. Such a moving piece" might be all you need.

Is moving out of town Danny's only reason for trying to sell the painting? Seems like a lot of trouble for a guy who seems already pretty well off.

The biggest issue at this point is that without Nathan, we're experiencing a narrative without a likable character. It doesn't matter what Danny's motivations were: he murdered a pregnant woman. No audience would give him any sort of sympathy, and we don't feel any concern for him, afterward. In *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone commits murder, but we see how circumstances force him to do it: if he doesn't, he and his family will be wiped out. In *In Bruges*, we have a protagonist who kills a little boy, but he feels so much guilt that his plot goal is to commit suicide. The point is that while these guys are most certainly gangsters and murderers, they have a code. They have rules. And consequences to breaking them.

Without having the details of how/if Danny disposed of Nathan and Melinda, we're left to wonder how/why he becomes the prime suspect. True, he and Nathan were friends, but why would he allow the bodies to be found, if indeed they were? Why wouldn't he dispose of them in such a way so that there's a question as to whether or not they are dead or simply up and left town? If he's sloppy enough to have allowed the bodies to be discovered, then he needs a pretty good reason for making that mistake.

Middle of 40 to middle of 43: why is the conversation so long with Ricky? How does it move the story forward?

How does Danny make it look like he entered a van, then moments later appears behind the dumpster? Is that ever explained?

Top of 55, Fred tells Danny to call off his "assassins" or die, and when Danny doesn't make a move, Fred seems to back off his threat too quickly. Why wouldn't he kill Danny?

Would be more ironic if Danny's the one who accidentally fires the shot that kills his own son. His own greed led him to this mess.

Hawley has the faceplate that gives him access to the \$40 million. Why wouldn't whoever it was that opened the account and deposited the money simply withdraw the funds or otherwise prevent access to them? Seems like a lot of trouble to go after Hawley when a far easier solution would work. If it wouldn't be that easy, then that has to be addressed.

Hawley's taking a huge risk, legally and greater, to keep the faceplate. Why? He made a promise to Wojciechowski, but he needs an even bigger personal reason. How could he hope to keep this secret from his superiors, the mob, and almost everyone around him? For this risk to work, the potential payoff, for him, must be huge. What is he lacking, and what does he want? We know he's a good guy, but otherwise, we don't know much about him. If he decides to steal Usmanov's money, bottom line, he needs a plan, and item number one needs to be retribution against Usmanov, and to raise the stakes, it has to be for more than giving Wojo's family a comfortable life.

Middle of 67: Major Hawley says, "A concerned friend gave me a copy of the F.B.I. file as of this morning." That's convenient. Do we ever find out who the concerned friend is? The Hawleys are given this information a bit too easily, and they should have to work for it.

Hawley is informed on page 68, "They are very brand name conscious and competitive to has the most valuable shit in their house." So a Russian mobster wants the priceless *Massacre of the Innocents* in his house so that he can brag about it to a bunch of other Russian mobsters? It would be a matter of days, if not minutes, before one of these other competitive fellows put in a call to Interpol about the painting. Given that it's the title to your film, and the major theme, it might be tough to hear, but you might have to go with something else as the stolen artifact, at least with something less famous, in order to give your antagonist a clear motivation. If it's that famous, then I can't imagine the new owner bragging about it to even his family members, let alone other criminals.

The scene between Major Hawley and Gramps (71-74) can be cut down considerably. The reason why the scene exists is to tell us that the FBI might be protecting the Russians. How can you show that with less dialogue? The Maryland receipt/Jersey interview bit is one way. What's another way that a cop with years of experience can tell that someone (in this case the FBI) is covering their own tracks? I'd bet that you can knock this scene down to a page.

You have a Lieutenant Thompson and a Detective Thomas mentioned in your script. The names are a bit too similar. Or are they the

same character? And the driver was the beige man who Hawley shot after the crash, right? But the driver shows up none the worse later on. What happens at the crash scene? Assuming Hawley misses his shot, the driver goes through all that trouble just to not kill Hawley? What if the driver is able to abduct him, there and then?

The Driver and Passenger are important enough characters to name.

Middle of 76: We're lacking details about what happened to Hawley. That's likely intentional at this point, but we need something, starting with the fact that the FBI agents don't say a word about him at the crime scene. At first, it seemed as though the beanbag to the face just might've knocked him out cold, but then we see Gail's reaction to what Gramps tells her when he's off the phone on 78. Then on page 82, Gramps says, "Where do we find my Grandson?" as if he was told that Hawley's body has been dumped somewhere, but that, apparently, the authorities don't know where it is. It comes down to the question: who was the caller (who apparently knew that Hawley was dead but couldn't/wouldn't divulge where) and what did the caller tell Gramps? Gramps evidently thinks that Hawley's dead. But the FBI agents make no conjecture about Hawley at all when they're at the safe house.

The dialogue from 83-85 can be cut down. The Hemingway story isn't necessary, and Gramps, listing what he's about to do to the driver (on 85) is also unnecessarily wordy. The scene exists for one purpose: to tell us that Gramps is willing to do anything to obtain information from the driver. How can you show that in less than half the amount of time it currently takes? Would Gramps really be this talkative after the death of his wife and disappearance/death of his grandson?

...and the driver says, "We trade him for the money," but is that the best he can do? The driver had to know that Gramps would figure that Hawley is dead, if the driver's at Gramps's house. Gramps himself says, "You're being here means he's already dead."

A little unclear on the timing from 88 to 90. We see Gramps in his kitchen, then Eldron and Cullen in Gramps's bedroom, then all three of them in the parking garage. What are Eldron and Cullen doing at Gramps's house when they've just been told that Gramps wants to meet them in the parking garage?

The Russians and the FBI agents are pretty stock antagonists. They're not deep, and they don't interest the audience as a good antagonist should (*No Country For Old Men's* Anton Chigurh, *Up's* Charles Muntz, *American Beauty's* Frank Fitts, *The Shawshank Redemption's* Samuel Norton, etc.). Whoever it is that's pulling the strings needs to be introduced at some point, so that we can have a good idea as to who the little guys like Hawley are up against. The antagonist is the hero of his/her own story, so

he/she needs to be well-developed and constantly (if not directly) throwing obstacles into the protagonist's path.

For almost two pages (88-89), Gramps takes a long, long while to fashion a method for himself to use the revolver. It can likely be reduced to a single action block. Or, perhaps better yet, eliminated completely. He can simply show up at the parking garage with his revolver-firing method and that could work just fine.

How does Gramps figure out that Harold is involved? And how also does Gramps discover the name of Alisher Usmanov? All from the driver? That's too easy.

So Alisher Usmanov is willing to pay \$40 million for the painting? Seems like a lot to pay for a gangster. Might make more sense if he offered a number that was more in line with the sort of fellow who's used to receiving something for nothing, or for much cheaper than the average person.

There could be a bit more conflict between the characters of your film, notably Gramps and Major Hawley and Eldron and Cullen. It would help to differentiate them for the audience, at the least, and help to develop their personalities, at best.

Your biggest global issue is that your protagonists mostly lack depth. They are all going after their goals, but we don't know anything specific about them that shows us why they're pursuing these goals in the first place. Your protagonists seem to be (in order) Nathan, Danny, Hawley, and Gramps. Of them, Nathan, Hawley, and Gramps are your most likable characters, but the audience would have a hard time rooting for anyone's motives, save for Gramps.

Nathan wants to steal a painting to pay back Danny for Danny's help with Melinda's IVF treatment. We need to see that reasoning far earlier than we do, and why Nathan's caught between a rock and a hard place, and can't offer Danny anything else.

Danny's a coldblooded killer. Nothing to really like about him.

Hawley's a good cop, and we like him, but his plan to take the \$40 million, now blood money, just to help Wojo's family, is the act of a man not thinking straight. We don't ever learn enough about Hawley or Wojo's family to see why it's worth risking his life to attain access to the money. Now, if we saw him take the money and use it to the antagonist's detriment, then that would be fun to watch. That would be ironic: the antagonist's own money being used against him. But Hawley would be risking everything to do it. Somehow, he needs to be set up as a man with everything to lose. Might be a good angle to work, and to work it early: how does a protagonist with \$40 million fight an antagonist with far more than that, and a better ground operation?

Of the four, Gramps is the most compelling, as he has a concrete motivation, action, and goal: he wants to save his grandson. It's simple and easy to follow. Plus, Gramps is a cool character and arguably the most complex in your entire story. However, it's tough to market a retiree as a protagonist.

The bedrock of any screenplay is the idea of simple story and complex characters. This script's story is pretty complex, and difficult to single out one protagonist with a singular goal, because there are lots of characters with lots of goals. Additionally, we never spend enough time with any one character so as to relate to his struggle. The audience's big challenge to any writer is *make me care*.

Suggestion would be to make Hawley or Gramps your protagonist at the beginning, and give him something to prove from the get-go. Maybe Hawley, from a long line of cops, messed up a big assignment and is considered the weak link in the law-enforcement family chain. Or if Gramps will be more of your focus, maybe he botched up a case and was forced into an early retirement. Tracing one story of a guy who screwed up is far more evocative and relatable for your audience. Even Nathan could take on the role of protagonist while everyone he loves and cares for dies around him. He was a normal guy who turned to the mob to help his wife conceive, and now, he's paying for it.

Although your conflict, action, and energy are good, there's no real emotional throughline and no real character transition. Look at Christopher Nolan's *Batman* franchise: the story is very simple: Batman has to stop [insert-bad-guy's-name-here] but in each film, he *grows*. He learns in the first film how to wield power responsibly. In the second film, he learns that he has to sacrifice what he stands for in order to win. In the third, he attains apotheosis, apparently sacrificing his very life to *become* what he stands for. Not all of your characters are flat, but the ones that are, are given enough screen time such that their actions don't matter much to the audience.

Another good film to watch regarding this is *The French Connection*. True, we don't catch up with our main puppet master antagonist at the end of the film, but he appears throughout the film as a reminder, a challenge as to what Popeye Doyle's up against. There's a constant escalation, a constant changing-of-plans on both sides, that keeps us guessing as to who's going to win. As it stands, the bad guys in your script have the plan to acquire the painting for the \$40 million, and once that goes bad, there's no plan B on their part but to shoot everyone. Give us a smart antagonist, and your audience will be grateful. It'll make us wonder, how will 'ol Gramps ever put one over on this guy?

In *The Boondock Saints*, the case can be made that there isn't an evocative character transition. Our heroes start out as

vigilantes and end as vigilantes. What makes them engaging is the fact that they're very interesting, deep characters. They have a rich psychology, we see how circumstances have forced them into being the active characters that they are. And we *like* them. Choose a single protagonist, the one who's the least likely to stop this major international gangster syndicate with ties to the FBI, and all of a sudden, we're hooked. Killing off your protagonists is a risky venture, and only really works if we care that they're dead, and if their death is the best way to inspire others to action (*In the Bedroom, Braveheart*, and such). Simplify the story, add complexity to your characters, and that will help to turn this good script into a great one.

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I hope that these notes are helpful. Thank you for the chance to review your work!

www.jaredmgordon.net/screenwriting