

Script Report
Surveillance

Writer/s

Draft
August 2020, v2

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6 September 2020

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Summary

This is an engaging screenplay with good deployment of genre details. It reads well and feels well-paced and most likely will be easily translatable to the screen given its clarity of visual details and clear link to how it might be approached visually and edited. The point-of-view is well established and unwavering, even as it switches in the closing scenes, and the frequent use of CC-TV as a visual motif and POV shift works very well.

Overall it does feel somewhat televisual because of a lack of character contradiction, and the fact that events are contemporaneous. If it is a character study, to make it more cinematic it should be about preparation or aftermath rather than the event itself. I do understand the need for a cold open, but because the setup of the cold open is never resolved, the action thread feels underplayed, suggesting other thematic preoccupations. As this report is intended to focus on casting a solid name, addressing the character and televisual elements is key, and the undercurrent of most of this report.

Tone is consistent and apt for the genre, but one that needs addressing only insofar as how it interacts with characterisation, and in turn with the theme(s). It currently feels like there is not enough 'connective tissue' between the three, which means that the characters are 'drama' characters operating in a 'thriller' environment, causing a mismatch of theme and plot, reducing audience engagement and leaving us emotionally marooned.

A choice thus needs to be made here in terms of genre and approach. If the intention is to make a thriller (albeit with dramatic elements), or a serious drama about the dangers of obsession and not moving on, either way the characterisation has to follow suit.

In short, the screenplay is engaging but misses the opportunity to be gripping because the link between theme and characterisation is not seamless. Changes on the level of character will have the natural effect in tying these strands more closely together, and make the screenplay feel more taut, timely and with a deeper overview.

Theme(s)

For the most part, the screenplay is thematically clear and convincing. The central theme can be broken down into separate parts but parts that all have the same connective tissue of the main theme, which helps to keep the theme bubbling away under the surface without superseding surface action. These parts can be roughly broken down into the following binaries:

- Security/surveillance vs privacy
- Paranoia/fear vs trust/calmness
- Prejudice vs open-mindedness

These parts weave naturally into each other, because in many ways security and surveillance are inescapable from the others. In other words, someone working in that voyeuristic field is either someone drawn to it because of their potential for paranoia/fear, or this can develop once they take on such a role. Which of these categories Matthew falls into is the writer's decision, but it is important that his characterisation does two things: a) it fits within this profile and b) any contradictions he has as a character mean that this 'fit' is complex and full of built-in ironies.

The screenplay's themes are similar to those explored in films such as *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *The Lives of Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), *Arlington Road* (Mark Pellington, 1999), *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954). In these films, however, the way these themes are expressed differs because of the main character's outlook. In the first two, the main character is someone unable to exist in a normal social framework. They have lost the ability to connect emotionally with people on an interpersonal level, so do so at distance – they observe life rather than live it. They use technological recording devices as vicarious tools to experience lives they are unable to inhabit. In the second two, these characters are driven by slowly developing fear and paranoia that is a product of their voyeurism and perhaps their prejudice. *Rear Window* also combines both aspects, because the process L.B. Jefferies (James Stewart) actually goes through is not dealing with paranoia or stopping/solving a murder, but committing to Lisa (Grace Kelly). That is the film's emotional centre and the focus of L.B.'s lack: the plot question is Hitchcockian (murder) but the thematic question relates to romantic love. (Side note: why it took a murder for 46-year-old James Stewart to commit to 25-year-old Grace Kelly is obviously a major suspension of disbelief!).

In *Surveillance*, Matthew is in many ways as a character embodying theme a hybrid of these two 'types', a bit like L.B. Jefferies but in a much more heightened context. Almost like someone in a wheelchair, a motionless victim of his obsessions, he has fear and paranoia generated by his profession, the state of affairs in the country, and his new neighbour. But he is also a troubled and wounded individual who is failing at real emotional connection – with his daughter – so is sublimating this shortcoming to surveillance.

In some ways, the lack of clarity regarding who he is and what he actually stands for (he's not a straight-out racist like Simon, nor is he progressive like Eva) mean we as an audience aren't entirely sure what motivates him. Yes, he's determined to 'save' his

daughter from an imminent school attack, but he could also refuse to let her go to school, as some parents have done in our current Covid situation. Staying with the Covid analogy, as a worried parent (who maybe lost a family member to Covid) you have a choice to make: let your child go to school but try to stop Covid, or keep your child at home. Given that Matthew chooses the first, his actions mean that the dominant theme is as described above.

But given his past, and his struggles with alcohol and the relationship with Eva, another theme of the screenplay – self-acceptance – keeps sticking its head above the parapet, to the detriment of the other themes. This connects to tone and genre, and perhaps a clear distinction needs to be made within this framework, or these themes need to adhere better. It does feel like as the writer you are covering not so much ‘too much ground’ but that we are been pulled in two different directions across that expanse.

If you think about *Manchester by the Sea* (Kenneth Lonergan, 2016), this is a film about grief, guilt and responsibility. [Spoilers ahead.] Lee Chandler (Casey Affleck) was responsible for the deaths of three of his children, a negligent act brought about by his own addiction. When he is confronted with having to care for his nephew, these feelings, buried under melancholy and violence, are challenged and resurface. The introduction of the nephew suddenly in his charge is a grand act of contrivance, but because it ties in with the theme – the main character’s inability to move on and forgive himself – we buy it and are engaged by it, because it addresses the character question before it addresses the plot question. We don’t find ourselves asking: “Will he agree to look after his nephew?”. Instead we ask, in the same vein, “Will he recover?”. The second question presupposes and therefore supersedes the first; the first is contingent upon the second.

In *Manchester by the Sea*, the questions are as follows:

Plot Question	Character Question	Thematic Question/s
Will Lee become a guardian to his nephew, who really needs a parent/mentor?	Will Matthew recover from his guilt and addiction, forgive himself, and repair his relationship with his ex-wife?	Is it possible to forgive yourself for the unforgivable? Can you keep living after feeling dead inside?

In *Surveillance*, it is (reductively) as follows:

Plot Question	Character Question	Thematic Question/s
Will Matthew discover Ali’s true motive and thwart the school bombing?	Will Matthew recover from his guilt and addiction and repair his relationship with his surviving daughter?	Is it possible to forgive yourself for failing? Can you keep living after feeling dead inside?

You can see here the discord between these elements. The character and thematic questions in both are very similar. But the plot question (highlighted) in *Surveillance* bears almost no relation with the character question. This is the crux of the softened engagement, and the source of the televisual tone. I feel it is also might be a character

shortcoming that deters talent. As the aim for the script is much higher – alongside its potential – it would be a pity if this were not addressed.

Think about the opening and closing scenes of *Manchester by the Sea*. It opens with Lee and his young nephew on a boat. Lee is physically intimate, tender, fun loving and caring – the perfect uncle. This prefaces tragedy, but it's a tragedy that deserves forgiveness even in the face of its severity. The most elusive source of this forgiveness is, however, Lee's forgiveness of himself. As he says during his meeting with his ex-wife, "there's nothing there", and later "I can't beat it", referring to the empty shell he sees himself as: he has responded to guilt and tragedy by emptying himself out, leaving nothing but silence and rage – he is the living dead. In many ways, this is similar to Matthew, but he seems to be functioning relatively well considering his wounds. The final scene has Lee again with his nephew, now an adult. They have come full circle as Lee has begun to accept his mistake, and can begin again. This does not mean Lee is 'cured', but he has begun the process of renewal by accepting the new responsibility in his life.

Compare this to *Surveillance*. The opening sequence is in the classic thriller mould, a gripping cold open written with pace, urgency and power. The closing sequence is a drama sequence akin to that of *Manchester by the Sea*. Both work, but their combination means the plot question is unresolved. This would be fine if the imminent terrorist attack were a maguffin – but it strikes me that it isn't, or that as a writer you are interested in the screenplay being primarily 'sold' as a thriller. So, the character question remains unresolved as well, because it's not clear how Matthew ends up, or indeed his relationship with Eva. This has the effect of feeling dissatisfied in both areas.

Characterisation

In general, characterisation is clear and characters feel real. There does need to be a distinction between how we see the characters and how the characters see each other. For example, the Muslim neighbour. At times, there feels like a little writerly intrusion, particularly regarding what feels like a fairly reductive binary between who are effectively embodying the central character conflict.

Further notes on character:

- Matthew is a troubled character, but characters are attractive to actors when they have built-in contradictions. Does he? He feels very 'straight' in terms of his beliefs, his reasons for the beliefs, and his complementary actions. Built-in contradictions between the characters would also soften writerly intrusion. Some are there (such as Ali's alcoholism) but could do with feeling more 'lived in'.
- Currently, Matthew is not such an easy character to 'care about'. I use these words reservedly because I don't subscribe to the notion that a character needs to have redeeming qualities for us to care. We don't need to 'like' him in the 'save the cat' vein, but we do need to find an emotional connection. There is some in terms of his relatable desire to connect with his daughter, but because his primary motive (to avert another attack) supersedes this, and isn't connected to it thematically, the emotional connection is softened. The main reason for his estrangement from Eva, et al., is his own wounded behaviour, which was not caused by terrorism but by negligence that led to tragedy. If the thematic setup is simplified, it will give you more room to explore character complexity and contradiction, and this will make him more fallible, more like us, and we will care more. It also means the character question predominates, so the audience will hypothesise on the answer to that character question (a bit like how we are forced to ask: will L.B. Jefferies commit to Lisa, long before we are asked if he will solve the murder). If it is the plot question that is in the forefront of our minds, we care more about what happens in the story than what happens to Matthew, again softening emotional connection.
- Matthew is drinking despite saying he isn't, or he isn't an alcoholic at all, he only goes to AA because Ali does. The alcoholism feels like it actually muddles his character. His addiction is espionage. It works better if each man has their compulsion they try not to feed. Matthew's alcoholism feels like double cream, whereas Ali's feels more organic and works because it is haram. If you stick to alcoholism, nail down the reason for it, and have him less in control of it.
- It's not really clear if Ali is British, and what 'kind', eg. Pakistani extraction, immigrant, naturalised, born and bred, and so on. If so, he may not speak a language other than English, or it might not be Arabic. Being so fluent in Arabic suggests he's an immigrant not born in the UK, but this isn't explicit. I think this is an important detail. This goes as well to his name. Akter is a predominantly Bangladeshi name that is usually Hindu and only sometimes Muslim. This may be intentional, but if it's about Matthew rushing to assumptions, something avowedly Muslim might work better? Either way, it does feel like the specifics of his ethnicity could be more developed.
- Eva feels a touch underwritten. How does she embody the theme? See more in theme. Likewise, Zara's take could be better established. She's a good

opportunity to tell us more about Matthew's past because they have a history, and she could certainly tie into the theme about intimacy because she represents his lost ability to connect emotionally. This history is interesting. The relationship between Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) and Amy (Teri Garr) in *The Conversation* is a good starting point. As he says to her when she's trying to make a connection with him: "I don't like people to ask me a lot of questions." Pretty rich for someone who spends his time snooping into other people's lives. This is the kind of contradiction that makes us care for Harry when otherwise he is entirely opaque and unlovable.

- The stakes would go up more if Matthew's relationship with Ali deepened. Currently he's largely an observer, which means info on him is either on-the-nose or repetitive. The scene when they are driving and getting to know each other is case-in-point. It's engaging, certainly more so than with Zara. Or at least if it were there, Zara could be threatened by it.
- Rather than an accident, if he lost his son in a school attack two years earlier (an act of implied rather than obvious negligence, given his profession), this could be the reason for him being anti-Muslim and into surveillance. The ticking clock of the impending school attack doesn't work and isn't paid off anyway. This shift in backstory would better explain his fear for Eva to go to school. It would also obviate the need for a flashback, because the 'mystery' of what happened to his son (resolved in flashback) doesn't really land. Or, if you used flashback, the images of that flashback could be in the form of repeated CC-TV footage that haunts Matthew.
- The central character conflict is nuanced, which is a good thing, because the main issue is actually Matthew and his relationship with himself (and, therefore, Eva) rather than his relationship/clash with would-be antagonist Ali. But, again, because the characters aren't woven fully into the theme and/or the central theme clarified, there is a risk that the audience might not know 'where to look' as far as emotional involvement is concerned. Are we to care more or less about Matthew regarding the thriller aspect of the plot (his relationship with Ali) or the drama aspect (his relationship with Eva)? If the edges between these two were more masked, we may not need to ask this question.

Tone

The tone is consistent and appropriate to the genre being deployed. However, this consistency comes at the expense of a visceral experience for the reader. This 'clean' approach is another reason why the screenplay feels somewhat televisual: just about past the watershed but nothing that would upset the sensibility of the average ITV viewer. This is a missed opportunity. The film has the potential to draw upon post-60s British thrillers such as *Get Carter* (Mike Hodges, 1971), to evoke Thatcher-era gritty films such as *The Long Good Friday* (John Mackenzie, 1980), and *Mona Lisa* (Neil Jordan, 1986), or later 90s thrillers such as *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) and *A Prayer for the Dying* (Mike Hodges, 1987). *Surveillance* has echoes of British neo-noir, yet in a sense its high-tech subject matter and environment similarly 'cleans' the tonal aesthetic, giving a sense that the world has cleaned up too. It hasn't. As tone cannot exist independently of characterisation, my recommendations to add missing contradictions to the characters could and should affect the tone commensurately.

Matthew is a broken man, yet we barely see him sweat, bleed or suffer. Even his moments of falling prey to his addiction feels somewhat unearned and easily averted. If he were secretly drinking again, we could see him cover up his slippages (more of a stake than trying not to drink again) and we could share in the visceral experience of suffering with pain and addiction: nausea, vomiting, headaches, and so on. A more visceral tonal experience, with more vivid physical detail, would then offer a counterpoint to the high-tech world on display.

For example, is Matthew a neat and fastidious person? This isn't always clear. Is he Harry Caul (*The Conversation*) or Gerd Wiesler (*The Lives of Others*), surveillance men who have no life or centre outside the lives they scrutinise and intrude, who live in bare, stripped back homes and wear drab clothing devoid of personality? Or is he sloppier, messier, more 'lived in', someone who would have Big Mac wrappers lying around his screens? It strikes me that you want to go for the former, which is fine. But this offers little contrast and suggests a man in control of his life and his emotions, which his actions do not bear out.

Recommendation(s)

PLOT

Given the stage you are at, I am loathe to make any major plot suggestions, at least none that are direct suggestions. I hope this does not feel that way from the preceding. As character and theme are more woven together, the plot will naturally change, but hopefully in a way that is organic and doesn't feel like a 'rewrite'. In many ways, clarification of those elements will lighten up structural elements and this will feel more a case of elision than addition or revision.

One area of plot I would focus on is the elements of contrivance that do crop up here and there, those moments of writerly intrusion that feel not so much part of the organic narrative but there to service the central conceit: characters victim of plot and not vice versa.

For example, I would suggest that Matthew – whether or not he is a (recovering) alcoholic – follows Ali to AA, rather than Ali turning up, which feels coincidental and 'small world', stripping away the cinematic feel. It's also a way of getting him to AA, a place he may otherwise have sneered at. At this point, see the note about his alcoholism in general, I'm not sure it serves either the plot or the theme. But assuming you stick with the alcoholism, parental guilt about losing a child in this case could be boiled down to: "If I hadn't been so PC and had actually been on-the-ball, I could have saved my son from a terrorist attack." So if he does have a drinking problem, his suspicion of Ali could actually be the start to a recovery. Yes, this is also a contrivance, but it is buried in character motivation rather than exposed by writerly intrusion (Ali walking into the same AA session). Being in a small town only deepens rather than mitigates this feeling of contrivance.

I do think a decision also needs to be made regarding whether this is primarily a drama with thriller elements/context, or a thriller with dramatic elements. It feels cautiously to be straddling or alternative between the two. Tonal elements such as grittiness and character elements such as fallibility and contradiction could help.

The POV shift between pages 85-94 is jarring but could work if other tonal and characters shifts are remedied. While they are somewhat overly expository (especially with recourse to dialogue), they do suggest is that Ali is actually a more interesting POV. He has more 'turmoil' in his life given his cultural context, addiction, history, and so on. It may be that more frequent shifts to his POV might aid in us understanding whether Matthew is paranoid or not, depending on how much this POV corroborates or contradicts his suspicions. There are also parallels with his own goal of reconciling with his son, something he achieves even if it's not clear to us precisely how.

While stopping short of suggesting he is the main character, this does hint at Matthew not entirely having the 'fullness' of a main character, which again may be a deterrent to talent. It's worth discussing the POV shift when we next speak.

CHARACTER

I suggest the following:

- Currently Matthew doesn't really feel too fallible – he's more single-minded than short-sighted. This means he doesn't so much have a blind spot or lack that becomes clarity or surplus, but rather that his singular vision shifts. The latter is less satisfying.
- Matthew could perhaps be anti-Muslim not by upbringing but by recent hatred fuelled by the loss of his son. This is in contrast to Simon's more cultural, 'lived-in' prejudice, and would explain why Matthew in the conversation with Simon comes out as more progressive.
- Matthew either joins Securicor because of the death of his son, or the fact that he was in security already makes him feel more like a failure because he couldn't protect his family. Either could work, and perhaps the latter is more plausible, but the link between his job/obsession and a tragedy caused by drink doesn't seem like it could ever feel cohesive.
- If you stick with Matthew's alcoholism, this might be something recent because of his son's death, or a genetic family illness that's come and gone and is now returning because of remorse, guilt and grief. He should be on-again, off-again, and therefore a character of contradictions. He has compassion and paranoia at the same time: he is troubled, unwell, an open heart full of love and pain. Currently, his cards are too close to his chest and he is inscrutable. This can work in a film like *The Lives of Others* because it's thriller that deals with questions of privacy and intimacy. That's not the theme here. This is a drama that deals with loathing, grief and remorse. So unlike Harry Caul, Matthew is not a cyber-organism controlling machines. He the opposite: a festering open wound, desperately hoping that machines will save him. Show the open wound. Make it visceral. Let's see him sweat, bleed, vomit, fight, etc.
- Weave Ally better into the theme. Is she a 'social justice warrior' who thinks that the burqa is a sign of female empowerment? Is she more moderate, offering the central position on the thematic spectrum? Ideally she should be the point on the spectrum Matthew needs to reach (if you want him to move at all). Whatever you decide, she should sit somewhere on the theme spectrum – at the moment she exists more as a manifestation of Matthew's central weakness/problem, but without be connecting to the theme, it feels authorial. See below for notes on theme.
- Likewise, reconsider or re-evaluate the name Ali Akter, and tie this in with more details about the specifics of his ethnicity. If he is indeed a Muslim man who immigrated from the Middle East, he would indeed speak Arabic, have an Arabic accent, but then wouldn't have a name like that. If his name is like that, is he first generation? Second? What is his accent? And would he speak Arabic? If he does, how come?

THEME

The theme(s) of the screenplay are clear and do run very well through the work – the ‘DNA’ of every sequence does feel wedded to theme in a way that is organic and not overwrought. What would help, though, is a ‘clearing’ out of character and plot elements that feel extraneous to the central ideas and preoccupations of the script.

- Let’s say the theme spectrum, along which ideally all characters should sit and offer the film’s central discourse, is something like: “In some cases, prejudice is justified.”

It would look like this at the start of the screenplay:

AGREE	-----	NEUTRAL	-----	DISAGREE	
Simon --	Matthew	-- Joe --	--Zara--	--Ali--	--Eva--

By the end of the screenplay, it looks like this:

AGREE	-----	NEUTRAL	-----	DISAGREE	
Simon --	-- Joe --	--Zara--	--Ali--	Matthew	--Eva--

This tends to work because the emotional centre of the piece – Matthew – has moved most along the thematic spectrum, and in addition has moved closer to the one person to whom he needs to gravitate: Eva. But without knowing where Eva stands at the beginning, we lose a little bit of the control (fixed positions of other characters) to the experiment (Matthew). Once established, this should naturally make certain plot elements (in backstory and present-day) feel extraneous without too much revision.

CRAFT

- There are some moments when the characters speak the subtext a little easily, often when they offer two sentences, one referencing the context and the other, the subtext. See the annotated script for examples of where, in the next pass, dialogue can be trimmed or removed to make the piece feel more visual and the tone more brooding.
- It does feel like the central conceit of the suspect being across the road and using the same car is a construct/coincidence. This is important because it’s a major pivot for the plot. In many ways, if Matthew is over-cautious and paranoid, he will draw his own conclusions. Anything that looks remotely like what he saw in the attack he failed to stop should be enough for him to draw hasty conclusions. This ambiguity would deepen POV and strip away contrivance. So perhaps find ways for Ali and his movements to resemble what Matthew saw without being exactly like it. (Remember: in *Rear Window*, James Stewart never sees any murder, but he sees things that, when connected, certainly look like something bad has happened. He connects the dots himself).
- The use of V/O and flashbacks don’t feel needed or earned and contribute to the televisual feel of the screenplay. This might work if this were a, say, 6-part, 1-hour series, but here they feel a little shop-worn (and as there aren’t too many and thus not part of a dovetailing narrative, feel quite jarring). Making us feel and see the aftermath of what happened through reaction, trauma and recovery would feel

more lived in and deepen our emotional connection, as per *Manchester by the Sea*, in which there are no flashbacks but after-echoes that we see in the way characters behave and live.

OTHER

Covid readiness – Many films nowadays are struggling to get financing because of Covid: and this is often about content. Insurance companies won't back film that feature, say crowd scenes, large entourages or a lot of physical contact. And there's the issue of films that show such physical contact and are set in the present-day. Short of saying that a film is set in 2019, there is going to be a real content shift to avoid confusion in certain genres. To this end, I think you might consider making this a period drama to avoid questions around pre or post lockdown. This is not only 'Covid friendly', but setting it sometime between 2005 and 2017, near to atrocities such as London Bridge, Manchester Arena, 7/7, etc., it would have deeper thematic context as well. Setting it during a heightened time justifies Matthew's twitchiness, and allows you to play with the newness and limitations of this tech. It also means counter-terrorism is relatively 'new' and people are still feeling their way through it. It also means that the Securicor contract is pioneering and massive, basically the first onslaught of a cottage industry thriving on fear and violence, which explains his suspension a little more.