

WANTED



HANS GRUBER

BUILDING  
A BETTER  
BAD  
GUY

HOW HANNIBAL LECTER, HANS GRUBER, ALONSO HARRIS, AND COLLATERAL'S VINCENT CAN MAKE YOU A BETTER WRITER

BY TOM MATTHEWS

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WANTED!



HANNIBAL LECTER

Life was so simple for the screenwriter back when all you needed in order to create a villain who would earn the wrath of a grateful movie audience was a damsel, a train track, and a couple feet of rope. The hero was virtuous and true and destined to prevail, while the bad guy was a twisted and snarling portrait of evil, seemingly unstoppable in his treachery—until the impending final fadeout inevitably signaled his undoing. The hero got the girl, and the villain got a proper thumping. At the same time, the actor *playing* the hero might become a star, while the scenery-chewing ham stuck with the Black Hat role most likely was thrown back into the stock character pool, never to be heard from again.

Times quickly changed. Practically with the advent of sound, the villain came into his own, from the grand gallery of monsters on the Universal lot, to the starkly grim Warner Bros. gangster flicks that made stars out of Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney. In Hollywood, it became very good to be bad, with audiences showing again and again that while big screen heroism is all well and good, there is nothing quite as satisfying as sitting in the dark with a truly wicked bad guy and watching the havoc he wreaks on the innocent folks who cross his path.

Odds are he's still going to end up dead or in custody before the end credits roll—preferably dead, spectacularly: burnt to a crisp, or blown to bits or dropped from a very great height—but a deliciously drawn villain will never fail to attract the attention of audiences, or the filmmakers desperate to anticipate their desires.

The accumulation of cinematic history, however, has made it increasingly difficult to conceive of movie malevolence that hasn't already been seen before. Add to that the fact that morality has become more complicated, while audiences have become somewhat desensitized to greater and greater displays of mayhem and cruelty, and the challenge to today's screenwriter to come up with something fresh seems daunting. All one has to do is sit through yet another dumb thriller, driven by yet another lazily drawn terrorist or serial killer, to make one think that there is nowhere else to go with movie villainy.

Which, fortunately, is never the case. In 2003, the AFI ranked the top fifty movie villains throughout film history, and while the list hailed evildoers going back decades (Norman Bates, Michael Corleone, Tony Camonte from the original *Scarface*), it was bookended by two truly bad cats brought to

screen life within the past fifteen years: *Silence of the Lambs's* Hannibal Lecter at #1, and *Training Day's* Alonzo Harris at #50. Written, respectively, by Ted Tally (adapting Thomas Harris's novel) and David Ayer, these despicable but endlessly seductive monsters crept movie audiences right out of their socks. Not insignificantly, they also won Oscars for Anthony Hopkins and Denzel Washington, the men who portrayed them. It may be the actors who get the most accolades for embodying such perversely entertaining characters, but it is the screenwriters who shaded the dark corners of their souls.

THE MANY SIDES OF SIN

"Intelligence. A point of view. Wisdom," says Ayer, listing the traits that he looks for in a great movie villain. "They *know*. They have a dynamic, Type A personality. They're manipulative, devious; they don't telegraph what they're doing. The best villain is a spider who weaves a web, and by the time you're caught up in it, it's way too late.

"But I also look for humanity. Humor. Charisma. Likeability. If someone is just walking around with severed heads, threatening to blow up the Earth, you're like, 'Okay, you're a Bad Guy. I'm going to run away.' That's bullshit, and that's not how it works

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in real life. In real life, bad guys are very seductive, very charismatic, very powerful individuals. That's what draws people in."

"A great movie villain is one you can't take your eyes off of. They're hypnotic, like a snake," says Tally, who won the Academy Award for his *Lambs* script. "The villain is the flipside of the hero, so there's a perverse attraction to a great villain. You can't just dismiss them. They can't just be a brutal monster, there has to be something more seductive than that."

Coming in at #46 on the AFI top fifty list, representing a kind of popcorn villainy which is no less entertaining, is Hans Gruber from 1987's *Die Hard*. Still something of an action benchmark for a certain generation of screenwriter, *Die Hard* provided the template for big studio actioners for years to come, and Gruber—portrayed with silky venom by Alan Rickman in his first screen role—proved a worthy adversary for Bruce Willis's John McClane. Gruber didn't have the depth—or screen time—of Hannibal Lecter or Alonzo Harris, but he had much more nuance than the typical action movie bad guy.

"Gruber doesn't wake up in the morning and think, 'Whose brains can I blow out today? Do we have an address on Mother Theresa so I can whack her? Find me some kittens to drown!'" says Steven De Souza, who shared a credit on *Die Hard* with Jeb Stuart. "That's where people go wrong all the time with the villain. You want a villain that you can fall in hate with."

### THE DEPTHS OF EVIL

Regardless of a script's artistic ambitions and the particular vices of its bad guy, certain rules emerge when studying the way great writers give life to the very best of the very worst. Sooner rather than later, the audience needs to be shown graphically what the villain is capable of. In *Lambs*, the cannibalistic proclivities of Lecter are spelled out with queasy detail in the first few minutes of the film, as Crawford (Scott Glenn) prepares Starling (Jodie Foster) for her first tête-à-tête with the mad doctor. In *Die Hard*, the moment comes thirty minutes in, when Gruber suddenly and quite violently blows away a hostage—a genuinely shocking turn which stunned audiences into understanding that this man meant business.

And in *Training Day*, Ayer slowly and skillfully acclimates moviegoers to the true depth of Alonzo Harris's corruption. With Ethan Hawke's rookie cop Jake riding along as an audience surrogate, we watch as the many layers of the violent and profane detective

are revealed. Is Harris merely the sort of lawman we're secretly okay with—breaking rules and kicking ass in order to rid the streets of its crooks and predators à la L.A.P.D.'s Rampart CRASH squad—or is he worse than the scum he's charged with rounding up? The clues emerge with increasing harshness, but it isn't until an hour into the movie, when Alonzo brutally slays a drug dealer previously introduced as a friend (Scott Glenn again), that Jake—and the audience—knows the full depravity of Alonzo's nature. As Ayer says, by that point there's no escaping the web. Or so it appears, when Jake realizes he's got to bring Alonzo down.

"Alonzo doesn't know he's a bad guy; that's what's great about him: he's convinced he's a good guy," says Ayer. "And you know

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ALONZO HARRIS

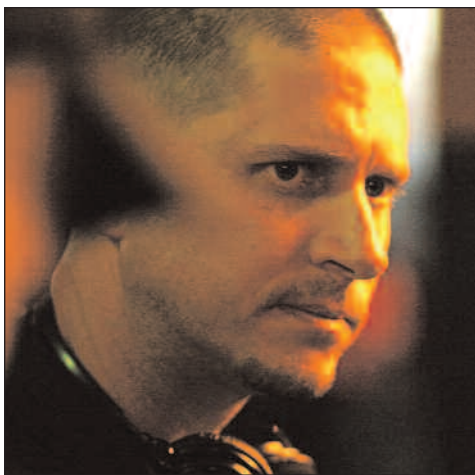
what? In real life, maybe he *is* the good guy, and Jake is the bad guy. Think about all of the hell that's going to be unleashed because Alonzo is dead. The pot's going to boil over, there are going to be a lot of problems, because the sheriff—albeit a corrupt sheriff—isn't going to be there to lay down the law. On a practical level, maybe Jake's the bad guy. Maybe it's his naiveté, his innocence, that is ultimately bad for that society. Again, it's all point of view, it's all perspective."

Can a villain go *too* far? While some perverse part of the movie audience revels in the prodigious body counts racked up by Hollywood's paid assassins, suave bank robbers, and charismatic cannibals, isn't there still a line that writers need to be wary of crossing, lest they push the audience from

entertainment to revulsion? The line is different in a popcorn film than a complex psychological thriller aimed at mature audiences, but even villains have to play by some rules, don't they? Ted Tally says yes, cautioning against violent behavior that stops being fun for the moviegoer.

"The audience will stop feeling like they're watching a chess game and will just begin to feel like they're being assaulted if the writer goes over the top. I personally can't stand movies where suspense is generated by putting a child in danger. I think that's really cheap."

Surely that's one line that can be agreed on. If Hannibal Lecter or Alonzo Harris killed a child during the course of the story, the audience would take offense, right? Espe-



"The best villain is a spider who weaves a web, and by the time you're caught up in it, it's way too late."

—David Ayer

cially in something as escapist as a *Die Hard* movie? Well...

"We were delighted to kill a little girl," crows De Souza, speaking of his writing in *Die Hard 2: Die Harder*. "People don't remember this, but we very specifically put a little girl with a teddy bear on the plane that the terrorists cause to plow into the ground by recalibrating its radar signal to show that they were serious. We were just cackling at that. We knew that the audience would not believe that we would do that, but it worked perfectly to prove what the killers are capable of."

"Now, I don't know what it would've been like if the villain had killed her with his bare hands instead of long distance, but we went out of our way to kill that little girl. And then Bruce Willis runs out onto the runway and

finds the teddy bear, because we couldn't show the little girl all burned up!" Spoken like the proud father of an awful villain.

#### A LETHAL GIFT FOR GAB

Also true to most memorable bad guys is a certain loquaciousness, assuming they speak at all (for the mute or near-mute subcategory of movie villain, see: aliens, masked stalkers of teenagers, and a certain cyborg-from-the-future-turned-governor of California). In a way which you could never get away with with your protagonist—who must at all times be stoic and whose character and intentions should almost always be portrayed through deeds and not words—the best of the movie bad guys are always deliciously verbose. Whether it's the lacerating street talk of Alonzo, or the cerebral British slither of Gruber and Lecter (the former references Alexander the Great; the latter, Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius), these guys can literally talk you to death.

Stuart Beattie, who added a new member to Hollywood's rogues gallery with the icy hit man Vincent (Tom Cruise) in *Collateral*, played this to perfection. "Vincent is like the perfect dinner guest," says Beattie. "He's funny, smart, articulate. He has interesting things to say about the world, has great life experiences and great stories—unfortunately, a lot of those stories are about the people he's killed."

"That articulateness in your villain helps because it makes it harder to dismiss him," says Tally. "If he's just some thug with an axe, that's not very interesting. You want to see a battle of wits between the good guy and the bad guy. And the better the villain, the bigger the challenge, the more the hero has to rise to the occasion. If you've got a great villain, chances are you've got a great hero as well."

It is the kind of character which a great actor can take to extraordinary heights, but before that, it gives a screenwriter with an ear for dialogue an opportunity to cut loose. If he or she has the nerve. "I loved writing Alonzo, but it was weird because it got to a certain point where I literally I had to take a shower after writing him," recalls Ayer. "At the beginning I was thinking, 'This guy is fucking cool. He's *bad*, I want to hang with him.' And at the end, I was shuddering."

#### A LITTLE WICKEDNESS GOES A LONG WAY

Maybe the most important question a writer needs to ask himself is how much of a physical presence the villain is going to have in

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the script. While it is a widely circulated myth that Hannibal Lecter only appears in *Lambs* for fifteen minutes (it's actually thirty-five minutes), Anthony Hopkins does have perhaps the least amount of screen time for a Best Actor Oscar winner. Asked how *Lambs* might have changed if Lecter had had a much greater page count, Tally—who sat out the *Lambs* sequel *Hannibal* but returned to write the prequel *Red Dragon*—thinks the results might've been much different, and not for the better.

"Less is more with Lecter. I think he works better in *Lambs* and *Red Dragon* than he does in *Hannibal*," Tally says. "He loses something when he's constantly in front of you, he loses some kind of mystery. He loses his mystique when he talks too much. It's very hard to make a fully formed character out of him. We like the spaces and gaps in his story, we like the blankness behind those eyes. I don't want to know how his puppy got hurt when he was a child and he was abused. I think it's a mistake to give him origin stories. Ultimately that diminishes him. You don't want to be asked to feel sympathy for him."

Whether it's the shark in *Jaws* or John Doe (Kevin Spacey) in *Se7en*, we've seen ample evidence that a little-seen villain can wreak havoc on a moviegoer's psyche, if his deeds are properly gruesome and his victims-to-be are sufficiently horrified at the thought of his return. At the other end of the spectrum, though, is the bad guy who is essentially the protagonist, an unrelentingly vile piece of work who carries the whole story and defies any other character to steal the screen from him. For both Ayer and Beattie, the considerable challenge was to modulate their characters so that their nastiest traits were allowed to flourish without becoming unbearably cruel and turning off the audience. It all went down easy once actors of the caliber of Denzel Washington and Tom Cruise stepped in to breathe life into the characters, but how to seduce squeamish script buyers when all you have is words on a page? Aren't studios—and movie stars—supposed to be all about safe material guaranteed to make nice with the largest audience possible?

In Ayer's case, there was never a question of shaving the character's hard edges to find a deal. "*Training Day* was my sixth script. Everything I had written before it had been rejected, and the rejection was painful. So I figured I was going to write something that I knew they'd reject, so I wouldn't feel that pain. I just said, 'Fuck it. I'm going to do what I want.'" The result? An uncommonly

raw studio film which scored both critically and commercially, with Ayer on board as the sole writer on the project. With a mind dark and violent enough to conceive Alonzo Harris, would *you* fire him?

Beattie also didn't worry about giving Vincent a puppy or something to show he's not all bad as he drags Max (Jamie Foxx), the timid cab driver, along on a night of killing. "It was always very interesting to me to see this unstoppable, almost Terminator-like hit man going up against this non-confrontational cabbie, and seeing who would win,"



**"The story is only as good as  
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lain I could make Vincent,  
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could make for Max."**

**—Stuart Beattie**

Beattie says. "The story is only as good as its villain. The more of a villain I could make Vincent, the more of a triumph I could make for Max."

#### **THE BIGGER THEY ARE, THE HARDER THEY FALL**

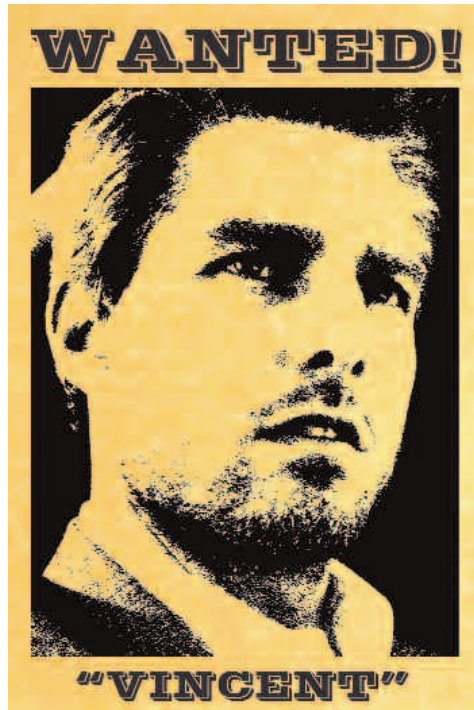
Long-accepted dramatic theory has it that the antagonist will ultimately bring about his own undoing—usually via a misstep caused by the persistent influence of the protagonist. Without exception, today's top villains follow the same template.

Ayer: "Alonzo understands people and is therefore able to manipulate them, but his blind spot with Jake is that he genuinely likes him; that is his Achilles heel. If he hadn't liked Jake, Alonzo would've gotten the money, paid off the Russians, and gone on to other stuff. But he liked the kid, and he wanted Jake to like him. That's the other

thing—he needed Jake to like him.”

Stuart: “At the end of the day, I think it was pride that drove *Die Hard*. Hans Gruber felt threatened not because there was a fly in the ointment, but because McClane was smarter than he was. That’s what got Gruber caught up in the cat-and-mouse game, when he should’ve stayed focused on his plan.”

Beattie: “Vincent is so outgoing, so alert, so confident that he just can’t stand being around a wimp like Max, so if he’s going to spend the night with him, he’s going to give



him some backbone. That’s what inspires Max to ultimately stop Vincent. If Vincent hadn’t gotten on Max’s case throughout the film, no way would Max have been strong enough to stand up to him.”

It is that final confrontation between hero and villain that delivers the final beat in their battle, and after having put the audience through hell for the past two hours, his comeuppance had better be spectacular. No matter how grand a bad guy you’ve managed to create, if you end his arc with him benignly cuffed and being lowered into the back of a squad car, you most likely have just killed a lot of trees on a script that no one’s going to buy.

In the popcorn action film, it’s that splat/blast/hail of gunfire moment at the pinnacle of your third-act action orgasm, in which your baddie meets his Maker with as much perverse violence as the writer’s twisted little mind can bring upon him. Movie villains have been sucked into jet engines, flung


into acid pools, reduced to puddles of goo on skyscraper sidewalks and much, much, *much* worse, leaving writers new to the genre with the considerable challenge of finding sick new ways to do away with their bad guys. This is not a trivial exercise: audiences sent out of the theatre on the high that comes from seeing their tormentor dispatched in a satisfying fashion are more likely to spread the word, and voila!—a hit is born. Studios obsess on delivering such moments, and it’s your job to dream them up.

“If the main villain is not satisfactorily whacked at the end of the movie, you’ve done something wrong,” De Souza says. “You have a 118-page script? Give me the last five. A successful whacking of the main villain? Hit movie. Unsuccessful whacking? I don’t need to see the first 115 pages, I know it’s not going to play with the audience.”

Stuart, who also wrote the gold standard actioner *The Fugitive*, concurs. “Most people say they’ve got a great action script when they’ve got a strong first act, or a terrific setup, but quite frankly, if you can tell me how you can kill a villain in a great new way, I could write a whole script around that. That’s the hardest part.”

“I always wanted Max to be the one to pull the trigger, and to do it in a way where Vincent is almost proud of him,” Beattie says of the irony-laced ending he knew he was always building toward. “When Vincent gets shot, he’s not angry. He looks at Max almost as if to say, ‘Good for you.’ At his moment of death, this vile person appreciates how far Max has come, thanks to him.”

As with all aspects of screenwriting, the challenge in crafting a villain who will join the pantheon of legendary movie monsters is creating a character who surprises from beginning to end. Just remember that true villainy is too wicked to ever be just plain bad. “Writers should pick up the newspaper and ask themselves, ‘Who do I hate in this paper, who is acting like a villain?’” says De Souza. “‘Is it someone who has ever made any public pronouncement of evilness?’ You will find that people whom you hate in the world very rarely just come out and say, ‘I’m evil! Ha ha ha!’ Take a cue from real evil.”

“That’s the tough part, that’s where the grace comes in,” says Ayer, who loosely modeled Alonzo Harris on a very tough character he met in the military. “You can write a two-line speech that will tell you more about a character than pages and pages of expositional dialogue. The trick is figuring out what those two lines are. That’s the hard part. That’s what keeps me up at night.” 



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