Die Hard Analysis

By William C. Martell

Since its release in 1988, *Die Hard* has become a benchmark of action films, frequently sighted as one of the best action films of the past twenty years. The film has also become part of Hollywood vocabulary, used to describe other films: *Die Hard* at the Stanley Cup. *Die Hard* on a bus. *Die Hard* on a warship. *Die Hard* in a hospital. *Die Hard* on a train. *Die Hard* in a luxury condo complex. And *Die Hard* on a submarine.

Why has this film received such an elevated degree of recognition and respect? The answer lies in the multi-layered characters and complex-yet-organic script by Jeb Stuart and Steven E. deSouza. Every nuance, every twist and reversal, every shading of character is spelled out on the page, making *Die Hard* the ideal learning screenplay for the action genre.

But first a little history. *Die Hard* began life as a sequel to another movie. In 1968, Roderick Thorp's best selling novel "The Detective" had been made into a film starring Frank Sinatra and Lee Remick, released by 20th Century Fox. When the film became a hit, the producers told Thorp if he wrote a sequel, they would buy it. Thorp's response was "I'm writing one now." Then he went home and started writing a new chapter in the life of the detective played by Frank Sinatra. He had read a book titled "The Glass Tower" (which would eventually be made into the film The Towering Inferno) about a group of people trapped on the top floor of a high rise office building by a raging fire, and found the idea of people trapped above the reach of rescue equipment intriguing.

In that time period, the newspaper headlines seldom reported fires. What they did report was civil unrest, the latest bombings by the Weather Underground, and the latest kidnapping or bank robbery committed by the Red Army terrorist group. So Thorp substituted terrorists for fire, his Detective for the firemen... and "Nothing Lasts Forever" was born.

Fox made a "back loaded" purchase deal with Thorp, with the majority of his payment coming when the film went into production. This didn't bother Thorp, as the hardback book would certainly become a best seller as soon as the film was officially announced. Thorp was on easy street.

Until Frank Sinatra turned down the film. And the hardback book (without the heat of the film deal) didn't become a best seller. "Nothing Lasts Forever" didn't even go to paperback until 1979, and even with good reviews ("Single mindedly brilliant in concept and execution" - Los Angeles Times) it did not sell well.

Fifteen years later, Joel Silver was looking for a project they could make on the cheap. He found "Nothing Lasts Forever" in the Fox archives and commissioned a script. The first person they offered the lead to was, of course, Frank Sinatra. He had played the character in the hit film *The Detective*, after all. Sinatra turned it down again. Silver offered it to Robert Mitchum. Mitchum thought there was too much running and jumping for a man his age, and declined.

With the clock ticking, Silver decided to change the story from the father/estranged daughter conflict of the novel to a husband/estranged wife conflict, and hire a younger man. Steven deSouza made revisions, and turned "Nothing Lasts Forever" into *Die Hard*. Bruce Willis was paid the unbelievable fee of five million dollars for his first film role... And Roderick Thorp's novel finally became a paperback best seller!

The key to the success of *Die Hard* is its adherence to the special structure of action films. The most important single element in an action script is not the protagonist, but the Villain's Plan. We can excise John McClane from *Die Hard* and we would still have a group of hostages held on the 30th floor of the Nakatomi Building by terrorist/"exceptional thief" Hans Gruber. Officer Powell

might then become the protagonist. If we remove Powell from the scene, the protagonist might become FBI Agent Johnson (no, the other one). Or Holly Genero might become the protagonist, using levelheaded strength to save her fellow captives. Only Hans Gruber and his plan to rob the Nakatomi Building on Christmas Eve remains the constant.

In an action script, the protagonist is reactive; it's the villain who has the active role. When Hans and his team take over the Nakatomi Building to rob its vault of 640 million dollars in negotiable bonds, they take the Christmas party crowd on the 30th floor hostage. We find out later, the hostages are an integral part of their plan. The hostages bring in the FBI, and Hans needs the FBI to shut off the power grid (which will open the vault). When Holly Genero is taken hostage, she is part of Hans' plan. One of the actions he has taken which will lead to the robbery of the Nakatomi vault.
McClane has a reactive role. His estranged wife has been taken, and he sets out to rescue her. Before Hans took her hostage, he had no reason to rescue her. His motivation exists only because of Hans' actions. The most important character in *Die Hard* is Hans Gruber, and the character motivations for the success of the script are his. Not McClane's.

But what makes *Die Hard* into a superior script is the nexus between the Villain's Plan and the protagonist's character arc. Though we could remove McClane from the story and still have a film, it is John McClane who turns *Die Hard* into the quintessential model for action scripts.

What makes John McClane the perfect protagonist for *Die Hard* is that the external conflict forces him to confront and solve an internal conflict, leading to a single solution which solves both problems and brings peace to the protagonist.

John McClane is estranged from his wife Holly because he will not accept her as a career woman. Her career comes second to his, and his attitude is expressed in this exchange (pg. 7, 8):

ARGYLE
So, your lady live out here?

McCLANE
The past six months.

ARGYLE(thinking about that)
Meanwhile, you still live in New York?
McCLANE
You're nosey, you know that, Argyle?
ARGYLE
So, you divorced, or what?

McClane gives up.

McCLANE
She had a good job, it turned into a
great career.

ARGYLE
But meant her moving here.

McCLANE
Closer to Japan. You're fast.

ARGYLE
So, why didn't you come?

McCLANE
'Cause I'm a New York cop who used to be a New York kid, and I got six months backlog of New York scumbags I'm still trying to put behind bars. I don't just get up and move.

ARGYLE
(to the point)
You mean you thought she wouldn't make it out here and she'd come crawling on back, so why bother to pack?

McCLANE
Like I said, Argyle.... You're fast.

McClane wants Holly to come to him both physically (note the number of times he uses New York in his exchange) and metaphorically (Argyle's observation that McClane would like her to come crawling back to him). He doesn't feel the need to meet her halfway, and we get the feeling he has flown to Los Angeles in the hopes of taking her back to New York with him. When they meet, McClane and Holly have this exchange (from page 16 &17).

McCLANE
I remember this one particular married woman, she went out the door so fast there was practically a jet wash...I mean, talk about your windchill factor...

HOLLY
Didn't we have this same conversation in July? Damn it, John, there was an opportunity out here... I had to take it...

McCLANE
No matter what it did to our marriage?

HOLLY
My job and my title and my salary did nothing to our marriage except change your idea of what it should be....
You want to know my idea of a marriage? It's a partnership where people help each other over the rough spots, console each other when there's a down... and when there's an up, hell, a little Goddamn applause or an attaboy wouldn't be too bad.
(quietly)
I needed that, John.
(pause)
I deserved that.

There's a clumsy pause as if she's challenging him to say ... something, but he sets his jaw, says nothing.

Without being antagonistic, McClane refuses to meet Holly halfway. He refuses to come to her. It is only when Hans' Plan puts Holly in danger, that McClane finally realizes how much he loves her, and how uncompromising his stance concerning their marriage has become (his "Hamlet Moment"). Witness this exchange with Officer Powell from page 94:

McCLANE
Look... I'm getting a bad feeling up
here... I'd like you to do something
for me. Look up my wife... and tell her...
tell her... I've been a jerk. When things
panned out for her, I should have been
behind her all the way... We had something
great going until I screwed it up. She was
the best thing that ever happened to a
bum like me. She's heard me say I Love You
a thousand times, but she never got to
hear this... honey, I'm sorry.

It is only after he faces and conquers the internal conflict that he becomes strong enough to take on Hans (his external conflict) and rescue Holly and the other hostages. Without the external conflict from Hans' Plan, McClane would not have been forced to resolve this problem, and their marriage would have ended. The resolution for the external conflict and internal conflict intersect, creating a strong, organic plot.

The theme of *Die Hard* is probably How Far Will We Go For Love? McClane learns he would risk his life for the love of his wife, but many other characters echo this theme throughout the script.

Holly has a love of self reliance and independence so strong that she risks her life by standing up to the terrorists, as in the scene on page 54-I and 54-J where Holly confronts Hans, slyly calling him an idiot and stating that "Personally, I don't enjoy being this close to you," in order to get medical help and bathroom privileges for the other hostages.

Ellis loves to make deals, which is referred to when his character is introduced on page 12 and on page 67 where he attempts to deal with the terrorists. His love for deal making leads to his death, when the deal sours.

The terrorist Karl loves his brother Tony. When Tony is killed by McClane, Karl vows vengeance. From this point on, Karl's sole motivation is revenge against McClane for his brother's death. He is no longer an active participant in Hans' Plan, except when it intersects his own goals.

The reporter Thornburg loves breaking stories. When he first hears of the Nakatomi Tower takeover, he dumps his girlfriend to cover the story (page 53). Even after being punched in the nose, Thornburg's response is "Did you get that?" to the cameraman. Story before self.

Deputy Chief Dwayne T. Robinson loves to be officious. He would risk the lives of the hostages just for the chance of adding a little red tape to the negotiations.

Even a minor Terrorist's love for junk food takes him to the extreme of snagging a candy bar during a shoot out scene. Hans, of course, loves material possessions. He could discuss men's fashions all day, but they are here to rob the vault of 640 million dollars. After the robbery has

soured and Hans has been tossed out a broken window, what does he grab hold of? Holly's gold Rolex. He's still grabbing at possessions, even on his way down to the pavement.

Before he reaches the pavement, Hans Gruber has shown himself to be superior in every way. Not only is his plan well thought out and ingenious, he is actually several moves ahead of everyone else. He knows the FBI will cut the power, and has planned ahead. He has a plan for every move McClane makes, from setting the fire alarms to radioing the police. His plan to open the vault at Nakatomi is complex and flawless. Hans' forethought, his "exactness and attention to every detail" has supplied a solution for every conceivable problem.

And Hans is clever enough to think on his feet. When McClane stumbles upon him on the top floor of the building, here's what happens:Hans turns, looks up.The transformation in his expression and bearing are mind-boggling. Hands shaking, eyes filled with fear, he swallows, looks up at McClane and in a perfect American accent says:

HANS
...OhGodplease...don'tkill me...don't kill me... you're one of them, I know it...

McCLANE
Whoa, easy man. I won't hurt you.

This scene turns into a multi-reversal. Hans talks McClane into giving him a gun. Hans then reveals his identity and aims the gun at McClane. But McClane has removed the clip, making the gun useless. But Hans has alerted Karl and Franco, who attack McClane. Which leads to the glass shooting sequence, where Hans proves his strategic superiority, and presses McClane to his point of no return which leads into the third act.

This is the first time that McClane and Hans come face to face, and it happens fairly late in the script (page 78). The relationship between hero and villain in *Die Hard* doesn't follow the "Flipside" model traditionally used in action films, where the hero and villain's similarities are accentuated. Instead, *Die Hard* harkens back to the social consciousness films of the 1930s, like Warner Brother's *Captain Blood*, where the differences between hero and villain are highlighted.

McClane and Hans are almost opposites. McClane with his working class, blue collar back ground; and Hans with his classical education and Saville Row suits. This is a battle of style and substance, with McClane's street experience pitted against what Hans read about in "Time Magazine" or "Forbes" and saw on "60 Minutes" (pg. 24, 68, 74). McClane and Hans' first conversation (pg. 54-A) points out the contrasts between the two. Hans' dialogue is refined; he refers to McClane as a 'party crasher'. McClane, on the other hand, refers to game shows and cowboys, calling himself "Just the fly in the ointment, the monkey in the wrench, the pain in the ass".

One of the keys to the success of *Die Hard* is John McClane himself. He speaks in a language we can understand, rather than the stuffy, dry, pseudo intellectual and professorial language of Hans. He IS a cowboy: an individualistic man whose character is earthy and grounded in reality. A multi layered hero, who isn't afraid to admit to his fear. In his introduction (pg. 1), we see him white knuckled as the 747 lands in Los Angeles. When a fellow passenger comment on his fear of flying, McClane makes a joke about it at his own expense. He is a man who acknowledges his fears and weaknesses and has learned to live with them.

When McClane is faced with dangerous situations later on, this fear humanizes him. He is not some super human hero; but a husband, father, and very mortal man who must overcome his fears to survive. He feels as we would in his situation. McClane must grow into a hero to survive.

That growth is the key to a successful action script, as witnessed by both *The Fugitive* and *In The Line Of Fire* which follow the same pattern.

One of the most impressive aspect's of Steven deSouza's writing in *Die Hard* is the ending, where a dozen sub plots are brought to conclusion in 4 quick pages. From Hans' death, to the Nakatomi Bonds falling like Christmas snow, to Holly giving up her gold Rolex (and all the greed is symbolizes), to Argyle the limo driver's smashing the getaway car in the underground garage, to the first face-to-face meeting of hero and sidekick (McClane and Powell), to Thornburg getting punched in the nose (for being too nosey), to Dpt. Chief Robinson's officiousness being completely ignored, to Karl's last ditch revenge for his brother's death, to Sgt. Powell regaining his ability to shoot his gun, to Holly and McClane reuniting... All of this and more in the space of four flowing pages. DeSouza makes this complex web seem effortless and elegant.

By weaving together the big action story fueled by the plan of a larger than life villain, with the smaller, personal story of a husband who must find the courage to admit he is wrong before he can reconcile with his estranged wife; Steven deSouza has turned *Die Hard* into a classic action film, the model of what a genre script should strive for, and the barometer with which to measure all future action films.

The "Die Hard Analysis" was adapted from William C. Martell's book *The Secrets of Action Screenwriting*.

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