



COVERAGE, INK. JC ANALYSIS

TITLE: (Title)
LOCALE: USA, Congo
AUTHOR:
PERIOD: the present
FORM: screenplay
GENRE: horror/thriller
BUDGET: high
DRAFT DATE: none
COVERAGE DATE:
PREPARED BY: JC

LOGLINE:

A former DIA doctor is sent to the Congo to investigate an outbreak, where he discovers one of his designer diseases has been loosed on the populace and has mutated into something preternatural.

SYNOPSIS:

In an African village, a limbless girl is roasted like an animal while an unseen man guts her with a ceremonial blade. At a DC restaurant, DR. JACK SINCLAIR (30s) receives an Excellence in Research award for his work on Ebola serums. Outside, Jack's ex CAROL (30s) hails a town car while Jack helps their paralyzed daughter HEATHER (7) into the car. Carol tells Jack she's proud of him. Heather is sad he's not going with them--she wants him to hear the new story about the sea serpent who accidentally ate himself. After they leaves, Jack is approached by DIA Director WILLIAMS (50s) who tells him someone is developing diseases even better than Jack, and the infected people in this hot zone have been doing very strange things... like not dying. Jack is briefed by an Admiral and DIA Agent RICHARDS, who believe a mutated pathogen is responsible for what's going on in the Congo. The infected are suffering fever and hemorrhaging, and most peculiarly are showing evidence of

superhuman strength and invulnerability in the final stages of the disease. Richards worries that this is some contaminant being tested by terrorists. Williams wants to go in big, but Williams feels that would disrupt a tenuous peace process and flow of natural resources (?) So Jack is sent in solo to get some samples and find out what they're dealing with. He is met at the Congo Airport by his guide CAIN MACENERY (40s) an armed Afrikaner who wants to know why only Jack was sent. Jack alludes to the elections and not wanting to make a fuss. Cain lets him now there are few America lovers here. Cain takes him to the university, where he is met by PROF. VUMI DANERSON (20s) She takes him to the ethnobiology lab and shows him a resurrection plant--looks dead but comes back to life with a little water. Suddenly they are attacked by armed African teens after Jack. Cain is killed. Jack and Vumi escape to her Volkswagen under heavy fire. Jack is seized by Baj-Baj (local security) and hauled away, leaving Vumi alone. Crying, she holds onto Jack's attache case. Jack is brought before COLONEL BASABE (50s) who reveals MacEnergy was part of his security detail, but is unsure why he was killed. Basabe is apparently one of the candidates running for office. Jack tells him he's looking for a cure to something that could destabilize the area. Basabe tells him he's seeking fairy tales and to leave first thing in the morning. Outside Jack's hotel, Vumi is waiting. Jack asks to be taken to a refugee camp. She wants to know exactly why Jack is here, but it's classified. But he does tell her on the road, even though he's unsure himself what he's speaking of. But Vumi has heard of the "Kindoki Malika," or blood spirits, flying witch soldiers with superhuman strength. Her father was a pastor at the Louringi Mission 5 years back and then was kidnapped by the 'devils.' They swerve suddenly to avoid hitting a peasant woman, who mentions "Damo Tchomia" and gestures to a nearby fire. Jack investigates despite Vumi's warnings. In the village, frightened Congolese soldiers are chased by bloody creatures with lidless eyes. Vumi now thinks the devils are real. They visit a refugee camp and are floored by the squalor. A TOOTHLESS WOMAN recognizes Vumi. She directs them to a tent with a sick BOY (7) with squirming blisters that fade before their eyes. They watch as local elders use a gramophone made of human parts on the boy. The boy is cast out as a witch. Jack goes to retrieve his attache to get a sample but finds his gas has been siphoned. They race on foot after a caravan--Vumi tagging along hoping to find some answers as to what happened to her father. They hitch

a ride. Vumi tells them the caravan is heading to the mineral mines where the corporations are mining coltan. They talk a little bit, then find a scarred 15-year-old boy NYEMBWE in the corner. They tell him they're following the sick boy to find out what makes him sick. Nyembwe is familiar with the disease--it affected his mother. He believes she was cursed and mentions she drank his father's blood. Soldiers made her eat of him while they burned Nyembwe. They exit the caravan at the witch village, Nyembwe accompanying (for revenge?) The place is deserted yet fires still burn. Nyembwe reveals he knew Vumi's father. They find a Nkisi, or medicine trap. Wailing gets their attention, and they barge into a hut to find the boy dead, surrounded by frail locals. Jack performs tests. Vumi learns the locals are all that is left. Jack's results show the disease has mutated beyond the range of known viruses. Vumi thinks whatever evil is on the loose out here isn't playing by the rules of science. Vumi wants to take Nyembwe back to the village but finds he has been taken. PREGNANT WOMAN tells them where they went, and Jack sets off, telling Vumi she can't come with him the whole way. He thinks the disease could be making their brains misfire ala PCP. Vumi asks about the strain Jack said he saw before, but that was Luringe 616, nothing like what they found in the field. Jack confesses when he was a young grad student working for the government, his baby tested positive for a genetic disorder. Jack cut a deal with the government to get his daughter into clinical trials for a new drug in exchange for working on their designer disease program--but the treatment did not work on his daughter and now he harbors guilt. They share some bitter cassava root to drink/eat even though it is laced with cyanide. They reach the place the pregnant woman told them of called "Where the dead go." To Vumi's horror, Jack digs into a grave to get a sample. Vumi wanders in search of Nyembwe. She runs towards a flash of light as Jack digs up the corpse and realizes this is a dumping ground, not a burial ground. Jack hears Vumi scream and runs after her. He looks in a shed full of medicine traps and stumbles on to an elevator that suddenly takes him down into a sick pit filled with all manner of nastiness surrounded by corpses and pale half-alive creatures. A corpse woman tries to drown him. Vumi surfaces in a grotto and then finds an industrial room and a mining car filled with body parts. Jack swabs his own cheek and discovers he has a form of the Luringe virus he engineered. Suddenly Jack is attacked by infected Nyembwe--who bites him and can now fly! Jack kills him but immediately faces

another threat in DAMO TCHOMIA, African warlord/sorcerer. Jack wakes tied up in the mining room where Tchomia reveals that girl who was killed in the opening was his daughter. Tchomia is in fact using the sick pit to incubate his subjects and intends to use Jack as his ambassador. Tchomia slices off one of Jack's eyelids and gives him "kindoki vision." Now he can see shadowy evil forms. Suddenly and without explanation he's in a cargo crate on a train. And equally strangely, Vumi is on the same train in another compartment. Jack suddenly is in the veldt stalking Basabe like an animal. From out of nowhere, blood spirits swarm the compound, Jack with them. Jack, possessed, evades most of Basabe's bullets in animalistic fervor and fights the screeching in his brain. Jack brutally kills Basabe then struggles to hang on to his humanity. Jack hears Vumi screaming and suddenly Tchomia is there dragging her by her hair. Vumi seems immune to the disease and Tchomia wants to know why. Tchomia guts Vumi and then orders Jack to tell everyone to leave the Congo alone. Vumi tells Jack to eat her so that he can halt the sickness within himself. Jack does so and comes around as Vumi dies. He goes after Tchomia with an AK-47 and the two face off. Jack finally kills Tchomia and is airlifted to safety. Williams tells Jack they got their sample--the one inside Jack. Turns out the cassava plant Vumi ate was the secret to suspending the virus. Williams arranges a fake funeral for Jack, and Jack watches from afar, leaving a secret message for his daughter so that she'd know he's still alive.

COMMENTS:

(SCRIPT) has some of the sharpest writing I've seen in some time. The craft here is excellent. Scene descriptions are crisp and economical; formatting is perfect; visuals are well-described; and the pacing by and large is good (but for one talky sequence between Jack and Tchomia in the second half.)

Despite that, there are factors keeping this script from attaining orbit. The first, but least egregious, is that script's cursory resemblance to the wave of virus movies from about a decade ago. Now this script does indeed have a hook that sets it apart from those other scripts, but here's the big problem: I didn't buy said hook. The conceit that Tchomia could be manipulating the disease victims in a supernatural sort of way just doesn't work for me--and that is largely because the writer did such a good job of grounding the story in a believable science, that the preternatural nature of Tchomia's powers seem like something out of a different movie.

In fact (SCRIPT) feels a bit like two separate movies split right down the middle. The first half is a fairly realistic thriller; the second half becomes a full-on supernatural-themed gore onslaught. Now to be fair, the writer did indeed set up the supernatural element in the first half. But it's a question of the two halves not working harmoniously in the same movie.

With that said, let's explore the details and see how best to make this material work and maximize the terrific writing chops on display here.

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VIOLENCE

We have to address this one right up front. First let me clarify that I am no prude. I read "Fangoria" occasionally and like '80s gore movies and even acted and did special makeup effects on a few. That said, in my opinion, this movie crosses the line.

The level of violence here is too extreme and unjustified given the genre. The fact that the story plays out like a typical Hollywood action/horror/adventure thriller means that we expect a certain amount of violence and thrills, and that's fine. But right off the top the movie opens with a sick image--a girl burning at the stake, still alive, limbs hacked off. This is very harsh and in fact some people might put the script down right there. Isn't it scary enough for a girl to be roasted alive without having her maimed, too?

Of course this scene does set up the level of extreme violence to come--but that level does not in fact arrive until page 75 or so, and then once it starts, it is an assault that some prodco readers will likely not make it through. Readers are lulled into a false sense of security by have relatively few deaths/horror sequences in the first 2/3rds of the movie, the tech thriller-way the story rolls out--and plus we get the promise of a relationship (which never pans out--more on that below). The net effect is we *think* PG-13 Land, despite the grisly opening. There's a big difference between a swimming pool full of skulls--great image--and the sick pit--also great--and mutilations and disembowelments to your heroes.

We have several sequences here that are just too much. Jack's eyelid-cutting--not a great idea to do this to your hero. You can cut him, sure, but permanently disfigure him on-camera? This might work in a Hershell Gordon Lewis movie, but again, the expectations based on the genre and the story itself tell us this is NOT that kind of movie. It does not structurally play out like that kind of movie. Thus the writer must play by the standard Hollywood adventure/horror/thriller guidebook.

Basabe's death at Jack's hands is tough, but most horrible of all is Vumi's death... with some gratuitous cannibalism thrown in for sot-so-good measure. Keep Vumi alive and Jack intact or risk losing many potential buyers.

STRUCTURE

One issue that weighed this script down just a bit is that the structure feels off. The good news is that this situation is fixable, since the writer was savvy enough to include most of the needed structural beats. They're just not hitting at the right times.

For example, the inciting incident comes too early. The inciting incident is the plot event that arrives like a monkey wrench into the protagonist's life. It requires a choice to be made, and an uncomfortable one. Either way, the protagonist's life will change.

The generally accepted place for the inciting incident is between page 10-12. The idea is that we spend the first ten pages getting to really know the protagonist in his known world. The first scene of the movie generally shows the hero doing what he does best; this is called the hook. It should be a grabber, either visually interesting or taking us into a fascinating world we've never seen before. In some cases this character intro scene can take place immediately after the hook (as is the case here.) Pages 3-9 then consist of documenting the hero's known world. Here we introduce most of the main characters for the script and most importantly we define both the hero's dramatic NEED and his dramatic FLAW. The need is something the hero wants really badly but is having trouble getting. The reason he's having trouble getting it? His flaw. Thus the protagonist is missing some key piece of their personality. By going on the journey of the movie, interfacing with other characters and navigating obstacles, the hero eventually acquires the WISDOM and introspection necessary to finally solve this crisis and attain his goal. That's all straight out of myth.

The problem in (SCRIPT) is that by truncating five pages off the first act--by placing the inciting incident on page 5 instead of 10--we have not enough time to get to know the protagonist in his known world. Jack doesn't even say anything when he receives the award! And before he can have much substantive conversation with his daughter, BAM, there's Williams.

Writer is doing this story a great disservice by not letting us get to know our hero in the first 10. Without this, we never really feel like we really know Jack or like him. He comes across as a bit thin, not one that the audience will freely emotionally invest in.

The solution to this is to restructure the first ten. First, show Jack doing what he does best--in the lab. Start with something very visual so that the audience both gets what he does and is wowed by it. But also in the same

scene, let's indicate--by coworkers' reactions to Jack-- exactly what his problem is. Again, we have less emotional investment in Jack because we are not really rooting for him to evolve. This is where you set up the character with something like, "Jack's a fucking genius--it's too bad he's such a _____." We'll go into this further in CHARACTER.

Then in pages 3-10 we again choose more iconic scenes that best represent Jack's life. Forget having the divorce be over and done--have it going on NOW. You need conflict in your hero's life. Once again, emphasize what Jack's problem is, this time getting it both barrels from the wife. But most importantly, include **a real scene** with his daughter. Why? Because this script desperately needs a 'save the cat' scene.

This refers to a scene in which the protagonist does something selfless when he could have chosen not to, and it wins audiences over every single time. You can have a character who is a stone cold killer, but give him a good save the cat scene (and make him really interesting), and we'll be rooting for him! ("The Professional" comes to mind.) The difference between a Jack we care about and the one currently in the script would be night and day. And no, it's not enough that he gets an award for Ebola research. We are being TOLD this, so it is uncinematic and not very effective. So take a moment to write a wonderful scene between Jack and his daughter that is simply about their relationship. Amidst the crisis with his wife, Jack's frustration at work (remember, he has to WANT something he is not able to get) and now seeing what a great dad he is, we will feel for this guy in a big way. So when Williams arrives on page 10 to call Jack back to the job, the audience will already be firmly in his corner.

There are a few other structural issues here. The next one is the decision phase, otherwise known as Hero Refuses the Call. This is the part where the hero is reluctant to do what he knows he must because the stakes are high, the consequences for failure dire--but nor can he simply say no and return to his normal life. Because the quest being granted to the hero must be of a personal nature--have some meaning beyond simply "Go do this." Jack does turn down the \$5 million for about a split second, but by page 9 he's already in the Congo. In fact, this should come no earlier than page 20, because this is the beginning of Act 2! So again we are missing crucial pages here as Jack goes back

to his known world for the last time and figures out what he needs to go. He needs to get input from his wife, daughter, a mentor, and then finally come around--because he must--somewhere between page 20 and 25. This again buys you the opportunity to embellish Jack's characterization and for the audience to really get to know this guy and root him on. So as you can see, we are already into Act 2 by page 9, and we are giving audiences only a quick sketch of a protagonist.

MacEnergy is killed too quickly. He's only just been introduced. This character could be used to better explain what's up with the elections, the culture of the place they're in, and of course allow us to get further insight into Jack's soul and his problem. The "guide" character is a staple of these types of movies and should be exploited for exposition if nothing else. Perhaps the writer was thinking it would be fine to kill him off--people wouldn't be expecting it, especially not so quickly and so brutally, so that's a cool shock. But the net result is it makes the character unnecessary. Why not simply have Vumi meet Jack at the airport instead of Cain? In a nutshell, use him better or lose him. Look at John Rhys-Davies' character from RAIDERS for a great guide character.

And when Jack is taken in by the Baj-Baj--on page 18--again, this happens way too early. This should be somewhere around page 40.

CHARACTERIZATION

I've alluded to several character issues in Structure above, but I will add a bit more about Jack here.

As I mentioned, we really need more development to get behind Jack as a protagonist. To that end, think about giving him quirks, tics, foibles, eccentricities. Give him little backstory touches that make him come to life. Where did he grow up? How did he meet his wife? What did they have in common, and what happened between them? Did Jack grow up rich, poor or middle class? What are his favorite TV shows? Does he like football and beer, *Star Trek* and acid rock? Perhaps he came in third place in the National Scrabble Competition when he was a junior in college, sits in on sax Tuesday nights at a local jazz bar and has a terrible habit of biting his fingernails when he's nervous (that he's terribly self-conscious about.) Touches like

these are the things that make characters come alive and make actors want to play the role.

And of course like all good heroes, Jack should arc. Now this is not always necessary in genre films, but since the budget on this film is large, and you are going to really have to appeal to big prodcos for this one, your best bet is to include one. Give Jack a flaw. For example, maybe he's a bit cocky. So what does he need to learn? Humility. Or perhaps he's a bit of a nervous Nellie. What does he need to learn during his adventure? Confidence. This could be the way to go here, since perhaps Jack let his government handlers walk all over him and abuse his research in the past--not anymore. For more on these topics I recommend THE WRITER'S JOURNEY, which breaks down myth into easy-to-use formula for screenwriters, and Hal Ackerman's WRITE SCREENPLAYS THAT SELL-THE ACKERMAN WAY, which is about the best book I know (from UCLA film dept co-chair Hal Ackerman) on characterization.

VUMI

Vumi, like Jack, comes up a bit flat. While we do get hints of her backstory here and there--it's a promising start--ultimately we feel cheated because the romance that we expect between her and Jack does not materialize. This seems most peculiar. Perhaps the writer was thinking that this would minimize the effect of Vumi's gruesome death (it does not) if we don't really get to know her or if she and Jack never really become an item. But the problem here is that again, this movie doesn't really read like a horror flick. It reads like a big-budget thriller with horrific elements. And thus we are expecting Vumi & Jack to come together and even worse, when Vumi dies horribly before this can happen, you run the very real risk of losing the reader.

The solution is, of course, to make Jack & Vumi a real B story. This gives you something else to talk about other than just the mission, and a character that can help Jack to change. It should be Vumi who helps Jack finally become self-aware--really at long last GET what his problem is--right around the midpoint (p. 55.) He can't fix it yet, but there should be that moment of introspection where Vumi helps him to realize that he needs to change, and it is after that that they also begin to come together. In Act 3, Jack should adjust his personality and finally evolve into

the person he needs to be to solve the external crisis (the plot.)

STAKES

The stakes here are reasonably high--a killer virus that is mutating and ravaging the Congo. But what are the personal stakes for Jack? Finding the answers must be of immense personal importance to him. It's not enough to learn late in the script that he helped develop the strain. At any point, Jack could simply leave and head home, and let someone else deal with then problem. That creates a feeling of low stakes even when the stakes are in fact high.

No, Jack needs to suspect from the get-go (or be told so) that his work has been directly responsible for what is happening to these people and these feel personally compelled to solve the problem. Maybe his ex-wife and child (make her African) are still in Africa and now his child has the disease. That makes it personal.

Too, it needs to be said quite clearly, in Act 1, that this thing is spreading like wildfire and put up some projections showing the pandemic spreading beyond Africa within months and affecting the entire world within a year. "Pandemic" is mentioned, but it's all fairly abstract. We need the Powerpoint presentation or whatever (again, this could occur in the missing second briefing scene) SHOWING the audience what the ramifications are.

On page 52 Jack says if he doesn't find the answers, the Congo will be wiped off the map. This simple statement is another key to amping up the stakes here. Again this should be the fallback, stated quite clearly: if Jack cannot solve the problem the hawks are insisting they just bomb the Congo out of existence, world peace be damned, not giving a rat's ass if they set off WWII in the process. Doing all these things will put a huge weight on Jack's shoulders AND a ticking clock, which is what you want.

LOGIC

As I mentioned above, I don't buy the supernatural premise of the story. The scientific and the supernatural just don't fit for me. To me it seems you need to choose one or the other--a scientific-based (realistic) disease that gives people superhuman but *not* supernatural powers--Super

PCP--or this needs to be a supernatural script from page one, with Tchomia as the evil witch doctor possessing people and Jack as maybe a UN relief worker.

Take Nyembwe for example. When Nyembwe hovers, that's a real head-scratcher. Because we can believe that a disease can affect you like PCP, where you feel and seem superhuman. But to ACTUALLY fly, there is no realistic way to physiognomically explain this. It can't happen. And if you don't buy the central premise, that's a problem. Now this may be just me, and perhaps other folks might think this is perfectly fine. But my gut tells me you need to pick one or the approach--disease or supernatural--and play by the rules of whichever you choose.

I would opt for the straight-up supernatural approach, as this has the most plusses. Firstly, it gives you a bad guy--TCHOMIA (thread him throughout the story. He comes in far too late, on page 68.) Give him an clear objective (seizing control of the Congo, getting rid of all foreigners or whatever) and loyal demonized followers and you will have one damn creepy script. Secondly, It allows you to keep much of what you have written. Thirdly, you can still have Jack sent to discover what's going on--leading a team of scientists (cannon fodder all!) desperately trying to find a rational explanation for irrational events. But ultimately it cannot have anything to do with any disease. In fact the first time Jack sees blood spirits, he should call the Pentagon and say, "That's no fucking disease!" Lastly it downplays the preliminary resemblance to 'Outbreak' and other such movies.

From page 62 on the script goes off the logic rails a bit. First, we have a few plot events with questionable logic. While this is an amazingly cool visual, how exactly did this elevator get into the ground? Later we are able to conclude based on the mining cars that it has something to do with the coltan mining, but until then there's a bit of a disconnect. We need to see some "Property of So and So Mining" company signs around the village or something like that first, since we are assuming this village is not directly related to the mines.

The next is, how did Vumi get down there in the grotto, too? Vumi is off-camera for too long and thus we have a disconnect. We're missing a critical scene with her. Are we to assume she did the exact same series of events as Jack?

Why does Jack head into the medicine trap/elevator hut in the first place? Is that where he thinks he heard Vumi scream from? Is the hut labeled "Property of Coltan Mining Company--no trespassing?" It should be.

How did Jack get on the train? And how did Vumi get on the same train in another compartment? Missing important connective tissue here. Similarly, how did Jack get into the veldt? Did he jump off the train? How does he know what his mission is? Has this somehow been communicated to him telepathically? This information needs to be on the page. Why is Tchomia after Basabe? This too needs a bit more clarification, although one can guess he wants to knock out Basabe to take over. But the bad guy's plan needs to be clear. Tchomia's plan is too amorphous as of now.

MISCELLANEOUS

Jack going in solo is not well enough explained in the script to suspend belief. We've all seen OUTBREAK and similar movies, which (fairly realistically) handled these things with containment teams. So the audience's first reaction, when Jack is sent in without such a team, is disbelief, and unfortunately the explanations given in the script are insufficient.

The solution here is to really explain to people WHY Jack has to go in solo. A couple of lines about not wanting to upset and election and a peace process don't do it. We need to know what exactly is going on down there. This can be explained to Jack perhaps in another briefing scene--maybe on the plane, en route. This in fact should be the same scene in which we establish all the goodies in Jack's 'magic bag.' As in a Bond movie where Q must show Bond and the audience all the gadgets Bond will use in advance, so should Jack get a briefing by a DIA person showing him all the things in the attaché AND explaining exactly WHY things are so delicate in the Congo right now and thus they cannot send in a team. So what if there are elections going on? How would that affect an American team? Surely there are international relief organizations helping out there all the time. Wouldn't it in fact be much more logical to send Jack down there leading a team undercover as UN relief workers?

When we first meet Basabe, it is unclear who he is; it should not be. It should be part of Jack's briefing going

in who the players are. Upon arrival he should see campaign posters with Basabe and his opponent's faces everywhere. The audience should be ahead of the game on this so that when Basabe walks into the room, we all know who he is because it's been foreshadowed.

Similarly, we have no idea Tchomia is a "messianic militia leader" until the very end of the script, so his role in the film and his goal seem unclear and even befuddling. While he's mentioned once earlier, he needs to be established much more clearly from the start (hello, briefing scene.)

It's also unclear how or why Jack gets the "message" from the corpse woman that he should dive down. Are these creatures telepaths? How is the audience going to know that she's telling him to dive down? And why would he?

We really lose track of Vumi once Jack goes into the sick pit. She needs to track a bit better. Also from the way the script is set up, with Vumi searching for what happened to her father, we expect Tchomia to **be** her father instead of simply the dad of some poor random girl who was killed not that long ago. It doesn't seem like enough movie time has elapsed for him to become a big dark shaman. This would be a great twist if it was indeed Vumi's dad. Consider it.

The yak-yak between Jack and Tchomia goes on for too long. I cut a bit of this on p. 72; still more can go, however.

CONCLUSION

I cannot state enough just how great the craft is here. But the script in my opinion needs some finessing in terms of structure and expectations of the genre. I have no doubt that the writer is clever enough to come up with some great solutions for all the things discussed here and really make this thing come together. Market potential is good should the writer be able to really nail this down.

Good luck!



	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Very Good</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>So-So</u>	<u>Not Good</u>
Artistically		X			
Commercial			X		
Premise				X	
Story			X		
Main Characters			X-----	-----X	
Minor Characters			X		
Dialogue			X		
Visual Elements		X			
Title			X		

SCRIPT:
WRITER:

PASS
CONSIDER