

Pack: A feature-length script

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Abstract:

Pack follows Shane, an outcast teenager who lives in the woods with his huntsman father and longs for acceptance from the town he lives outside of. When the Chambers family moves in, the patriarch, Coach Chambers, offers him friendship and a spot on the lacrosse team, at the same time as suspicious wolf attacks plague the town. Shane and his friend James must gain the acceptance of the wider team by impressing the cruel team captain, Roman, the coach's son. By the time Shane earns the respect of the lacrosse team and Roman, he notices the chambers might not be who they say they are and may not even be human. Discovering the lacrosse team and James are the monstrous progeny of the inhuman Chambers, left to be raised by regular humans, Shane must fight back against the Chambers to save himself and stop them from consuming the entire town.

This report follows the research and development of the script of 'Pack', including a reflection on the overall project's success. The research details notes made on similar films and how they influenced decisions on character, plot, and theme. The development section follows the process of writing the project from the initial treatment to the final draft, detailing the adjustments made at each step. Finally, the report ends with a reflection on how each piece of the film, character, plot, and theme worked as a cohesive whole to complete the aims of the project and its effectiveness in telling the story.

Author's Declaration:

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Initial plans and goals:

Pack was generated from an idea exploring the mythology of ‘wolfweres’, an inverted version of the werewolf transformation: from wolf to man. I was drawn to the potential of ‘wolfwere’ as a metaphor to explore a communal fear of imposters, or the replacement of the familiar with something that infiltrates a community. While these sorts of narratives have often been used to portray reactionary political ideas, such as the early 1950s anti-communist ‘Red Scare’ of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), I wanted *Pack* to explore contemporary anxieties about the rise of far-right movements and ‘toxic masculinity’, particularly among young men, especially in the USA. The thematic focus of the script was therefore centred upon a narrative exploring how male violence and reactionary ideas infiltrate youth culture.

1. Research:

On the 23rd of April 2024, in a discussion with my supervisor, it was decided the initial idea was suitable for development and I began research on the project. I started by studying a number of films that explore ideas of infiltration, including the original and remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956 & 1978), *They Look Like People* (2015), and Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019). Several others also became significant influences, which I will acknowledge at appropriate moments below, as research continued.

In previous projects, I had struggled to produce character-driven scripts, those guided mainly by the protagonists’ goals; so in *Pack* I began by outlining structure and characterisation. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) was particularly helpful as regards structure, suggesting a slow-release narrative where a protagonist, initially unaware, is slowly introduced to more and more clues. *Us* (2019) influenced both the visuals and the use of political metaphor in my script. Peele’s increasingly bloody and desperate set-piece conflicts with the infiltrating doubles, and how he invokes contemporary politics helped me formulate my own.

Unfortunately, Perry Blacksheer’s *They Look Like People* (2015) was less useful to me since it proved to be more psychological and less explicitly horror, but it did help me develop ideas about masculinity. In particular, the central relationship between his two protagonists, Wyatt and Christian, inspired the brotherly relationship between Shane and James in my script.

In developing the central theme of my narrative I also researched youth subcultures (see Amidon, et al below) and the growing far-right influence from social media figures like Andrew Tate, particularly in the United States. It was the well-established use of high school male fraternities such as *Omega Gamma Delta* (Brooklyn high school), and *Phi Kappa* that helped me decide to set *Pack* in the US.

1a. Character:

The main influence on the characters of 'Pack' was Joel Shumacher's *The Lost Boys* (1987). While the film's plot initially appears quite reactionary, where a teen must resist the homoerotic allure of the lost boys' gang lifestyle (Levy, 2017), I was particularly interested in the predatory relationship of the gang members and their true master, unassuming video store owner Max who 'recruits' young men into their group.

Following common advice in script-writing, I knew my protagonist needed to be defined by his wants versus needs. And this conflict – between wanting to belong within masculine culture and needing to understand his true nature and ultimately resist – defines the character of Shane. Firstly, I decided that Shane must be an outsider in a number of respects in order to define his 'want'. His desire to be a part of Coach's team and gain acceptance is part of his own insecurity about all the aspects of himself that make him an outsider: his lower social rank as a poorer student, compounded by his status as a mixed-race student in a predominantly Caucasian school. With Shane's Native American mother having died when he was young, I planned for him to be completely isolated from that culture too. As well as this, I planned for him to feel insecure about his latent homosexuality, adding even more to his desire to be a part of the dominant culture; one that is heterosexual, white, affluent and venerated by fascist ideology.

Shane's character arc is the gradual realisation that he can never be one of the 'pack'; indeed, as not only a member of an 'inferior' race but of an inferior species, he can only ever be their victim. His arc, therefore, has parallels with that of Michael in *The Lost Boys*: seduction culminating in a horrifying revelation.

The antagonists' goals were always far simpler. I wanted Adam and his family to be entirely motivated by domination and killing, a grotesque and explicitly evil compulsion with no other motivation or ideal than the gratification of their thirst for violence and power. This departs from the divided nature of the werewolf, where the transformation involves a loss of human or humane nature. For the 'wolfweres', I wanted to make it clear that any humanity

displayed (such as a gesture of friendship or paternal care) was merely a performance to mask their true inhumanity.

1b. Plot:

Trying to get ahead of previous issues in scriptwriting where my plots were not embedded enough in the characters' goals, I wanted to find inspiration for a plot that fully fit the protagonist's journey I had mapped out. This was intended to avoid a 'meandering' quality that had dogged my earlier scripts.

After defining the protagonist's arc and using *The Lost Boys* as a blueprint, I settled on the narrative's basic beginning, middle and end. The ominous Chambers family moves into Shane's town. He is seduced by their affluent lifestyle and seemingly perfect family. At some point it would become clear that the family can no longer be trusted and finally Shane would be forced to fight to resist them.

Initially I had considered Shane discovering the truth about the Chambers early on, then trying to convince the town about the danger they posed, much like Charley in *Fright Night* (1985) or Matthew in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) but found that neither protagonist struggled sufficiently with their own demons. I wanted the personal stakes for Shane to be clearer from the start, so that when he pursued the seduction arc it fit the political themes I wanted to explore.

Of great help here was Jordan Peele's first film *Get Out* (2017), which informed the structure of *Pack*'s narrative with Shane's increasing suspicion of the Chambers/Armitage family, which gradually challenges his own moral sense. Despite his better instincts, for much of the first half of the narrative Shane ignores any warning signs, until there is a direct threat against him.

I also decided early on that Shane needed James, a best-friend character, as a plot device to not only prompt his moral journey but through peer-pressure to encourage him to fall in line with heteronormative hypermasculine sports culture. James was also useful as a mirror showing the destructive result of radicalisation. Similarly, I introduced the character of Jackson to foreshadow the victimisation Shane might suffer if he continued on his current path.

To fully flesh out the narrative, I expanded the three-point beginning, middle, and end into the six-key story beats structure of: *Normal World, Inciting Incident, Act 1 Break, Midpoint, Act 2 Break, and Climax*.

1c. Themes:

In embedding *Pack's* themes I wanted to develop an idea arising from research on the growing influence of far-right influencers on young men and teenagers. It felt obvious that the story should take place in a school and within a sports team fraternity, since the far right has infiltrated these spaces most successfully in both the US and the UK (O'Donoghue, 2024). Over and above outlining 'toxic' masculine behaviour - competitiveness, aggression, and misogyny - I wanted to be guided by ideas about fascist psychology, which has clear pathological parallels with 'toxic masculinity'.

I wanted the lacrosse fraternity to be a space of domination, where team members suck up to authority and beat down their subordinates to reinforce conformity. For example, Shane first proves himself when he demonstrates his violence to Roman, earning his respect by subordinating his victim. I was influenced here by Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* (1977) about "soldierly men" – *'a theory of both the roots and consequences of proto-fascist and fascist masculinity'* (Amidon, 2009, pp. 1). Theweleit's intriguing biographical information about several Nazi soldiers provided useful insights into this culture of domination, born from a fetishisation of military discipline, and influenced my depictions of Adam and Roman as leader and his lieutenant.

I thought the wolves would make the best metaphor for fascism, especially when recast as the even more sinister 'wolfwere', a creature whose viciousness is actually more insidious and invisible in human form. Rather than display fascism as merely the darker impulses of humanity, I instead thought of Sartre's description of a German fascist being *'a man who wishes to be pitiless stone, a furious torrent, a devastating thunderbolt – anything except a man'*. (Satre, 2009, p38). The desire to be more than a man but a natural force of destruction is expressed in their true wolf forms.

In exploring themes of domination and fascism, my final piece of research involved 'anti-family' political analysis and filmmaking, from Joseph Ruben's *The Stepfather* (1987) to the work of Ari Aster throughout his career. The social construct of the nuclear family has always been problematic, of course; at once lauded for its stability in rearing children and excoriated for its destructive dynamics arising from patriarchal authority. In Shane's eyes the

Chambers are the ideal nuclear family, one that he lacks. Consequently, his journey is about overcoming his desire for the 'ideal' by understanding the nuclear family as a mechanism for control, in this case with Adam as its domineering patriarch. Drawing from my research, especially from Sophie Lewis' *Abolish the Family* (2022), I decided, through Adam's sinister brood, to demonstrate what Lewis terms the '*quasi-fascist structures latent in the heteronormative white nuclear family*'. (Lewis, p.14)

2. Development:

The first stage of development was the creation of a treatment by expanding the six key story beats described above. Besides creating a roadmap for every scene in the script, the treatment also allowed me to develop the minor characters and consider their arcs in relation to the overall structure of the narrative; for example, to tie Shane's lowest moment, the act 2 break, to the death of James.

In a supervision meeting on the 14th of May it was decided that the structure of the story was solid enough to move forwards with a roughly twenty-page treatment, making several improvements in the process, particularly regarding Shane's character. The feedback made it clear that the treatment failed to show any of his interior life - thoughts and emotions - making his motivation unclear until the narrative midpoint. This would create problems throughout development since, without addressing his reactions to events and the depths of his shame and envy, their impact on his actions would remain obscure. Consequently, Shane might have seemed passive and inscrutable, until suddenly in Act 3 he emerged as a vengeful agent of destruction. The treatment of Act 3 itself had sparse detail, leaving it much shorter than that of the first two acts, with a similar limited thematic account, due largely to the agreed restricted word count, so I decided to rectify this in the longer treatment.

Expanding the treatment allowed me to develop the plot points I had only hinted at in the six-page treatment. Now I was able to develop the characters of Shane and James, filling out their relationship to tie it back to the central theme about masculinity. I could show their moments of closeness and hidden longing to explore the repressed desires smothered by the stoicism of traditional masculinity. I was also able to flesh out scenes detailing Shane's backstory, particularly the death of his mother. Most importantly, it was possible to detail the action sequences, developing them into a desperate struggle and emphasising the mounting tension of the horror. Act 3 became more dramatically significant, with Shane having to overcome both the wolves and being trapped in a room filling with gas.

However, there was still the issue of Shane's apparent emotional passivity. In the inciting incident, where Adam offers Shane a spot on the team, it wasn't clear what this incident incited in Shane and how his decision to join the team would define the final arc of his story. Despite having his desire to be accepted clear in my mind, Shane's physical goals in the narrative, the things he wants to do as a result of his desire, were not. It wasn't clear if and why he wanted to join the team. Of the parts that needed the most reworking, the majority were contained in the first half before the midpoint. It was agreed that, with these improvements in mind, I would move forwards to writing the script's first act in full, in the hope of finding the character of Shane in the process.

By August 6th the first act of *Pack* was completed and largely successful. While Shane's motivations became clearer as his dialogue was fleshed out, the writing needed to focus more on the visual: Shane's reactions and inner thoughts had to be revealed in the scene's action lines. It was then decided to move ahead and complete Act 2. The continuing issues with Shane's goals were clearest here because it was important for readers/viewers to understand why Shane acts or does what he does beyond what is revealed/articulated by Shane himself. He was not entirely successful as a protagonist because his physical goals, to become accepted by the lacrosse team, were not guiding the events of the story. Nor was he actively discovering for himself the true horror at the heart of the story: he was still too passive. Asking myself 'What does Shane want in this scene, and how does the audience know he's trying to achieve it?' extensive rewrites ensured that each of Shane's actions were the driving force in every scene. At last, it felt as if the narrative had begun to flow more compellingly, and here *Get Out* became very helpful. The desire of Peele's protagonist, Chris, to ignore the mounting horror around him was the central tension of that film's narrative, and I decided that a similar tension should operate in Shane's arc too.

As well as general editing, another problematic aspect of the script needed addressing. Wolves would emerge from the shorn skin of the human bodies they inhabited, simply discarding the skin on the ground. While appropriately macabre, this posed a logical problem: did they have to collect the skin afterwards? More importantly, this was similar to a Native American folklore creature, the Skinwalker, widely considered controversial and offensive to native communities. To avoid any such offence, I removed this aspect of their transformation and opted for tearing the flesh open messily to transform, as in the werewolf classic, Neil Jordan's *A Company of Wolves* (1984).

With these changes in place and the third act written, the structure was finally where it needed to be and a first draft had been completed. Only minor improvements were needed for the final draft, in particular reworking the character of Shane's father, Ellis, to more efficiently establish why the father and son's relationship was so strained.

Reflection:

Overall, I think the project was successful. Obviously, the most significant issue throughout was Shane's character, where I struggled to make the plot fit with his arc as I intended. This was possibly a result of pursuing my thematic intentions without giving proper thought to the physical goals of the character: putting subtext before text. In the end, however, I think it came together. Making Shane's goals clearer through his actions was as simple as having him openly state them. Perhaps Shane's character could have been more straightforward, as the many facets of his identity and backstory created an overly complex character who is queer, mixed race, grieving for his mother and estranged from his father. However, in a story attempting to explore why a male teenager is so seduced by the far-right, perhaps a character like Shane might be expected to suffer complex and contradictory personality traits, even if these aspects of his backstory are far from the life experience of an average American teenager.

The most successful characters were the antagonists, I think, due largely to their relative simplicity. Adam and Roman, who are only ever motivated by the desire to dominate, manipulate, and kill, made writing them easier, and they seem to represent an appropriately malign force in the story. Shane's gorey confrontation with them in the latter half of the script, mimicking the monsters of eighties horror, was the part I was happiest to write and probably the most effective.

The mythology surrounding the wolves however was more problematic. Combining the largely new idea of 'wolfweres' with the more traditional 'Changeling' folklore was difficult, especially finding ways to explain it without lengthy exposition. Through multiple reads by my supervisor and friends I found myself constantly reminding them of the distinction between 'werewolves' and 'wolfweres', a consequence of how much more established a creature in horror the former are versus the ambiguous mythology of the wolfweres. The most awkward aspect of this lay in its effect thematically. For example, suggesting that the lacrosse team and some members of the town had *always* been wolves implied that fascism had always existed at the heart of white suburban America. However, it might also suggest

that fascist tendencies were somehow genetic, something only monstrous inhuman creatures are predisposed to, rather than the alluring choice that many young men find reaffirming.

After a lengthy struggle, I was able to fix the structure towards the second draft. This was achieved by recognising that Shane must try to fall in with and then fight against the Chambers' team/wolf pack. While the first half – figuring how and why Shane tries to become part of the pack – was difficult to achieve, the second half gained momentum and probably contains my strongest writing. Having Shane employ his father's knowledge about hunting to fight against the wolves worked thematically; and writing the fight scenes as desperate struggles with calculated tactics worked dramatically. Resisting the temptation to turn Shane into an action hero, and allowing the sheer difficulty of fighting to be shown, kept the fight scenes tense. This was inspired by the likes of *Blue Ruin* (2013) and *Green Room* (2015).

The only issue I had with the conflict heavy fight scenes in Act 3 was the length. The pace of the second act is slow in order to build tension towards the reveal, and it stands in stark contrast to the fast-paced fifteen pages of Act 3. I anticipate that in translation to screen the runtime would be dramatically longer than fifteen minutes, allowing the action more careful development on screen. One possible refinement might have been allowing more time for Shane to develop and act upon his new outlook after his lowest point, the death of James, rather than moving straight to a counterattack against the wolves.

I am satisfied that the thematic content of the script is fairly strong, since it was the most researched. Apart from concerns outlined earlier, it was always clear that the script was exploring 'toxic masculinity' with Shane and the Wolves, especially with the latter being such an explicit metaphor. The twin sides of Shane's masculinity, his vulnerability with James and his toxic desire to be one with the pack, represented the dilemma of Shane's arc early on, and the research I did on far-right subcultures and their language influenced me, particularly in the writing of Roman.

There was one flaw in my thematic content that I think caused the script to suffer: the scarcity of central female characters. If what most defines patriarchal, and especially fascistic masculinity is domination and aggression towards weakness – and femininity when defined as such – then the story should have centralised the experiences of women more. The most interesting female character I have is Leana, a representation of fascist women whose dual status is both victim and perpetrator. All other female characters are victims or passive

extras. I had in previous drafts considered a character called 'Maddie', Jackson's girlfriend, who persuades him to leave the team due to their increasingly horrible comments about her and other women. Having her there to perhaps fight alongside Shane or push him to investigate the Chambers early on would have worked, but unfortunately I was unable to fit her subplot into the already bloated story, which I regret.

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Filmography:

A Company of Wolves (1984) Neil Jordan (film) UK, ITC Productions.

Blue Ruin (2013) Jeremy Saulnier (film) US, The Weinstein Company.

Fright Night (1985) Tom Holland (film) USA, Columbia Pictures.

Get Out (2017) Jordan Peele (film) USA, Universal Pictures.

Green Room (2015) Jeremy Saulnier (film) USA, Broad Green Pictures.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) Don Siegel (film) USA, Paramount Pictures.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1978) Philip Kaufman (film) USA, Solofilm.

The Lost Boys (1987) Joel Schumacher (film) USA, Warner Bros.

The Stepfather (1987) Joseph Ruben (film) USA, ITC Productions.

They Look Like People (2015) Perry Blackshear (film) USA, Netflix.

Us (2019) Jordan Peele (film) USA, Universal Pictures.