

SENTIENT – PILOT REVIEW – TASK 2
USA SCRIPT
Pilot review by Craig Delahoy

Overall rating (as given in Task 1): ****

GENERAL NOTES

My initial comment from task one was:

“I really enjoyed this script, though it does need some work. Some of the dialogue feels a little forced and unnatural, and there were quite a few typos (eg, Terimal) that were distracting. It seems to hit most of the right beats at the right time, and certainly has plenty of high stakes when needed.

“I did feel that some of the situations didn’t ring true. For example, I wasn’t convinced that JJ would actually scope out a bad guy, or that he would miss the cues in the gas station that Lena and Reese were sending. I felt he should be picking up on those more clearly near the end, which would also help to raise the tension there.

“I also wasn’t convinced with Syd’s return. We’ve seen him disintegrate, so his return as written felt unconvincing. I also felt that some people (including JJ) seemed to be wandering around a little aimlessly, with no real purpose – or at least with nothing driving them at times.”

TEASER ACT

- The opening image (one man trying to save another in the midst of a tremendous, frightening storm) certainly meets the brief of drawing us into the story.
- Length of teaser is 7.5 pages – well within the guidelines.
- Syd’s first dialogue (“... that cute little brunette.”) doesn’t ring true. Doesn’t sound like real banter among a crew of alpha males. While the crew should certainly feel and sounds like friends, and there should be some bonding moments, it still needs to be genuine for the type of people these characters are.
- Same with JJ’s first text back to Lindsey. Text messages should be short, brief. Perhaps change to “I made a mistake. We moved on. No?”
- Syd’s line on p4. I think the word “headquarters” is a poor choice. Better to use something more colloquial (eg, “the shop”, or “the office”, or “the boss”), or better still, use a name for an unknown boss (eg, “Brodie says he wants you to check ...”).
- JJ and Syd’s exchange at top of p5. Not sure that “I don’t have the equipment” rings true. He would have taken up all the equipment he would reasonably be expected to use. Perhaps the work required is more than was anticipated – “Syd, both these units are totally shot.” – “Seriously? Nothing you can do?” - “They’re gonna need a full overhaul – maybe even replaced.”
- I also think JJ would take some pics of the work to be done, either on a phone or, more likely, a digital camera strapped to his wrist (again, highlighting the risk of tools falling). This would be to document the work to be done. This might then come in handy when he sees the reddish hue over the city, and he can take some pics of that too. The camera or phone can then be shown to die when the storm (ie, the EMP

activity) increases, giving him something else to think about (another clue for the audience). This then ties in with the radio not working.

- P7. Two men flee in the truck. Would they? Would the truck's ignition be working if we've just established that an EMP has killed the radios? How about if the two guys get into the truck, and try to start it, but the electronic ignition is dead and nothing happens. Then, one of the huge trees, which we've already established as swaying and cracking in the distance, crashes down onto the cabin of the truck visibly crushing it? Ramps up the carnage and danger. (Would obviously have implications later in the script.)
- P8. As the two men are getting thrown about, how about Syd gets seriously injured (eg, his leg is pierced by a tree branch, like a spear)? This injury can then be compounded when he crushes his knee on a rock. This combination of injuries would help to make his effort to reach the safety of the cave less successful, providing a reason for him being left outside.
- Not sure that we've discovered a "special skill" JJ has that will serve the story later. Is it his familiarity high voltage power transmission? His lack of a fear of heights?
- I'm assuming the "seed" for JJ is the unknown issue with his girlfriend. He refers to her later in the story, and there is an unfulfilled attempt to make that his motivation or early goal.
- There is no interpretation of events offered, but at this early stage I agree with the writer that it's inappropriate. Best to keep them busy surviving at this point.
- The climax works as an end-of-the-first-act highlight. However, I'm not sure that two hours has passed in these seven pages (as the super after the opening scene implies).

ACT ONE

- Act One is 19 pages long, slightly beyond the recommended maximum of 15 pages.
- I'm not a huge fan of onomatopoeia (eg, "BLIP") in a script.
- As a director, I think I would rearrange the opening scenes here a little. I like the idea of starting on the grass, with blood dripping and red ash falling. I'd then investigate that source a little more, until I discover the body hanging from the tree, then widen a little more to find the fuselage in the tree. Each little reveal becomes a new shock. Then I'd possibly cut to the big wide scene of the airport with damage, bodies, etc. Then I'd cut back to Reese waking. I think this would add to the dramatic impact. Alternatively, leave the major wide shot until Reese stumbles out of the trees onto the runway.
- P11. Who is Reese potentially yelling to? He's established that there's no one about. I'm not sure, even shocked as he is, that he'd bother yelling.
- P12. *Terminal. Shouldn't Reese see more shadows (formerly people) inside the terminal?
- P11-p12. Reese's journey from the plane to the runway, to the interior of the terminal and back to his plane seems too contrived. Not sure it's the order of events that seems most natural. I think the terminal interior can be dropped. I also wonder if the events around the cockpit of the plane can be compressed into one scene? We can still have him initially seeing and being repulsed by the bodies of the pilots, then he spies a phone that's humming, and maybe others that are hot and glowing, even

parking, then he can spot the cockpit again to see that the bodies are suddenly gone. His circular journey seems wasteful.

- This could be expanded more to reinforce some of the major theme stuff. For example, perhaps he initially sees other passenger bodies as well, then sees the pilots. Perhaps something he sees is so shocking to him that he has to turn away and vomit. He takes a moment to finish and clean himself up, then when he turns back the bodies are all gone, replaced with those shadows on the ground ...
- P14. More onomatopoeia. Also, not fond of the bullet shell falling down his neck. Too unlikely.
- P16. Is Sal supposed to be conspiracy theorist/doomsday prepper? If so, this exchange could possibly be ramped up a little to play off that more.
- P16. Sal's line "Some phenomenon from the upper atmosphere" doesn't work. I'd drop that bit and just leave him shaking his head and offering only the "radioactive" bit.
- P17. Not sure about the "rivers swelling" bit. JJ is up in the mountains, and he saw one small creek. That creek would be a feeder **into** a major river further downstream. A dam spillway would flow into the major river it was damming, so creeks further upstream wouldn't be affected if the spillway was opening or the dam was failing.
- P18. Again, would a HAM radio be working if there was an EMP hit that knocked out everything electrical?
- P19. I wouldn't have Lena crying. She'd be in shock, certainly, but that doesn't include crying. I think she's stronger than that. (PS – I wonder if this scene could be moved earlier to follow JJ falling asleep under the tree? That would then allow us to come back to JJ with the sense that more time had passed.)
- P20-p22. I wonder if some of this scene could be included in the teaser scene? I understand the idea of being able to jump back and forth between pre- and post-the inciting event, but sliding some of this scene back to the teaser would help with the two hours that was supposed to be passing then, as well as introducing another major character early on.
- P21. Need to be careful that the birthday set-up and pay-off doesn't come across as too cheesy.
- P23. This car not working reinforces my earlier comment that the truck in the teaser shouldn't be working either.
- P23. Lose Reese's response "Nobody". Go straight from "Who are you?" to "Nothing works."
- P24/p25. We seem to cut from day time to dawn. Feels awkward.
- P25. Sal convincing JJ to go with him seems too easy. If JJ is truly motivated to seek out his fiancée, he should resist more. Especially as he failed to get to her the previous day.
- P27. How could Sal recognise an individual from so far away? Okay, he spotted someone in orange coveralls, but how could he clearly identify him as a specific criminal. If he was also looking through his rifle scope to identify the man, then this should be mentioned. Maybe it could be reinforced with him looking through the scope, obviously seeing something, then muttering something like, "Well, fuck me ..."

- P28. I'm still not convinced that JJ would "return to his duty" and scope out bodies for Sal to shoot. Allowing him to be complicit here paints him as a bad guy, or someone too easily led into moral ambiguity. Not sure that's what we want for our lead protagonist. I think some threatening cliff-hanger here, **without** the additional executions, could be enough tension to end Act One. If Sal is the nemesis to JJ's protagonist, there needs to be conflict, but that conflict should lead the protagonist into doing something he wouldn't normally do. This is only reinforced in Act Two, when JJ tries to stop Sal from executing the trapped prisoner. His behaviour should be consistent.
- I'm still finding it difficult to understand why JJ allows himself to get too distracted from his main goal – which I understood to be trying to get to his fiancée. He really doesn't seem to be trying enough to work towards his goal.

ACT TWO

- Duration of Act Two is eight pages. This is within the 5-10 page guide.
- Lena and Reese wake up in a barn when there is a perfectly good farmhouse nearby. Why didn't they go to the farmhouse first? The explanation given is brushed off too easily and seems too contrived. I wonder if the addition of a small scene of them arriving here at night and deciding not to go to the farmhouse but sleep in the barn would be worthwhile? If so, I'd slot it in around the time JJ is settling down into the camp.
- P32. Lena's line "I've cried more in the last 24 hours ..." Again, I don't see her as a crying, hysterical type. I think she's stronger, or at least tries to be. Maybe something like "I'm always okay" is more appropriate. She doesn't like her sister and doesn't keep in touch with her parents. She's a loner, a survivor, so she needs to carry like one.
- P33. Again, Reese's explanation of bodies being there and then not being there ... this wasn't really set up sufficiently in his opening scene.
- P34. *Bites. Sorry, but typos are distracting. Is the farmhouse dilapidated or damaged from the storm?
- P35. Would it be physically possible for JJ to reach down, retrieve Sal's revolver, empty the shells INTO HIS HAND then throw them and the revolver away, while still holding another gun to Sal's head? It seems to me the moment JJ takes his gun away from Sal's head to do all that, Sal would be onto him.
- P36. *Streaks. Steaks in the sky would be a different movie.
- P36. It would be best to have something else to break up JJ's escape and then Sal sighting him through his scope. Can one of Lena's scenes be inserted in here to add space and time to JJ's escape?
- P37. Sal wouldn't weep. He may have a change of heart, maybe even an attack of conscience, but he wouldn't weep about it.
- Should Act Two end before Sal fires the shot? Should it be kept as a cliffhanger?
- Quite a few of the goal dot-points in the guide are not implemented, but I don't see this script as weaker for that.
- The ash has been mentioned a few times, but there is no suggestion that this is human ash. In fact, the comment that it is "granulated" implies something else entirely.

ACT THREE

- Act Three duration is 10 pages, well inside the recommendation in the guide.
- P38. How does Lena know that Reese needs glasses? It's not been mentioned between the two of them previously.
- P40-41. While the repair with the ignition switch from the compressor works (assuming that just being underground is enough), if the tractor were really old enough, even that wouldn't be necessary. Anything that doesn't have an electronic starter should still work. Older tractors would have just had a very simple solenoid starter with no electronic parts.
- P44. I wonder if this is too late a point to be introducing new characters and a new storyline. I feel this first scene could be taken back into Act Two somewhere – where were these people when the storm hit? Even better, something small in Act One to set it up would be good too, and that could include a crowded zoo full of people – and later we just see shadows on the ground.
- P46. When Reese and Lena are checking cars, while they don't find bodies, should they find shadows on the seats where people would have been sitting?
- The guide mentions time pressure. This is an echo of the time comments in the guide for Act Two. This script doesn't seem to contain any time pressure or ticking clock. Mind you, I don't think it needs that. It works well enough as a story of different people waking up to a new world and trying to understand it and survive in it.
- JJ is very quiet in this act. Should we seem him somehow firing himself up again to go to where he thinks his fiancée should be?

ACT FOUR

- Act Four is about 6 pages, on the very low end of the recommended duration.
- Not sure about the ghost of Syd. Is that part of the bible? Or is it a nightmare?
- P52. The coal-miner's explanation about where they were seems overkill, unnecessary. It could be reduced considerably or even eliminated. *taking.
- Again, should this act finish on a cliffhanger?
- Good that the writer has introduced another theory here. Works well with their characters. The aura of menace is going up a notch, which is also good.

ACT FIVE

- Act five is about 8 pages, within the recommended duration.
- P60. I mentioned in my brief review that I felt JJ should pick up on the fact the Lena and Reese are prisoners much earlier than he does. Picking up on the situation doesn't mean it suddenly deflates. It can actually build the tension. (See No Country for Old Men, or the first fifteen minutes of Inglorious Basterds.) Top of page 60 is where I think he needs to start twigging. Instead of JJ looking confused, he should start to get concerned. He has to maintain that knife edge of understanding what's going on (and we know he understands) without letting the bad guy know he understands. Then there comes a point where everyone knows exactly where they all stand and the fuse could blow any second.x

- P63. We have bodies disappearing earlier in the script (supposedly days before events here), but we have bodies floating in the water here. Is that consistent? Shouldn't all bodies disappear at roughly the same time? Or does the water hold some significance?
- P64. Good cliffhanger.
- I note that there is no resolution here, as the guide suggests. I don't think there should be.

While it still needs some work, I think this forms a solid basis for the pilot episode. I assume a full series arc has been developed that this is setting up. There are a few areas where I think the stakes can be raised (most of which I've mentioned), and a few areas where I think the internal logic falls down (again, most of them I've mentioned).