

SENTIENT
SCRIPT ASSESSMENT 25/4/2020

Synopsis

A teaser scene in a private hospital, an Aboriginal naval officer, Dowd, is wheeling a sick child in a wheelchair through a hospital but is stopped by two Arab paramilitary guys. There's a face off, they're stopping him go see his dying dad. His threat of violence makes them let him through.

Then we see Dowd waking up in a hyperbaric chamber, he feels something isn't right - he comes out into a naval medical centre - finds a colleague who has something strange wrong with her and he looks for help. He finds that the exit doorway is blocked by a stack of bodies - something weird is also going on with mobile phones all ringing at once. He has a flashback to a boat - he's wracked by pain from having the bends from ascending too quickly - they're racing to get him to the hyperbaric chamber. A woman officer, Freisler, threatens him with repercussions for the disaster that has just happened under water. He snaps back to the medical centre and sees a dark alien figure with a space constellation face. He backs into an office, finds a Scientist, Teicher, already hiding in there, after discussing the pros and cons of going out, they do and find the space man and the bodies all gone. They go out the exit into a storm.

Meanwhile an admin officer is stuck in a drain, a naval medic, Amiri, helps him and he runs off despite her getting trapped by a flying car. Dowd arrives and helps her despite almost being impaled by flying rods. They make their way to the bunker and find a crowd including an Admiral trying to get in but the doors are locked. A mysterious sound starts and the crowd are literally torn apart - except our main characters - the Admiral is now disorientated. The doors open and Freisler comes out with two men, she says she's taking command despite Dowd's protests. She tells her men to arrest Dowd, but he quickly disarms them, and leaves them behind to go deeper into the bunker with his allies.

Inside there's a red Mist, which they walk around, Dowd asks the Scientist what is going on and he gets a bible story. In the diver's change rooms they find Dowd's friend Hunt in shock, a quick smack and he's fine, there's enigmatic talk about the dive from earlier and missing colleagues from that dive. They decide to go to another base, but before that Dowd wants to find their missing people.

They wander around and Amiri falls into a pool, it turns out it's full of bodies who's eyes open, when she gets out the figure with a space face appears. It seems like it will attack and shooting ensues which seems to hurt the figure and then they decide to shoot the bodies. They go to a wharf and find the admin guy who ran off earlier, he takes the dinghy they were going to use to get to a bigger boat - then Freisler turns up with men and machine guns.

Dowd and friends run along the beach, they're intending to swim to the bigger boat - there's some sort of fracas in the mist up ahead, Dowd runs towards it - finds a girl that is approaching the space figure which has been attacked by dogs - then Hunt turns up as well as Freisler's cronies. Just as it looks like Dowd is done, thousands of the space figures make their way to the shore and take out Freisler and the bad guys.

ANALYSIS

SENTIENT sets off at a furious pace filled with colourful, larger than life characters, it's full of energy and plenty of plot and character questions that should keep an audience watching. It's unlike anything ever done on Australian TV and that's a great thing.

Technically I think there's an issue with breaking it up into act breaks and stating it on the page. The only reason to do that would be if this was going to be made for a free to air network for ad breaks. I don't think they're needed and they slow down the read.

In general, I think that the characters are consistent in action and in voice and the story structure is really solid. Except for one thing - I'm very confused by the teaser, I think it works fine in and of itself, but as it stands, it seems to be about things that aren't in the actual pilot - the sick son, the father the estranged sister. The two Arabic security guards are written in a style that feels completely different to the rest of the episode. It seems like it's from a different show, I think that page space is a wasted opportunity. It's 4 pages of what is already a short script and unbalances it. My general feeling is that this is the biggest story and structural problem with this script.

I assume any pitch would be about a group of elite special forces naval divers who are caught up in an alien invasion -

but there is no actual naval diving in the script. I think this is a huge problem. The tiny flashback and the conversation with Hunt indicates that something weird and dramatic happened under water - yet we don't see it. I think this is a missed opportunity - it could be almost a mini film like the opening of the first Raiders Of The Lost Ark movie - we see the main guy doing the thing he's best at, in this case being a diver. It's not like I'm coming up with this, it's a big dramatic part of your story, it's just not in the script to be on screen.

The other bigger thing that I think needs work is the rules and science of this world and this story. It may all work in the writer's head, but it was sometimes confusing to me. I'll talk in detail later about where I was confused. I know the tightrope of what the audience knows and what the characters know is a hard one to tread. But it's essential that science and the rules are revealed in some way to the audience, even if only in chunks.

I like how the action rockets along and I think many of the set-pieces are original and go to defining character through action, which is a really good thing. But often I was pushed out of the story by trying to work out the specifics of what I was seeing and the geography of the spaces. I think that each set-piece needs to be broken up into smaller bits - personally I do like when a writer reminds me of the physical geography during the scene so I can be clear where characters are in relation to each other. Using subheadings to define where people are in capital letters - even just DOOR or ROCKWALL or ROADWAY - something that reminds me of the special relationships.

Some specifics. When Dowd goes into the office off the hallway to hide from the figure the windows are misty, is that fogging, or is the glass frosted in a semi opaque way - I'm not just being a pedant, but mist, specifically red mist is something mentioned throughout the script and I was pushed out of the read trying to picture what it would look like. It seems benign in the bunker, but at other times seems dangerous. When Dowd runs into the mist near the end, is this regular mist or red mist? If the mist has a specific function spell it out some more.

I was thrown a bit by the ute tray trapping Amiri, I was trying to work out how it was trapping her, but not injuring her, then when it was pinned to the rock face by the flying

poles, I couldn't understand how it could then be moved off her.

When they get to the bunker, I found the stuff with the Admiral confusing, I would be consistent with naming him, just call him the Admiral or even Admiral Frank in both action and character, then I wouldn't have to think it through.

The big event at the door was very confusing. I like the structure of how it all works the build and confusion then chaos but the specifics were confusing. I'm not sure what the super cell looks like - I assume it's some broiling mass of clouds, is it red or regular clouds? Then when whatever happens "**WHOOSH**, a stream of particles ascends into the heavens, accompanied by the horrified screams of the crowd being torn apart, limb by limb." Where are particles coming from? Next paragraph says "the supercell vaporize the crowd" so are the particles going from the people in the crowd? But then it says "torn apart, limb by limb." They seem like very different things to me.

Then afterwards - "an eerie red mist shrouds the harbour city" what is this mist? The storm? The particles? Or something else? Then inside Friesler's "face covered in blood." Whose blood is that. Then I don't know what "smacked up survivors" means - were they being thrown around when those around them were vaporised? Or is it an after-effect of the sound?

Dowd and the Admiral seem like they are split up at this point, I wasn't clear what had happened there. Then the scientist sees a shadow burnt on a wall - like from an atomic blast - I was unclear what caused that. But the big thing was, why weren't the hero characters vaporised? It would've made sense if they hid behind a car or Dowd or the scientist did something or gave instructions - but it just seems like luck at the moment. This just needs to have a consistent logic and the actual physicality and geography needs to be spelled out. This is a huge action set-piece, so there's no need to make it happen quickly on the page.

Just to be clear, I think what's happening in these scenes is good, it just required me to stop reading and try to puzzle it out - I'm sure it's in the writer's head and on screen it'll be clear but I couldn't always work it out on the page. And as I have said I think the script is quite short - 50 pages where in my experience most 45 to 50 minute TV shows are usually over 60 pages in script form - also I think the white space caused by the act breaks probably means it's only 48

pages. So opening this stuff up and taking more page real estate ain't a bad thing.

Some more things I didn't understand. At the door when Freisler tells Eid to arrest Dowd, when Eid calls her husband a "boong" she doesn't react, considering they have a child together who is also technically a "boong", and as someone who seems interested in rules, I found this surprising. Then the action line - "a round dispatches into the wall" - is unnecessarily convoluted and again pushes the reader out of the read. Then why does Dowd "empty the spent cartridge" - as far as I know the Brownings the military use are semi-automatics that eject spent cartridges. Also, the Admiral is in this sequence and as far as I can tell, he just disappears, not dealt with, not mentioned again - I found that odd.

The rules aren't set out and things seem to act differently as we go along - particularly in the aftermath of the storm attack. There's a moment when Dowd says "Why are we still alive" I had hoped for an answer, Teicher says "That ... wasn't the P.L.A.", I was left wondering what the "that" was - the space figure? The red mist? The storm? The vaporising? And I certainly didn't know what a "P.L.A." is. For the simple ones in the audience like me the occasional straight answer would be good. Then Dowd says "Do you have an answer?", the scientist says "for the science not the existential." - I was waiting for the science answer but instead got an old testament story about Hebrew slaves. After a couple of pages of this I was absolutely none the wiser as to what the scientist thought was going on. Clarity please.

I found the search for "our people" really confusing. I couldn't understand why they thought they were kidnapped - they've just seen a whole heap of people vaporised. Then there seems like there's a bit of zombie thing going on, or the people in the pool are being physically controlled by the space figure. It wasn't clear and muddied my understanding of what the figures were trying to actually achieve.

On the beach at the end I had no idea where people were in relationship to each other, the water, and the direction needed to go in order to get to the boat. It seemed like Babic should have been coming from behind Dowd so further away from the creature, but somehow he seems closer to it which feels odd. And just to be a pedant "shattering his eyes", couldn't visualise that, wouldn't a ball of jelly pop? Then the mechanics of him reacting was confusing, he "collapses to the ground", then "dropping him, face forward into the sand".

I'm assuming the first collapse is to his knees but he's still upright, then he drops forward.

I'll say it again, I think that there's a great sense of urgency and high stakes, the set pieces sound great and would be very cinematic. But clarity about the science/story rules and the physicality and geography within each scene will make it so much easier for the reader and ultimately the audience.

Overall

SENTIENT is a project unlike what we usually do in Australia, which is something that makes it very exciting. There's a lot of great scenes and sequences in it that will make riveting viewing. But I think there's still some work to do yet.

I'm going to harp on about the teaser; it's a lost opportunity I think to see the protagonist doing the thing he's great at and set up some dramatic questions. I think that the science, the rules, need to be really clear and consistent, it needs to be made clear to the audience every time, how things work. One of the reasons most monster/creature genres work is that the rules are really clear about what they want, what they can do and how they are vulnerable. I'm sure there's a desire to reveal new information over the length of the series - but I think that there can be some things made clear or different possibilities of what might be happening spelt out as we go - they don't even have to be right.

The other main thing I want as a reader, is to be really clear about what I would be seeing and hearing in the finished show.

This draft of Sentient is well on the way, but it isn't quite there yet.

DAVID CAESAR