

*-The Script Department-
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Type of Material:	Script	Title:	CONFIDENTIAL
Number of Pages:	118	Author:	CONFIDENTIAL
Coverage type:	Basic	Circa:	2017
Payment type:		Location:	Various places around the globe
Coverage Date:		Genre:	Action/Political Thriller
Analyst:			

LOG LINE: CONFIDENTIAL

	Excellent	Good	Needs Work	Rethink
Idea			X	
Overall execution			X	
Narrative/Structure				X
Characters/Dialogue			X	
Effective Scene work			X	
Professional appearance: grammar, spelling, typos			X	
Commercial potential			X	
Readiness for Market				X

Scouting Recommendation:	
Yes	
Not at this time	X

COMMENTS:

Raoul,
Thank you for the opportunity to read and cover XXXX. It's an intelligent enough idea, with some real potential for internal and external conflicts. However, the scope of your story serves to undermine the human element. What you are going for (kind of like WATCHMEN, if it had been written by Tom Clancy) is noble and important, but the script is challenging to engage with because there is simply too much you are trying to accomplish. The most important thing for a screenplay to accomplish is to tell a story. With a bit of rethinking and reorganizing, the script can become much stronger.

Scale & MacGuffin

The primary area that needs improvement in XXXX is the scale of the story. True, the strain on the planet's resources is, by definition, a world-wide problem. We are dealing with themes that necessitate an awareness of everybody in the world – their needs and their weaknesses. Whenever writing about a problem on that scale, it is virtually impossible to tell a compelling story. The numbers are just too big and impossible to relate to for most audiences.

In a film like XXXX, it is critical to have a strong emotional spine to build it on. Of course, the larger issues are important, but a screenplay needs to have the focus and intensity of a laser beam. A story of the scope you describe diffuses the light too much. Look at DIE HARD. John McLane wants to defeat the terrorists and thwart their robbery of the Nakatomi Building's vault. But his main focus, his drive, comes from the desire to save his wife. Even James Bond, who saves the world every time he's pulled out of cold storage, has a damsel in distress. Flash Gordon is always saving Dale Arden even though the galaxy is at risk. Superman and Lois Lane. In THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW, it was Dennis Quaid's son. In ARMAGEDDON, it was Bruce Willis's daughter. In XXXX, our intrepid heroes endeavor to save the world, but – not to be flip – what's in it for them?

Most films in your genre that deal with large crises tend to use the larger story as a B-story, or even merely as a MacGuffin. "MacGuffin" is a term coined by Alfred Hitchcock to describe the plot device that launches/advances the plot. Like The Antidote, or The Microfilm, or The Ark of the Covenant.

In XXXX, your MacGuffin isn't revealed until page 72 or so. This is a legit technique...writing is the art of withholding information, after all, but the level of gravitas in the screenplay didn't lead us to this place very directly. The script itself doesn't need a megalomaniac or anything. In fact, the idea of an actual worldwide conspiracy to cull the human herd is enticing. It's enticing enough to be worthy of an entire film of its own. The time spent chasing the mystery around the globe is unnecessary. The monkeys dying, the meetings and time spent in court with the US and Chinese consuls, and all the other stuff feels tacked on and flabby. None of these plot points require the pages devoted to them. The script would be much leaner (and inexpensive to shoot) if the characters all got to the big meeting much, much sooner. In fact, the lion's share of the story should take place right in that environment.

The horror of what these men plan to do would not be diminished at all, and the reader/viewer would have a lot more time to learn about Tom and Maria and Rob, and maybe a couple of others. Then our protagonists could be the ones with the XXXX in the title. They can recognize the "lesser of two evils" aspect of the plan, and recognize that with the impending nuclear exchange, that maybe the best thing and the worst thing they can do are the same: just let it happen.

Dialogue & Voice & Voices

Writing striking dialogue is important to make your screenplay "pop" for readers, viewers, and potential actors. The awkwardness of exposition is a challenge every writer must overcome, but it is just as important to make sure that each of your characters has his/her own voice. By which I mean, each person should speak a certain way, with a particular cadence. Look at how your characters talk as opposed to what they say. Each one should be distinctive.

Speaking of voices, a screenplay's action lines need to be in the active voice. Most of the action lines in XXXX are written in the passive voice. On page seven, the action reads "Mike is carrying camera equipment." This sentence suffers in two ways: It is in the passive voice, but also, it fails to convey the complete message. Every word in a screenplay is precious. "Mike carries camera gear" is accurate and in the active voice, and it tells us what Mike is doing. What it doesn't do is tell us anything about Mike or about the way in which he carries it. Using more descriptive verbs is an important skill for any writer to develop. "Mike schleps camera gear," or "Mike struggles with camera gear" say more in less space, and give the reader a mental picture of exactly what Mike might look like with the gear.

Enter Late, Exit Early

A good rule of thumb when writing is "Enter late, exit early." In other words, don't start a scene with unnecessary action or dialogue, or end it that way. On page 19, the following exchange appears:

JUDGE ABBOTT

I don't know.

(beat)
Can you do something for me,
Tom? Do what you reporters do
best - you know, scout around a
bit. See if you can find out
what they are up to?

TOM WILKINS

Well, I, uh...Let me see what I can
dig up. No promises.

Mrs. Abbott walks in with a coffee tray.

Everything after “Can you do something for me, Tom?” becomes redundant when we actually see Tom scout around and so on. In fact, the relevance to the plot of the Judge’s role is questionable, but a full rewrite, with an eye toward trimming the flab off the scenes is necessary, especially if you choose to rewrite the whole thing.

The script has potential, but it isn’t there yet. Whether you decide to make it similar to THE CONSTANT GARDENER meets AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH or CONSPIRACY meets DIE HARD, an emotional through line and a little more heart will go a long way. By putting your protagonists in the conundrum earlier and forcing them to decide how to best resolve it, the audience will be brought along for the ride. Thank you again for the chance to read XXXX.

Recommended Reading

CONSPIRACY (Recommended Viewing), an HBO movie, available on DVD
Writing Screenplays That Sell by Michael Hauge
Also highly recommended: Pilar Alessandra’s Six Steps To A Rewrite class.