

SCREENPLAY GURUS

SCRIPT NOTES

TITLE: **X: PILOT**
LOCALE: Steamy Vietnam, Expensive, High Tech San Francisco
WRITER(S): X
PERIOD: 1974, Present
FORM: Teleplay Pilot
GENRE: Conspiracy Drama/Comedy
BUDGET: Low
PAGES: 57
DRAFT DATE: NA
COVERAGE DATE: 6/6/20
PREPARED BY: AJ

COMMENTS

OVERALL

X is a deep dive into the deep state as a hard-partying, genius coder, the son of an American GI and Vietnamese woman, steals data pointing to tech that literally puts voices in people's heads. He assembles a team to take the fight to those who would use it to control the world.

The attitude is California laid back, but the stakes are sky high. Along the way, we meet the corporate head who wants to take the coder down. The dialogue is breezy; the well-structured story builds to an effective cliffhanger. The script is a page-turner.

There are typos and formatting issues. The script could be a bit more original.

Let's take a look at ways to improve the Pilot.

STORY

Very good work, writer. This is a tale well told. The script is a very good template for a series.

Pilots sometimes do not always do what a pilot needs to do. The idea might be great, but the formatting is wrong, the structure is not working, the story engine is not clear. Conversely, there are pilots that play by the rules, beginning with an original idea that are developed in the least original way possible by rehashing some predictable formula that reveals nothing new about what makes this writer, or this pilot, special.

A script like either of these is not going to make an impression on someone who is reading hundreds of pilots. It is just going to blend right in with all the noise. The biggest reason most TV pilots do not move forward is that readers, producers and execs are underwhelmed by the core concept when it is pitched.

X has proper formatting and solid structure. It has the elements of a well-written TV script. However, the good core concept is not sufficiently mind blowing. Many TV series and films dwell in this house. From 24 to X FILES and MR. ROBOT, the 'conspiracy-is-real' does not pack enough punch on its own. The writer underscores this with the well written:

SWAN

No way! I read about this on 4chan a while back. I just thought it was bogus conspiracy bullshit.

Another issue affecting the series is the time in which it is written. Today, there is conspiracy brought to light, immediately denied (even with documentary proof of someone's hand in the cookie jar) and then shrouded in a blanket of discrediting rhetoric or obfuscation. While the core concept here is a very good idea, the logical extension of MK Ultra to the contemporary world seems quaint. The world already labors under a form of mind control, and every government is inside every other government's IT infrastructure. The idea of "truth" is losing its footing.

The tech is allegory for today's influencers: politicians, social media, and celebrities. These are a type of telepathy that tells people what to buy or think, who to follow and what trivial societal nonsense is important.

Pilots must have attractive elements: Premise, Characters, Structure, a Promise: The premise must work on two levels. First, what is the show about and what will the characters be dealing with. This is handled very well. Binh uncovers tech to control people. The team will face obstacles to try to stop the tech from being

used. The basics are covered. Next, what is the meaning? This is a show about banding together under a bad circumstance to stop covert subjugation of society. What will it mean to have Godlike control over the world's population?

On the lighter side, a company could tell people to buy their product. That would be the end of traditional advertising. On the darker side, elections and every other important or critical decision a person makes. Altruistically, to stop violence, racism and other ugly 'isms'. It could be a golden era for man – except it is planted. It means the dehumanization of mankind to a near-robotic state. As evil or good as humans behave, we are who we are. It's been working for millennia.

These are heady messages for a TV series. An idea of what the writer believes the effect of widespread use of the tech should be woven into the fabric of the Pilot. There are many ramifications and areas to explore. This element could separate the Pilot and take the place of some partying.

A show is nothing without its characters, which is why TV exists. We invite these people into our homes every week. More importantly, why should the audience root for these characters besides being sorry for their circumstance? This is a bit lacking in the Pilot. There is more in Characters.

Structure is a more than the three Acts. It is the show's essence. Binh is the lead, and the focus remains on him. However, we float between a few characters. This is handled well. The A, B and C Story proportions are just right.

The Pilot must subtly inform the audience what they can expect to see every week. Danger and death seem to be lurking. The infamous 'They' will stop at nothing to end the Team. The cliffhanger works well. Is the tech from a shadow government? Tune in next week and find out. Good work here.

The final element in every successful pilot, no matter the genre, tone, length, or network, is a hook. Here, the open shows the night the protagonist is conceived. There is a promise in the intriguing: *The combustion was so intense, the aftershocks are still reverberating to this very day.* This reads meaningful as in Chau and Thomas holding a key in the present. This line could mean Binh's conception leads to whatever he does to change the world. Outside the flashback, the couple is not seen in the Pilot. At the very least, the scene portrays the merging of two cultures during a war many felt was unjustified. The

Hook finishes with Binh as a celebrity à la Zuckerberg, Jobs or Gates. The Pilot immediately sets up Binh's conflict with Russo.

The Pilot successfully establishes what the show is about, and the writer makes a promise to deliver on the premise. The writer does a good job here, and in not wrapping up storylines. The window is open and the script remains a bit messy. The point of a TV series is to have many, many stories to tell.

Thus, we have a solid, well-written Pilot with well-trod subject matter. The synthetic telepathy is clever. The "They" are weaponizing it in prep to roll out. As noted, there are many ramifications – religion to commerce – inherent in the tech.

In order to amp up this good idea beyond the expected, consider the antagonist. The bad guys are usually the US government or an evil corporation, or both. This could be another government. China or Russia would be the first guess. What if it were a tiny nation? Vietnam? That is a tie to Binh's parents, and it is unexpected. Thomas was a MK Ultra guinea pig. A sect of Buddhists wields the tech.

Consider the tech already widespread. The world's leaders, their legislative and judicial branches, are already outfitted. Here, the threat reaches beyond testing to a real and visceral threat to humanity. There could be two factions – religion and government – with the tech who battle for control. The Pilot has big stakes. Slight changes will greatly amplify them.

BRAINDEAD, a short-lived TV series set in DC, had extraterrestrial ants enter bodies through the ears and turn brains into mush. The satire was, after legislators were afflicted, no one noticed the difference. This leads to a suggestion to skew the Pilot toward satire or comedy. The wired population could misconstrue benevolent, messages. There is a lot of comedic possibility with social commentary subtext.

We are certain the inventive writer will find ways to freshen the conspiracy-theory-turned-real-nightmare genre.

STRUCTURE

As noted, the structure is solid with good balance.

A STORY Binh, et. al.

B STORY Russo, et. al.

C STORY The Hackers

TEASER

Pages 1 – 3; 3 Pages

Good Tease Out, Good Verbal Button

Great work here. We meet Binh's parents and get an immediate sense of how big a rockstar he has become.

ACT ONE

Pages 4 – 17, 13 Pages

Good Act Out, Good Verbal Button

Binh's conflict with Russo and Sara are introed. A note on Sarah, these are good scenes. They quickly illustrate her home environment and Binh's permissiveness. It also sets up the blackmail video.

However, besides these elements, we do not see Sarah again. A suggestion to reconsider her, trim the scenes and instead have Binh blackmailed by a secretly recorded rendezvous with a few prostitutes. How does Sarah fit into the whole? Where does she land in future episodes? If she is not important to the series, reconsider the otherwise well done scenes with her.

Binh's character development continues. He is sharply drawn. Good work. We meet the team. Their chemistry is good, but they tend a bit toward trope. A suggestion to flip the messy Mountain Dew, junk food environment on its ear. What if they were fussy eaters and anally neat?

We learn some of the back-story of the conflict with Russo. The writer does a good job meting out info in small bites. Russo is forced into a meet with Binh.

ACT TWO

Pages 18 – 32, 14 Pages

Good Act Out, Good Verbal Button

Back with the Team where their mission is further explored.

The depths of Binh's hedonistic lifestyle are presented. The first crumb of Tyson's real agenda is forwarded. Good work.

Back to Sarah for the blackmail video.

Russo arrives for the meet after passing through a gauntlet of Reporters. The pace is lively with short scenes intercutting between the A, B and C stories. Russo forces Binh to go on vacation.

With the encryption key from Lysander (Binh), the Team preps to hack the data.

ACT THREE

Pages 33 – 47, 14 pages

Great Act Out, Good Verbal Button

Binh interfaces with Sarah and packs for his “vacation.”

The Team in aftermath of a successful hack. They have the data “Lysander” wants. Tina reports an issue to Russo.

Binh country-ups and hits a brothel. Gully saves Binh from the party gone sideways. He offers Gully a bodyguard position. The Team is complete.

Binh meets the rest of the Team at the cabin. They learn Binh is Lysander.

ACT FOUR

Pages 48 – 88, 10 Pages

Great Episode Out, Good Verbal Button

Russo plays hardball by enlisting the Mafia to watch Binh. That’s all... for now.

Binh lays out the meaning of the hacked data. It leads to a malevolent plot.

The Tyson scene is a candidate for a cut unless he figures prominently in the future. This is a possibility as Anthony invites him to join “hacks.”

Binh shows the Team the plans and explains the back-story. Binh enlists them in the fight against the use of the tech. And we are off and running.

CHARACTERS

BINH

His portrayal is counter to the image of a straitlaced Zuckerberg type who takes himself far too seriously. He is a rich, party animal with an affinity for prostitutes –

a subject he has seriously studied. Good work, but the characterization is a touch tone deaf.

As noted in Story, viewers return to series for the characters. Take a medical or cop show. They are alike: heal the sick, catch the criminal. The characters are what make shows. Even though he came from poor, Binh is not very sympathetic. I already have more money than any human should legally have. In a time when income inequality is a serious issue, this does not make Binh likeable. He probably spent more on the hotel party with the prostitutes than many make in a year. At this particular time, it is exacerbated because so many are out of work.

Then there are the prostitutes. This is a way for Binh to enjoy sex without any sort of commitment. This could also be a reaction to being divorced. The inference is Binh was unfaithful to her with prostitutes. A married person can sometimes not be faulted for loving someone else. Here, Binh is a bit distasteful.

Post #metoo, portrayals of women are being closely watched. The writer does maintain some balance with the well executed Rose, Tina and Swan.

Binh does not cross the viewer gender line. His hard-partying, footloose manner will appeal mostly to the young male demographic. Binh is a fanboy fantasy: power, money, drugs and women.

Binh is also not a very good father. There is liberal and understanding, and then there is I do not give a crap what you are doing. Binh leans a tad to the latter. The suggestion here is to add a quality or trait to make him sympathetic. He could support a charity or foundation. Care more for his daughter as in be a concerned parent. Do the women have to be prostitutes? He is rich. Couldn't he just snap his finger and attract non-pros? ...you went into great detail about the difference between the two professions. Does he have to crow? Binh does have flaws: carousing and drug use.

Despite these issues, Binh is determined to stop the tech. We can almost forgive the self-destructive dalliances.

THE TEAM

As mentioned, they could be a little less of what is expected in a group like this

The rest of the characters are effective. Good work.

TONE

Serious with dashes of funny. The balance is good.

CRAFT

The Actions are well written. Mark up flags typos, misspellings and formatting issues. However, there are too many specific brand names used. These are flagged. This can be an issue when a company does not want its product used. This also circumvents product placement where companies pay the production to use Macs or Dells instead of Alienware laptops. A 1970 Caddy could be difficult to find and expensive to rent. It is best to leave all these generic.

The cultural references assume the viewer knows them and can relate. They are marked up. Some work. Some do not.

INSERT: Media footage of Binh and Tyson breaking through reporters to get to the hotel. Binh smiles and waves as Tyson ushers him ahead.

This is:

INSERT – SMARTPHONE

Footage of Binh and Tyson entering the hotel. Binh smiles and waves as Tyson ushers him ahead.

BACK TO SCENE

Direct address commas are occasionally missing.

When are we going to eat Grandma?

When are we going to eat, Grandma?

SWAN

...Then to need it and not have one. Yeah, yeah, sing the NRA song puppet!

SWAN

...sing the NRA song, puppet!

The link leads to tips on how to use Direct Address commas:

<https://www.grammarly.com/blog/comma/>

The recommendation is a pass to correct typos, misspellings and fix formatting.

DIALOGUE

There is a bit too much technical jargon. It is marked up for trims and cuts. The dialogue must be accessible to the average viewer and not cater to techies.

Otherwise, unless flagged, the dialogue works well.

TITLE

The title connotes a comedy. While there is plenty of funny, the Pilot deals with a serious topic. As noted in story, this could be a scathing satire or comedy. If the writer steers the story in that direction, the title works better than it currently does.

There is an expectation with the current title that will not be entirely met. The title appears to refer mostly to Binh rather than the tech. What is the Pilot title?

MARKETABILITY and CONCLUSION

The Pilot is well positioned budget-wise. There are no outrageous special effects or exotic locations. The cast is large but manageable. This is a plus.

As noted, this is a well-written and solid Pilot. The fact is there are many Pilots with similar credentials. In order to rise above, the clever writer should consider taking the story down wholly unexpected roads.

Consider the similar MR. ROBOT. The core idea is to hack and cancel all personal debt. This is a tip of the hat to FIGHT CLUB where the goal is to take down the system. Elliot, the lead character, elevates the show. He is dissociative, deals with clinical depression and severe anxiety. He is an antisocial drug user; an unlikely hero. We do not know whether what Elliot sees is real or not. In some ways, this is similar to Binh except he is rich and could take hold of his life at any time. Elliot does not share this luxury. The bottom line is Elliot is different, unexpected.

The opportunities to option or sell the Pilot are limited. As is, the Pilot is a good Spec. The recommendation is for the writer to continue developing the script; hone the story a bit more. Add surprises, twists and wow. The goal is for a producer to read the script and be surprised by a fresh spin on the familiar.

The story set up affords a lot of opportunity to craft a tale that delves deeper into the philosophy of freedom versus control. The tech is frightening. The writer should scare the pants off the reader with the possibilities. Even better, realities.

Thank you for the opportunity to read the script.

SCREENPLAY GURUS' 11 POINT SCORING MATRIX

Scores: 0 – 10 points for each element, 110 total possible points

Pass: 0 – 75
 Weak Consider: ¹ 76 – 80
 Consider: 81 – 90
 Strong Consider: 91 – 100
 Recommend: 101 – 110

Statistical Scores of submitted screenplays

Pass: 80%
 Weak Consider: ¹ 10%
 Consider: 5%
 Strong Consider: 3%
 Recommend: 2%

PRESENTATION	7
THEME	8
STORYTELLING	8
ORIGINALITY	5
STRUCTURE	9
PLOT	8
CHARACTERIZATION	7
DIALOGUE	8
STYLE	7
CONCEPT	7
MARKETABILITY/COMMERCIAL APPEAL	6
TOTAL POINTS	80

SCRIPT: WEAK CONSIDER
WRITER: CONSIDER

Presentation:

Is the script properly formatted, free of typos and misspellings? Does the writing use standard English conventions? Is the cover page attached with the author's name and contact information only? Is there white space? Are there lengthy blocks of dialogue and action?

Theme:

Is the theme stated and does the screenplay reinforce it throughout. Is the theme relevant or unique?

Storytelling:

How effectively has the author crafted the timeline of events? Is the story interesting or compelling? Is it relevant? Does the script serve the genre in which it's written? Does the story have a through line and respect it without unnecessary departures?

Originality:

Does the story twist well-worn conventions, or create a new one, without straining credibility? Where does the story fit into the four degrees: Totally Familiar; Familiar, Yet Different; Different, Yet Familiar; Totally Different (Familiar, Yet Different and Different, Yet Familiar are preferred).

Structure:

Does the script have and an Inciting Incident, proper Act Breaks, Rising Action, Complications and Obstacles, a well- identified Protagonist and Antagonist?

Plot:

How well has the author informed the audience why the story's events belong in the script, and what the story is meant to communicate?

Characterization:

Do the characters have dimension beyond cliché and trope? Are they real or relatable? Do they have flaws? Do the characters elicit empathy or sympathy?

Style:

Is the writing clear, economical, free of bloat and unnecessary description. Does the writer "Show, don't tell?" Are the descriptions visual and intriguing? Does the writer use Active Voice and Present Tense?

Concept:

Is it sound, interesting or compelling? Do Plot, Storytelling and Structure reinforce the concept?

Marketability/Commercial Appeal:

Where does the script fit in the marketplace? How likely is it to be made? How does it compare to similar films? How will audiences react?

1. AKA Consider With Revisions.

Thanks for submitting your screenplay to Screenplay Gurus! We hope the analysis gives you the info you need to make the script as good as it can be.

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