

Writing the Pilot

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By

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the two greatest teachers a writer could ever hope for, Richard Walter and Michael Gleason.

Why Write A Pilot?

You've got a great idea for a TV series. It's going to combine the serialistic thrills of *Lost* with the sociological import of *Mad Men*, the blood lust of *The Walking Dead*, and the feel-good musical uplift of *Glee*. If you can get someone to read the script, you know without a doubt it will sell within an hour, probably with multiple bidders. If you can get it on the air, it will do what *Law and Order* couldn't and run longer than *Gunsmoke*.

But right now, your brilliant idea is still only that – an idea. What can you do with it? For most of the history of the TV business, the answer was simple: Nothing.

In fact, the real answer was worse than nothing. It went something like: *What are you, a moron? Networks don't buy shows from losers like you, so if you want to create your own series, go do what you did and get a TV writing gig, then work your way up.*

And if you think that's an exaggeration, then I'll quote no less an august voice than my own (although I choose to believe my co-writer, Lee Goldberg, actually wrote this passage in our book *Successful Television Writing*):

"If you have a great idea for a frozen dinner, you can't just send Swanson your recipe and expect them to let you cook it. We can scrawl a drawing of a car right now on a napkin, but it would be ludicrous to believe that General Motors is going to pay us to build it. So why would anyone believe that creating a TV series is any different?"

We went on like that for another page or so – I'll continue to use "we," although I must say that the tone of semi-outraged condescension does sound more like Lee than me – and ended up with the standard advice that the aspiring series creator write a spec script for an existing show, use that as a sample to land a job on a series, and then work himself up through the ranks until he is finally at a level where studio and network executives invite him in to pitch ideas. (A "spec" script is, of course, one written *on speculation* – that is, a script no one has requested, no one will pay for, and no one wants to read...) At that point he can open the massive desk drawer into which he's stuffed all the concepts he's dreamed up over the years and finally bring them out into the light.

With or without the outrage, that wasn't terrible advice when we wrote the book back in 2003. At that time, a spec pilot was still something of a feathered hippopotamus – a creature you could imagine, but whose use, desirability, or existence was highly dubious. Since there was no chance anyone would ever buy such a thing, the very act of spending the time and effort to create one tended to make the writer look like a clueless newbie, in the same way that sending out a spec episode of a show that had been cancelled two years ago would have. And it didn't fill the primary purpose of the spec episodic script, to demonstrate to a showrunner that the writer had mastered the most basic skills of the TV professional – to capture the voice of the show while still bringing something unique and essential of his own.

But there have been a lot of changes in the TV business since 2003, and several of them have made the idea of the spec pilot a lot more acceptable, both to those who hire writers and those who buy series.

And the biggest change of all is that spec pilots are now selling. At first it was just a couple of projects written by superstar showrunners like Aaron Sorkin – his first TV project since *The West Wing*, in fact – and J.J. Abrams, still surfing on the huge success of *Lost*. And for a couple of years after that, there was an occasional spec picked up by a network. But in the 2010-11 development

season, the floodgates opened when the major networks purchased at least a dozen spec pilots.

Suddenly it's possible to create a script outside of the standard television development process and see it turned into a series.

Even if you don't sell your series, the spec pilot is an increasingly useful script to have in your portfolio. The reason for that is, quite simply, the stunning decline in quality of the dramas on network television. This certainly doesn't seem to be a problem for the networks themselves, as they keep putting on countless iterations of the same procedurals (*CSI* times three, *NCIS* times two, *Law and Order* times four, and that's not mentioning the endless unbranded copies). But for the showrunners and the creative executives at the networks and studios whose job it is to read scripts and evaluate writers, this has been a nightmare. And for writers who want to show what they can do, it's even worse. These shows are so rigidly formularized that even a produced example can demonstrate little more than basic professional competence.

And what's being developed seems to be less and less original every year. Even the pilots are getting formularized, with each new show borrowing its soul from an established hit, whether that means *Dr. House* transformed into a brain surgeon or a private detective, or *Gray's Anatomy's* mix of sexual and professional hijinks transferred everywhere from a women's health clinic to a spaceship.

Not that this is a completely new state of affairs. Television has always been an imitative medium – unless you think it's a coincidence that there were a dozen spy shows on the networks right after James Bond became an international sensation. But in the last few years as corporate control has tightened over the networks, it's gotten much worse.

Of course there is always the alternative of specing an episode of a cable series. And it's certainly true that while the writing of network shows has been getting less and less inspired, that of the cable dramas has become more sophisticated with every season. Instead of focusing solely on valiant doctors, dogged detectives and brilliant forensic technicians, newer cable series tell stories about advertising executives confronting the damage their profession does to the culture, about a dying chemistry teacher turned meth dealer, about biker gangs and armies of the undead. Genres are still flourishing, but they're frequently turned upside down – crime solvers include a serial killer who preys on other murderers and a police detective almost as corrupt as the gang members he arrests. Even the less transgressive, more traditional, series like the "blue skies" shows on USA Network or *The Closer* on TNT have a depth of personality that hasn't been seen on the networks in years.

But writing a spec for a cable show presents problems of its own. For a spec to work, its reader needs to have at least a passing familiarity with the series it's based on. If not, they have no way of knowing if the writer has gotten the voice right. Even worse, the reader will be thrust into a world of characters and situations he doesn't understand and will spend most of the read trying to figure out who is doing what to whom and why it should matter.

Granted, this is a potential issue with any episodic script. But it's a much greater problem with cable shows, simply because their audiences are so much smaller. *Mad Men*, which is frequently called the best drama on television and sometimes the best drama in the history of the medium, barely musters two million viewers per episode. Some only slightly less acclaimed series number their viewers in the hundreds of thousands.

Which means that a writer could spend months working on a brilliant spec for, say, *Sons of Anarchy* and find that the people he most wants to be read by don't know the show, and therefore are unwilling to read the spec or unable to evaluate it properly.

What this means is that there is almost no way for any but the most successful TV writers to express themselves creatively within the system. And while this may contradict everything you've

ever heard about the business of television production, TV writers actually do yearn for creative satisfaction. ~~Yes, we are paid obscene amounts of money to write exactly the same crap that fifty other people could do just as well, and when we're working, we love the job. But as the man said, there's no trick to making a lot of money if all you care about is making a lot of money, and we're overcompensated as we might seem, we don't make a fraction of what a second-year investment banker can pull down. What we want from our writing is the same thing that the poets and essayists and fiction writers I work with in my MFA program want – to touch people. To make them laugh or cry or think.~~

In older times, the answer for these frustrated writers would have been to write a spec feature that's where good, original writing belonged. But if network television has been dumbing down over these years, the movie business is actively plummeting into what can generously be described as a "post-literate" phase. Complex plots, rich characters, layered dialogue – no one wants them anymore. Films are being made for a global audience, and words just get in the way. What sells is pictures, and mostly pictures of genetically modified super-heroes and super-villains hitting each other over the head with slabs of concrete. There is simply no market for a drama aimed at adults – so why should anyone waste their time writing a spec feature that no one will want to buy?

(You can object here if you want: What about that brilliant drama that won a bunch of Oscars and made a fortune? It's certainly true that there are still a handful of smart, serious, important movies made every year. But for the professional writer – even the aspiring pro – choosing what to write now is a business decision as much as an artistic one. And the fact that someone out there is going to win the \$375 million Powerball jackpot doesn't make it a sound financial decision to empty out your retirement accounts and pour the money into lottery tickets...)

Besides, even if there was still a market for serious scripts in the film industry, TV writers have gotten pretty sick of being told to look to a different medium if we want any kind of creative satisfaction. This, after all, is *our* business. It's what we do. Why should we have to leave television and spec features or write books – just because we want to do it well? The first waves of spec pilots were as much as anything a movement to reclaim an art form by and for the artists.

And while I don't have any way to prove this, I'd guess that first wave was written primarily to be read as writing samples. There simply was no expectation that a network would buy a script from outside its development process and put it on the air. Matthew Weiner, to cite what is still the most famous spec pilot ever written, has never claimed that he thought he'd sell *Mad Men* as a series when he wrote the script on spec; he was working on sitcoms that left him unfulfilled creatively and he wanted a sample that would show the producers of the kinds of series he wanted to write what he felt he was capable of. Indeed, he had his agent send the script to David Chase, who hired him on *The Sopranos*.

It was only after several years of work on what was then the most acclaimed series on television finally rising to the level of executive producer, that Weiner took his spec pilot out with the serious ambition of having it produced. (In other words, he was following our advice in *Successful Television Writing!*)

The critical, artistic and commercial triumph of *Mad Men* – don't believe everyone involved isn't making money, no matter how small the audience – forever changed the way the spec pilot would be seen in the industry. It was obvious looking at the show that this was something that could never have emerged from any network's development process.

Which, it turns out, is what everyone wants right now.

You want proof of that? One statistic tells the story: All those spec pilots picked up by the network

were *purchased in January and February*. Which is to say, there was no great interest in specs at the beginning of the development season in the fall. The networks ordered their usual number of projects. They gave their notes at every stage of the process. And then, when the scripts came in that they had commissioned and it was time for the executives to decide which ones they wanted to shoot – they started buying specs instead. Because what they wanted was something that couldn't – and didn't – come out of their own process. No doubt these execs blamed the writers for the poor scripts, but for someone who doesn't wear the suit it's pretty clear that the studios and networks had noted and destroyed their own projects to death, and they needed to find new material that they hadn't yet destroyed.

All this goes to say why it's no longer a bad idea to write a spec pilot, no matter what those old hacks who wrote *Successful Television Writing* said on the subject. (To be fair to those hacks, there is a tremendous amount of information in their book that is still accurate and useful, and it should be read by anyone thinking about a career as a TV writer. Fortunately, it is still in print from John Wiley and Sons, and available for the Kindle. Download it now!) But before we move on to what goes into writing what a pilot is and what a great spec pilot needs, I want to talk a little about why a spec pilot has become more than just no longer a bad idea. Why it now is the most important thing you can write.

The Other Reason To Write A Spec Pilot

It's the terror.

No, not your terror as you stare at your blank screen and try to figure out how the hell to write the project you saw so clearly in your head. This, for once, is not the writer's fear at all.

It's the industry's.

You might not realize this if you're just looking at the bottom lines of the multinational corporations that run our entertainment business, but the entire industry is currently in a state of panic unseen in the last forty years.

Why this panic when there is so much money coming in? Because everybody knows that the entire industry is about to change – but no one knows exactly how or when. Television networks are losing viewers while an increasingly large share of the audience is watching on their DVRs or online streaming to their TV. But Internet revenues are a fraction of what broadcast or cable ad sales bring in and no one has a clue how to replicate that revenue stream. All they know is that these new viewers aren't as profitable as the older people in their Barcaloungers, content to watch the commercials they wait for *NCIS* to return after this brief message from their sponsors.

TV networks understand these Barca-viewers. They've based their entire business model around them. And you might think that if these are the people who are happy with what the networks want to broadcast, the networks should be happy to appeal to them. But networks have spent the last thirty years convincing themselves and advertisers that the only people who count in this country are between the ages of 18 and 29. Apparently once you turn 30 – or worse, 50 – you will never buy another product or sample anything new again. So aside from CBS, which is quite happy to attract the largest possible audience, no matter who happens to be in it, the nets can only succeed if they attract a large proportion of the 18- to 29-year-old audience.

But the current generation of 18- to 29-year-olds doesn't watch TV the same way even those who have just aged out of relevance did. They watch what they want when they want, and most of the time they're doing six other things on their computers and eight other things on their phones at the same time. They've got access to just about every inch of film or tape ever broadcast in the history of television, whether legally on DVD or Hulu or YouTube, or less officially on pirate download sites. They've got no patience for crap they've seen before – unless crap they've seen before is exactly what they want.

The networks need to find a way to appeal to the new generation of viewers or risk losing the one demographic they care about. *But they have no idea what these people want.* And this is where the panic sets in.

Now you could argue that the reason they have no idea what "these people" want is that we're talking about a huge cross-section of the American public, and the notion that there's a single concept that will appeal to everyone who happens to text faster than five characters a minute is simply ludicrous. And God knows you wouldn't get any argument from me on that. But the fact that we both think this way pretty much explains why we're not network executives.

Hollywood has faced this kind of panic once before, when it found itself faced with a new audience who seemed to reject everything the studios had ever put out. It was just over forty years ago, when a movie called *Easy Rider* rattled Hollywood to the bones. A tiny-budget, European-influenced, plotless road movie about a couple of dirty hippies driving their motorcycles across America, it became a

enormous hit. And the old men who ran the studios had no idea why. To them it was some piece of crap that violated every aesthetic value they'd held for decades. And yet, the new audience, which had adamantly stayed away from the multi-million dollar musicals and other road show behemoths that were currently bankrupting just about every studio in town, flocked to see it.

The executives were stumped, and they knew it. So they did what had never been done in Hollywood before – they threw open the doors. For one brief period, "any asshole with a beard" could get a meeting in a studio, and a lot of them ended up making movies. A handful of masterpieces came out of this period, and a few great careers were launched. But there was a lot of garbage, too, and a few artistes the world never heard of again.

This period didn't last long, of course. New executives were hired, ones who understood the modern trends in filmmaking and could separate the real talent from the frauds and wannabes. And of course a few years later, with the success of *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, studios regained control of the mass culture machine.

But still, that moment existed, and it gave filmmakers like Hal Ashby and Bob Rafelson and George Bloomfield a way in through doors that would normally have been closed. (Who's George Bloomfield? you ask. Exactly.)

That's where we are in TV now.

Okay, it's not quite as open as all that. You're not going to get thirteen episodes on the air just because you've got an iPhone.

But if you've got a fresh idea, the talent to pull it off, and the determination to fight until you can persuade people to read your script, you've got a good chance to be taken seriously. Because there's a desperate hunger for a new vision and unheard voice.

Now if you're not already counting your syndication millions, it may occur to you that this directly contradicts everything I said before – that the increasingly risk averse networks are sticking to a small and shrinking group of pre-tested talents to deliver reiterations of current hits. And, of course, it does.

But that doesn't mean both things aren't true.

Networks are always terrified of the new thing – but they're even more terrified that it will come along and they'll miss it. They need to be safe, but they want to be bold.

Which means they are tremendously attracted to a new writer with a voice that's truly unique, a concept they've never heard before.

Before you start sending out your scripts, you have to understand how few people are going to break through this way. The doors may be open a little, but they're still going to be barred to anyone who doesn't show extraordinary talent and who isn't willing to fight like hell to be heard.

But then, the film studios in the early '70s probably weren't nearly as open as it seems in retrospect. There were a lot more beards back then than there were development deals. Still, a lot of people got their shot who never would have if *Easy Rider* had bombed.

Some writers are going to break into television based on their spec pilots. There's no reason you shouldn't be one of them.

Or maybe it's closer to the truth to say there are a million reasons you shouldn't be one of them, but you are going to ignore them all, except for the ones you have direct control over.

And the most important of those is the quality of your script.

It's not going to be enough that it's good. It's not going to be enough that it's got a cool idea at its core. It's not even going to be enough that it's better than a lot of the other crap the executives read this week.

It's got to be great. It's got to have a bold, new concept that makes people see a genre in an entire

new way – and it's got to be executed flawlessly.

~~Sound easy? Sure. Because you're a great writer with brilliant ideas.~~

But what you don't understand is just how difficult a form the pilot script really is...

Your Great Idea For A Pilot

Both as a writer and a teacher of writers, I meet a lot of people who are certain they've got a great idea for a TV pilot. They want me to pitch it for them, or partner on the project, or take the whole thing over, sell and write it myself, and give them fifty percent of the proceeds.

You may be surprised to learn I don't generally accept these offers.

I'm thinking all the other TV pros these people have already approached declined as well. That's why some of them don't even bother with the business part of the project. They just launch right into the pitch, knowing that once I hear their brilliant pilot idea, I'll be so blown away I'll be desperate to join up. And before I can say a word, this is what comes spilling out:

There's this guy, he's maybe 25, about to get married to the most beautiful and wonderful woman in the world. But when they take a cruise together, she disappears off the cruise ship – and there's no record that she ever existed! As the guy searches desperately to find the love of his life, he must plunge into the depths of an international conspiracy.

This is where the writer stops, ostensibly to catch his breath, but really so I can ask that all-important question: Then what happens? Because he knows that if I do ask that, it means I'm hooked.

(And yes, I do know that the pitch above sounds suspiciously like a chunk of the pilot for *The Event*. It's astonishing how many amateur pitches sound exactly like *The Event*, and did for years before this show made it to air. Maybe that's why I barely made it through the second episode...)

There are days when I actually will ask what happens next, if only to see whether there's even a hint of an answer in sight, or if this is going to be one of those *Lost*-lite ideas in which every question leads to another question and nothing ever comes close to an answer. But either way, the pitch concludes and then comes the inevitable tag: *Isn't that a great idea for a pilot?*

And you know, a lot of times it really is a great idea for a pilot. There's only one problem:

There's no such thing as a great idea for a pilot.

You can have a great idea for a movie. Heck, the pilot idea this guy just pitched me sounds like one already, especially if he has any clue where to go after the first act. You can have a great idea for a novel or a painting or a twist on beef stroganoff. Because these things are all complete in themselves.

Saying you have a great idea for a pilot is like announcing you've come up with a brilliant notion for a chapter of a novel. It's not going to do you a bit of good unless you can figure out where you're planning on going with the rest of the book, and until you do you're going to sound pretty silly declaring yourself a genius.

Unlike a movie script, a pilot is not created to stand on its own. A movie's primary function is to entertain. The pilot shares that purpose, but adds another one that's just as important: It exists to act as the template for a series that can sustain for 22 or 50 or 100 episodes.

If you're thinking in terms of "great idea for a pilot," you're basically focusing on aspects of the hour's story. *She disappears off the ship and no one admits she ever existed!* That's exciting, all right, but then what? Every week our hero is going to meet a new character who refuses to admit his girlfriend existed?

The real answer to the writer's question is: Yes, it is a great idea for a pilot. *Now what's the series?*

That's when you see the writer's smile disappear. The series, well, you see, the guy, he's searching for his fiancée and there's this global conspiracy and they may have kidnapped her and –

And again, we come back to the question: What's the series? And if that's not hard enough, let's ask

the one question that every executive asks after every pitch: What happens at the end of season two?

~~No one sells a pilot to sell a pilot. (Although the money is good...)~~ More importantly, no one buys a pilot simply because they want that pilot. They want a series, and they're willing to invest upward of a hundred thousand dollars in a script and possibly more than ten million dollars in production costs to see if that series is viable.

If all you've got is an idea for a pilot instead of an idea for a series, there's nowhere to go once the money is spent.

But what's the difference? How can you tell if your great idea works for a series or just for a pilot? In the next chapter we're going to explore exactly what a pilot is and what it needs to have a chance at success.

But for this discussion, let's look at one great pilot idea that turned out to be a terrible concept for a series.

Life on Mars may be one of the great pilot pitches of all time: Hard-charging police detective Sam Tyler is trying to rescue his partner (and fiancée!) from a serial killer when he's hit by a speeding police car. He's knocked out, and when he wakes up, he finds he's in 1973. And he's not just there, he seems to belong there. He's wearing period clothing, he's got a 1973 NYPD ID and badge and keys to a Chevelle. And when he gets to the station he learns they've been waiting for him as a transfer from another precinct. Now he has to find his way in a world with no computers, no cell phones, and no DNA – and in which the police are a lot closer to vigilantes than the professional force he's been a part of. While he tries to figure out if he is dreaming or if he's actually gone back in time, he finds himself investigating a series of crimes with eerie echoes of his present-day cases.

Cool, isn't it? Just from this paragraph you can see the pilot unspooling in front of your eyes. Scenes after scene comes to mind, and every fish-out-of-water moment you think of summons up a dozen more. It's not hard to see why ABC bought this.

Except, of course, that there's no series here.

You may want to disagree. You may be able to spin out three or four stories right off the top of your head. Good stories, strong stories, stories that spring directly from the protagonist's central problem.

That's great – but the American financial model for series production doesn't allow for a show that lasts four episodes. If it's cancelled after one 22-episode season, it's a flop.

This is why development executives always ask that one question: What happens at the end of season two? Because they need to know your idea can sustain not three or four stories, but 44 or 66 or 100.

You might still think I'm not being fair to *Life on Mars*. Just because we can't come up with two seasons worth of stories right off the bat, that's no reason to assume we couldn't if we were given a reasonable amount of time.

But that's not what I'm basing my judgment on at all. I'm going by the pitch itself.

What works about this pitch, what makes it so exciting, is that it's a terrific *story*. You hear the hook and you immediately respond the way you would to the beginning of any good story: You want to know what happens next.

But a pilot isn't about the story. It's about the *conflicts*.

A TV series doesn't exist to tell one long story. It isn't a serialized novel. There has never been a long-running series that started with an outline for a beginning, middle and end to play out over a series of seasons.

The way a series works is not to follow one story, but instead to *explore a set of conflicts* that have

been established in the pilot. These can be conflicts between the main characters, or between the protagonist and his world, or between clashing world views. Whatever they are – and we will be discussing the types of central conflicts in much greater detail very shortly – they will provide the basis for every story, no matter how long the series runs.

So let's step away from the very cool story of the *Life on Mars* pilot and look at the conflicts that would need to sustain the series through its five-season run. What are they?

Let's start with the obvious one: Sam is a man out of time. His 21st-century way of doing things clashes directly with the 1973 style of his colleagues. That's a strong, clear conflict. Or at least it is for maybe half a dozen episodes. But what happens after that? If Sam is smart – and Sam is going to be smart, because the leads of American cop shows are never allowed to be stupid, at least when it comes to police work – he's going to figure out after a few weeks that he is in the 1970s, and that many of the tools he's grown used to working with are not going to be available to him. And if he doesn't, we're going to get pretty tired of him. The fifth time he calls for a CSI team to collect DNA, only to be met with baffled looks, I know I'm ready to give up on the character – aren't you?

That still leaves the clash of police cultures. The 1970s cops are much more violent, much less professional – more like a posse than a modern force. Sam's methods will always be clashing with theirs.

Okay, so there's an actual conflict there. But it's not enough to stick any old conflict in the center of a series – it's got to have some kind of resonance with viewers. Is there any real debate going on in the country about whether we should return to 1970s-style policing?

Besides, locating the central conflict of the series in a clash of policing styles ignores the most striking aspect of the show's concept, the very idea that draws most of us to it in the first place: This isn't about two cops from radically different cultures who are forced to work together, *it's about a detective from the 21st century who's hurled back in time*. It doesn't matter how interesting you make the culture clashes, this is what people are tuning in expecting to find. The core conflict has to reflect that.

So what is at the core here? Well, one obvious aspect is to have Sam searching for a way to get back home. But how can he do that? He didn't run here through a time tunnel, so there's no secret tunnel entrance to search for. He didn't come in a time machine, only to lose the key. And he wasn't sent back by an evil wizard whose spell he needs to undo. He was hit on the head and woke up in the past; as far as he knows he's in a coma and dreaming the whole thing. So how do you craft stories based on his desire to get back to his home time when there's no mechanism for getting him there?

The other conflict they tried was to have Sam discover cases that resonated with events in the present day – he stopped a serial killer before he got rolling, he stopped the mentor of another incipient serial killer before he got that guy rolling. But how many times can you do this? After all, unless Sam was working on the Templars, Rosicrucians and Freemasons Global Conspiracy Task Force, how many of his 2008 cases could actually have anything to do with something that happened in 1973?

That leaves one last set of possible conflicts, and that is Sam's discovery of information about his own past that reshapes his understanding of his 21st-century existence. And that really does sound like it could provide some really interesting storylines.

Except that the accident that sent Sam back in time happened in 2008. (The series aired in the 2008-09 season.) Sam was sent back to 1973. That's 35 years. The actor who played Sam was 36 when this was filmed, so it's not too much of a stretch to suggest that the character was the same age, give or take a couple of years. Whatever Sam discovers about the life he lived back then happened before he

was out of diapers. What's to discover?

The more you dig beneath the surface of *Life on Mars*, the more you realize that there's no series here, just a really cool idea for a pilot. ABC should have realized this when they heard the pitch, but they were apparently so swept away by the story they committed to a pilot, and based on that, to series order. Not surprisingly, the first episode got a pretty good sampling from the audience because it is indeed a cool idea. But that audience dwindled with every passing week as viewers realized what the network should have known the second they heard the idea: that there was no series here.

Two quick notes before we move on to pilots that really do work:

If you doubt me when I say there was no central conflict to drive this series, you need look no further than the final episode, in which the executive producers were kind enough to wrap up the storyline for those few devoted fans who were still watching. A finale is, of course, where you resolve the story's conflicts. And what happened here? It was revealed that Sam's 1973 existence was all a dream – but so was his 2008 life! He was actually an astronaut in hibernation as he and several crewmates made the long journey to Mars. Which meant, ultimately, that there really was nothing to resolve here, and thus nothing to have explored.

And if you think I'm using the benefits of hindsight to claim superior insight to the entire executive corps at a major broadcast network, I can safely say that I knew there was no series here before ABC even heard the pitch. Because I'd seen the proof. *Life on Mars* was actually a remake of a British show, and it had all the basic problems of the American version.

You could contend that the British series was actually something of a hit, running for two seasons. But those British seasons each consisted of six episodes. Together they were barely more than half of one American season. And the original show, which did have a great pilot, ran out of creative steam about four episodes in...just like ours.

The Franchise

Before we move on, let me preemptively answer one question you may be asking: Does this mean we don't have to worry about a story for our pilots? Can we just start writing?

That answer, as I suspect you already know, is a resounding no. The pilot story will be crucial to your script's success, and we'll be discussing its crafting in a little while.

It's not that the story isn't important. It's just that it isn't the most important element as you're conceiving your pilot.

So what is?

This is where we get to the crucial difference between a pilot and any other kind of dramatic writing. Because the key element of your pilot is something you'll never have to consider if you're writing a feature or a novel or an epic poem.

It's called the *franchise*.

This is probably a word you've never used in conjunction with your writing before. If it's crossed your lips at all, it was probably in reference to a fast-food outlet. What could the local Burger King have to do with your script?

Everything.

I want you to think about that Burger King for a moment. Got it in your head? Good. Then quickly: what's the name of their signature burger? What's in their color palette? Do they dispense Coke or Pepsi products?

That was a trick question – but only because you really didn't have to think for a moment. Or at all. You knew the answer to every one of these questions instinctively.

(If you didn't – congratulations. You will probably live longer than everyone else reading this book right now...)

You knew the answers because Burger King has spent millions of dollars establishing its brand. The instant you hear the name, you know exactly what you're going to see and smell and taste when you go to one of their outlets. And just as importantly, you know what you won't get – a Big Mac or a Double Double or whatever those square things Wendy's sells are called.

Now I'd like you to think of a TV drama for a moment. Let's go with *Law and Order* – true, it's not in production anymore, but it had twenty years to establish its own brand, and it's one series that everyone has seen at least a couple of times.

Got the show in your head? Good. Quick: Who are the protagonists? What kinds of cases do they take on? What happens in the second half of every episode? What sound do you hear at the beginning of every scene?

You know all this, just like you know that Burger King sells the Whopper. And you know a lot more than this, as well. You know what socioeconomic bracket the stories are going to take place in – that of the rich and the powerful. You know how the first act is going to play out, with a series of quick scenes of the cops following leads until a suspect is arrested before the commercial. You know that one of the assistant DAs will clash over principles and procedures with the boss. You know the teaser will end with a witty quip by one of the detectives. You know that act three will almost certainly end with the key piece of evidence for the prosecution being thrown out. You know that the police detectives respect the prosecutors but are frustrated by legal maneuvers that keep them from doing their jobs. You know that the prosecutors admire the cops, but wish they better understood leg

procedures so that fewer pieces of evidence could be thrown out by judges. You know that the judges are fair and impartial and give equal weight to prosecution and defense, ruling strictly on the law and the legal arguments in front of them, even when that means a truly despicable person might go free.

And you know so much more than this. You instinctively understand the show's rhythm and style and tone.

And mostly what you know is that you're going to find all this in an episode of *Law and Order* and you're going to find something completely different in any other series about cops solving murders in New York City, whether that's *CSI: New York* or *NYPD Blue* or even the other two *Law and Order* shows set in Manhattan, *Special Victims Unit* and *Criminal Intent*.

This collection of everything that defines an episode of *Law and Order* is the franchise. And here are a few elements it contains:

- The characters.

- The setting.

- The types of stories told.

- The style of dialogue.

- The way people interact.

- The storytelling style.

All of these are hugely important in defining your pilot, and we're going to be looking at all of them shortly. But before we do, there is one thing missing from this list which is actually the most essential element of them all. The piece that will make or break your idea for a series.

If you're having trouble thinking what that might be, recall the key problem crippling *Life on Mars*. It was the lack of a central conflict to drive the episodes.

That conflict is the crucial element of the franchise. If it's not there, it doesn't matter how clever your idea might sound or how brilliant your writing. There is no series and thus no pilot.

But what defines this central conflict? And how do you know if it's strong enough to sustain a series?

To answer that question, let's look at a few that worked...

The Conflict

All TV series are powered by a set of central conflicts that drive every story and define the lives of its characters. You know this, if not intellectually then at least instinctively, because you're tuning in every week to see those conflicts engaged and resolved. What may not be so apparent is that there are two types of conflict in a show's franchise, and any series needs both of them to thrive.

The first type of conflict is the obvious one that provides the show's basic premise: The cops need to stop the crooks, the crash survivors need to get off the island, the advertising executives need to win land accounts, the lawyer needs to win cases. These are the ones that are built into the series' conception, and it's a given that every story for a series is going to involve some variation on that basic conflict.

But just as importantly, every successful series has a second, deeper layer of conflict underneath that surface level. And this is what gives a series depth and meaning, what keeps it going when a dozen other shows with similar surface conflicts have disappeared to Hulu Heaven.

Take *The Closer*, TNT's long-running police procedural, for an example. What is its surface conflict? Well, it's a cop show, so it's essentially about police detectives trying to solve murders and capture the killers. Since it is a specific cop show instead of a generic one, there is a twist on that plain vanilla conflict – LAPD Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson is an expert interrogator, so that the detectives are always searching for the right suspect whom Brenda can get to confess under her brilliant questioning.

That's a pretty straightforward conflict, and one that's hard to distinguish from a dozen other shows past and present. You could give the same basic description and end up with series as distinctly different as *Lie To Me* or *Homicide: Life on the Streets*. If you've seen *The Closer*, though, you know immediately that it is nothing like either of those shows, or all the others the description might fit.

What separates *The Closer* from those other shows is the deeper conflict that lies beneath the surface, which in this case has to do with Brenda's personal issues. As a police officer, Brenda is practically a machine – efficient, unstoppable, ferocious; she's the Terminator of the interrogation room. But in every other area of her life, she's a mess. She doesn't understand people, can't relate on the most basic human levels, and is constantly baffled by the way the rest of the world lives.

Every episode of *The Closer* has two stories, the crime of the week and a personal storyline for Brenda. And it's the struggle between these two sides of her personality that drives the show.

This wasn't accidental – it was built into the DNA of the show. Writer James Duff created Brenda as an outsider, a Southern woman newly transplanted to Los Angeles, to emphasize her separation from everyone around her. This conflict was always intended to be one of the central issues of the series. It's what the show is about.

I want to repeat that phrase, because it is the most crucial thing for you to keep in mind as you're beginning to hone your own series idea: *It's what the show is about*. I hate to hit you with a word that you've probably been trained to think of as dirtier than anything they used to say on *Deadwood*, but the great purpose of the secondary level of conflict in your series is to convey the *theme*.

There, I said it. You may want to stop reading right here. You may think that theme is for school essays and charity benefits and that your writing is so good you don't have to think of something as dusty and old-fashioned as that.

In fact, theme is what drives TV shows, what sets them apart from each other. You can't sta

writing your pilot until you can answer that simplest of questions: *What is my show about?*

I can already hear the objections: TV is about entertainment, not theme and symbolism and all that film school crap.

To which I respond: TV is not possible without theme. Because it is theme that gives coherence to a set of thirty or fifty or one hundred episodes – it is by definition a *unifying* idea, and here it's what makes all those separate stories part of one larger whole. It's what keeps the audience watching. And that theme is always expressed through the series' central conflict.

But I'm not going to convince you simply by stating this, so let's take an example. Let's look at the most theme-driven show of the last couple of decades – and one of the most beloved, too. Joe Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ran for seven years, just over 150 episodes. And every one of those episodes was constructed around the same simple theme.

If you haven't seen *Buffy*, or don't remember it well enough, let's start by looking at the surface conflicts that define the show. Actually, the big one is right there in the title: The heroine is named Buffy and she's going to spend the series killing vampires. So, human versus vampire, a new battle every week. Just by reading the title a little more closely we can figure out that the heroine has a name generally associated in pop culture with frivolous teenage girls, so that's going to add a layer of irony to the conflict – the heroine is a teenage girl who kills vampires. And if you look at the opening of the pilot, that's exactly what you get. First there is a voiceover laid on top of a montage of vampire-related objects: "In every generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer." And then we cut to the exterior of a high school. So we've pretty well nailed what the primary conflict of this show is going to be just from the title.

Once we actually move into the pilot's teaser, we get an immediate sense of what one of the animating conflicts is going to be: A teenage boy and girl break into the high school's science lab at night. He's hot to take her up to the roof where, presumably, he'll make his move on her. She's nervous that they'll get in trouble and doesn't want to go. They hear a strange noise, she's spooked, he makes fun of her for being scared. He assures her that there's no one there.

So far, we're in strictly routine horror movie territory, exploring the basic beats of a million scenes that climax in the bloody death of horny teenagers.

Then there's a twist – after she's sure there's no one else in the building, the girl transforms into a hideous vampire and sinks her fangs into his neck. End of teaser.

Did I say this brief teaser gives us an immediate sense of one of the show's animating conflicts? I should have said two. The primary is the clash between a normal, contemporary high school life and the fantastic world of demons and monsters. The other is essentially stylistic, and it resides more in the viewer than in the text – it's the struggle between the genre clichés that have been implanted in our heads through constant repetition and the ways the show will attempt to fool us by playing into and then against them.

Those are both important aspects of the franchise, but neither is enough to drive a series. Because really, after a few episodes we're going to start taking it for granted that the normal, contemporary high school life and the fantastic world of demons and monsters co-exist, at least for the purposes of the show, and it's going to stop being much of a draw. And while seeing clichés exploded is entertaining, it's a style that quickly gets to be as predictable as the clichés themselves.

But of course we haven't seen the central conflict of the series yet – because we haven't met our protagonist. And even when we do, it's hard to tell how her own personal struggle is going to work here. Buffy Summers is a new student at Sunnydale High, transferred from an LA school where she

was expelled after burning down the gym. She's here to start fresh, and the opening six or seven minutes of the first act are all about her learning how to fit into this new place. She's quickly adopted by Cordelia, the leader of the popular girls, although we can see she's immediately drawn to the outcasts like uncool kids Willow and Xander.

So far – if we ignore the teaser – this could be the opening of a John Hughes movie. But just before the end of act one, Buffy stops in at the school library to borrow a textbook, and the mysterious librarian Mr. Giles offers her what he thinks she wants – a dusty tome on vampires. He knows she's the Slayer, because he has been sent to act as her "watcher." "It's not what I'm looking for," she tells him and runs out of the library.

What's really important is what happens next: Nothing. (Well, technically some catty girls are gossiping about Buffy in the locker room, and the dead body of the boy from the teaser falls out of the locker, but since our protagonist and her sidekicks-to-be don't know about the act-ending action yet for them nothing has happened.) Buffy goes outside, sits with Willow, and says she'd like them to hang out together, maybe even do a little studying.

You might not realize it on watching the hour for the first time, but what Whedon is doing here is setting up the key conflict that will power every episode for the next seven years. Can you tell what that is yet? Or should we move a little further into the pilot?

As Buffy is chatting with Willow and friends, Cordelia comes up and informs them that gym has been cancelled because of the discovery of a dead body in a locker. Slipping away from the group, Buffy breaks into the gym, studies the corpse and discovers the distinctive fang marks on its neck.

What comes next is the key scene: Buffy goes back to the library to tell Giles, who says, "I was afraid of this." It's Buffy's response that sets up the entire series: "Well, I wasn't. It's my first day. I was afraid that I was going to be behind in all my classes, that I wouldn't make any friends, that I would have last month's hair. I didn't think there would be vampires on campus, and I don't care." To which Giles responds, "Then why are you here?" She's honestly stumped, and stammers out, "To tell you that I don't care. Which I don't, and have now told you. So, bye."

Of course the reason that Buffy's there is that she *does* care. It's her duty to care, because she is the Slayer, the chosen one. She knows that she is the only person who can stop the onslaught of the vampires and save humanity.

But she hates it. She doesn't want to be a superhero. All she wants is to live a normal life, worrying about classes and friends and hair styles.

This is the conflict that will drive the next one hundred and fifty-some episodes of the series – how do you choose between your deepest personal desire and your obligation to the world?

Does this sound too simple to drive more than a hundred separate stories? It is simple – but all good conflicts are. A strong conflict needs nothing more than the necessity of a choice between two equal but irreconcilable ideas.

What's important in a central conflict is not that it be complicated, but that it is impossible to resolve, and that it can manifest itself in myriad ways. Ideally it will also become richer and more complex as time goes on.

Which is how this conflict works out in Buffy. If you see the earliest episodes, Buffy's struggles to balance her life are played out in a fairly obvious manner: She wants to date the cute guy, but her slayer side is going to get him killed; she wants to be a cheerleader, but she's got to fight a witch who's cursing the squad. But as the series goes on, Buffy's personal needs become stronger as she gets older and the pull between her desire to live for herself and her obligation to live for the world becomes more emotionally difficult.

This is a conflict that can sustain a series because it's one that can never be satisfied. Had the series run until Buffy hit middle age, she would still be dealing with the same issues, only presented in new ways appropriate to her advancing years.

(Indeed, this was exactly the case for Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, who sought a comfortable life for himself decade after decade, only to give it up each time it was in reach because only by doing so could he right a wrong for someone else. Only in death was he allowed release...)

It's important when you're looking for your pilot's theme that you choose something that can be explored from a lot of different angles – remember, your goal here is one hundred or more stories. If your conflict is limited – if your theme is too small – your series will run out of steam.

Let's look at two of the first dramas on the FX network for an example: the gritty cop show *The Shield*, created by Shawn Ryan, and the plastic surgery melodrama *Nip/Tuck* from Ryan Murphy, both of which had long, successful runs.

The Shield followed the adventures of Vic Mackey, leader of a small, anti-gang strike force working out of a run-down precinct in the worst part of Los Angeles. The second most important thing about Vic was that he was corrupt – he made deals with gangbangers, he stole money and other valuables, he was brutally violent when it served his purposes. In the show's pilot, he murdered a fellow officer who was spying on him for the FBI.

But the most important thing about Vic was that he believed he was a good guy. Sure, he made deals with criminals, but that was to keep worse criminals off the street. He only stole from crooks and he did it to help his family. And if he was violent, it was because he lived and worked in a violent world, and that was the only way to get the respect of the bad guys he went up against. As for killing the other cop, that was required for his own self-defense – but even then he knew it was wrong, and he tortured him for the entire run of the series.

This was the central conflict that powered every episode of *The Shield* – Vic Mackey acted like a bad guy in order to be a good guy. And that was the theme as well: How much evil can you do in the pursuit of noble goals before you stop being one of the good guys?

Like *Buffy*'s, that theme could have kept the show running forever. Because there would always be new challenges that would force Vic to become dirtier and dirtier.

Then there's *Nip/Tuck*. A melodrama about a team of plastic surgeons, one in a difficult marriage and the other a single sex addict, the central conflict had to do with people who were physically beautiful but whose souls were hideous. The stories were all focused around the theme: What price is worth paying for physical beauty?

Maybe you can spot a major difference between this thematic conflict and those of *Buffy* and *The Shield*. The conflicts in the other shows were centered directly on the protagonists – it was Buffy who struggled between desire and duty; it was Mackey who descended into evil to achieve good. But Sean and Christian, the plastic surgeons, took on cases every week in which the cost of achieving physical beauty would be borne by their patient.

There was more to each episode than the case of the week, of course. The show also followed the soap operatic lives of the two surgeons. But as the series progressed through its six seasons, it became increasingly difficult to locate the conflict within the lives of the two doctors, and the plot lines grew ever more outrageous – which wasn't easy, since outrage was one of the show's chief attractions from the pilot on. When the series relocated from Miami to Los Angeles in the fourth season, the move came with an air of desperation, as if the writers were searching for ways to keep it fresh.

In fairness, I have to say that *Nip/Tuck* was a huge hit for its network from the beginning until the end, and no matter how silly the show got, the audience stuck with it. I certainly don't mean to argue

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