

Case Study: TV Pilot Big Mistakes

Ask yourself this. Is that possible, that some production companies with multimillion-dollar budgets are run by idiots? It is improbable. That means talented and smart people make mistakes. And those mistakes lead to bad TV shows, movies, books, YouTube channels, songs, and even cereals. That makes it so much more valuable to learn from their mistakes.

Meet *Snowpiercer*, the sci-fi post-apocalyptic show that premiered on TNT on May 17, 2020. It is based on French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* as its adaptation — *Snowpiercer*, US and South Korea 2013 movie with Chris Evans.

There are one thousand and one things that contribute to the show's success. I don't claim that I know why the show is currently at 6.33/10 on Rotten Tomatoes nor am I writing a review. I want to go over some things that caught my attention after 3 episodes. Some of them uncover basic principles of pilot writing and TV show writing.

Mild spoilers ahead.

Principle #1: Pick a genre

If you're familiar with the premise, skip this paragraph. The show is about a giant train that revolves around the dead-frozen world without stopping. Wilford Industries build The Train as an ark for the rich. But on departure hoards of scared and desperate "non-ticketed" passengers fought their way into The Train. They now live in the Tail of The Train.

In the first 20 minutes, you think it's a dystopian study of social inequality and the case study of the rebellion in closed space. The grotesquely useless pretentious rich bastards eating haute cuisine in the middle of an extinction-level event. The dirty and desperate "nonticketed" passengers (looking suspiciously healthy and well-fed) plotting a coup d'état against people who actually know how to maintain the infrastructure of the humanity last resort.

But at minute number 23 we learn that there has been a series of murders on the train and the protagonist "non-ticketed" leader Andre Layton has to solve them. Because he is the only former homicide detective on The Train.

Let's not get into the details of how useless a detective would be without an up-to-date real-life knowledge of society and operations, without the network of informants, without any documents and databases whatsoever, without CCTV... Let's not go into that — we'll save it for the principle #2 — and talk about the sudden genre switch.

There are a lot of things your audience can forgive. But you should always stick to the genre. It's best that people know and feel the genre and the tone of your story in the first couple of minutes. And if you've picked your genre do not change it along the way. If you need to change it ("the story told me to!") then go back, delete everything and start over with your newly acquired epiphany.

What happens if you change the genre (or even the tone)? The worst thing any writer can experience happens: people start to lose interest. People stop watching. And it's understandable. I don't like it when you lie to me. I don't like it when you advertise a celebrity in a trailer and kill him in the second scene. I don't like to adjust my expectations to your mood-swings. It's your job. And I don't like it when the story changes from a family rom-com to gory porno-horror and I need to call an ambulance for my nana.

So let's make a deal. You don't change the genre and I won't change the channel.

Principle #2 Respect your audience

I will go out on a limb and claim that the sci-fi audience is among the smartest and demanding of all. So you shouldn't mess with it.

Imagine. The well-constructed room in the only nightclub of the post-apocalyptic Train. The room is designed to remember the Earth, to emerge yourself in the experience of the previous life, life before the Frost... The hero enters the room and the hand of the mysterious artist opens the curtain uncovering the 360-degree floor-to-ceiling screen. The waves of water gently brush the beach... Breathtaking view. And what is the first thing the therapist says to the protagonist?

"Close your eyes..."

Or another example. The creators of a giant ever-revolving super-techno train (have I mentioned it has 1001 cars?) decided to put *all* the cows they have in *one* car with actual *unprotected* glass windows in it. Of course, the first avalanche kills all the cattle.

Or yet another example. Why do you need an unimportant section of your train (on several occasions they suggest to unpair the part with "non-ticketed" passengers)? Unimportant part of the train that is the last hope of humanity. The train that should use every inch of usable space to save everything and everyone on board. It's not a "cruise-go-wrong" situation, they've designed it and built it with one goal only — "survive, survive, survive".

Or another example. Rich do nothing, non-ticketed do nothing. What a wonderful society they've created. Where so many people can sit on their asses and watch the time go by. I get it, that is a subtle nod in the direction of our current state of affairs. We have a big part of the population which cannot contribute to economical development and another part that doesn't feel like it. But still, it's improbable that the same order can exist in the planet-is-frozen situation. What resources do rich of The Train control *now*? What resources do they plan on controlling *tomorrow*? One guy's pet iguana is pretty cool, but otherwise, I've seen nothing.

Or another... Well, I'll better get to the point. You should know your audience and go out of your way to please it. The sci-fi is so attractive because of the well-thought details of the future. Usually technical, sometimes social. It is not enough to build a big train with a couple of cool features like a giant fish tank slash pool, suspended living facility, and smooth walls. Your audience is not a group of five-year-olds. They need a coherent experience and are waiting for the train full of ingenuity and clever design. They want to say every five minutes "oh, my gosh! so cool!". And "wow! did you see that?". Or "look at that guy!". What if you don't want to create all sorts of cool things but instead have important social and psychological problems to explore? Then learn from Lars von Trier and build a *Dogville* set.

There is a slight ego boost in discovering flaws and mistakes. But generally, I want to experience things that I can admire and not criticize.

Principle #3: Hire the right actors

Ok, I admit, it's less about writing and more about casting. But it's important anyway and I want to figure out if it's me or is it a universal consensus. Please, let me know if you agree with me.

Daveed Diggs as Andre Layton is a very strange choice. For some reason, he seems off. It looks like we've performed a "hero swap" and put a character from another movie in the middle of this series. Looks like he is on set by mistake fooling around with other actors. I cannot pinpoint what is it: the dreadlocks, the beard, the look in his eyes... And yeah, by the 3 episode I kind of got used to him, but the initial reaction was "are you kidding me?".

Anyway, if you feel the same, or if you think I'm wrong and he is the best pick for the part, let me know.

Conclusion

The mistakes and principles don't stop here. I'm sure, that you'll find more if you decide to give it a go. And also great creative choices, clever twists, witty one-liners...

Every time you like something there is a chance to learn. And every time you hate something there is a chance to learn. So pay attention. And enjoy the ride.