

"Untitled Nikola Tesla Project" by XXXXX

Notes by Steven/Scriptshadow

Pros

- Great concept (plucky genius immigrant self-destructs in America).
- Clearly-defined protagonist.
- Extraordinarily well-researched.

Cons

- Reads more like a chronology than a story.
- Poorly developed secondary characters.
- Too many conflicts, not enough drama.

OVERVIEW

Biographical films are pretty tricky to write. On the one hand, the historical record can do a lot of the work for you—provided you do adequate research, your protagonist can be revealed to you, fully-formed, via letters or interviews or newspaper clippings. On the other hand, you have such a wealth of information about your protagonist that it's difficult to pare down into 120 pages or so. It's obvious to me that you've spent months, if not longer, poring over all the minutiae surrounding Tesla, and it's served your script well. Your Tesla is a fascinating, well-realized character—even now, I can practically hear him croaking out curses for his imagined enemies as he tinkers around on his latest gizmo. Unfortunately, the story surrounding Tesla is unfocused, and I think it's largely a result of your having trouble determining the most important scenes from Tesla's life as they relate to the story you're trying to tell. As a result, you depict too many of them. The consequences of this sprawl are a dilution of conflict, undeveloped secondary and tertiary characters, and a whole host of drama-less scenes. These are not uncommon problems—recounting the sweep of a man's (or woman's) life can be difficult. For every tightly arced "There Will Be Blood", there's a meandering "J. Edgar". Let's explore this a bit more...

HALF-BAKED CONFLICTS

For simplicity's sake, I'm going to list every one of Tesla's external conflicts in your script: Tesla vs. His Mother; Tesla vs. Guglielmo Marconi; Tesla vs. JP Morgan; Tesla vs. Thomas Edison; Tesla vs. George Westinghouse; Tesla vs. the FBI. That's too many. In a long-lived life, it's not surprising that someone would develop feuds with any number of people. But when you try to include all of them into a script, the story suffers because none of the conflicts have enough space to breathe. Take Guglielmo Marconi. The entire back half of your Act 2 is peppered with the elder Tesla raging against young Marconi's impudence for daring to challenge him for the honor of sending the first wireless transmission across the Atlantic. That rage, incidentally, is what leads Tesla down his self-destructive spiral, alienating his friends and benefactors in his self-righteous quest to conquer Marconi. Because of that, it's the most important conflict in your story. It's also a great dramatic conflict. Or, at least, it's potentially great—a young upstart vs. the entitled veteran, resonating even more because it echoes a previous conflict established with Tesla vs. Edison. The problem is, because you're trying to service so many other conflicts and characters, Marconi and Tesla get left behind. They interact for a total of one scene, and a

short scene at that. And because he's only in one scene, Marconi is never allowed to develop into a proper foil. He remains the solicitous, polite young man he's introduced as. There's not even a hint of ambition that might unnerve Tesla, yet this is the conflict that drives Tesla to madness. Now, Marconi is certainly not unambitious—after all, he triumphs over Tesla through hard work and guile. But Tesla—and by extension, the reader—only hears of Marconi's progress through newspaper updates, or from mutual friends. It's passive drama—telling, not showing. We hear of Marconi's treacheries, and we hear that he's appropriated Tesla's technologies illicitly, but it's all done off-screen. We don't actually see him do anything untoward, so it's very difficult to accept him as some sort of malign presence. If you developed this conflict, and really drove home the fact that Marconi wasn't just some affable guy, I think the story would be much stronger for it.

There are issues with other undeveloped conflicts, too, but the most important one to focus on is that with Thomas Edison. Anyone watching a Tesla biopic should be expected to watch him clash with Thomas Edison. Tesla does so in your script, but it feels *pro forma*. The crux of the conflict is Edison withholding a promised bonus from Tesla, which is a fine place to start, but you don't really follow up on it. Tesla doesn't explode in a self-righteous outburst at the injustice of it all, and he doesn't come up with a fiendishly clever idea to get his money. Instead, he takes some playful verbal abuse from Edison, gets fired, and slinks away. I don't doubt that a new immigrant would be passive in this situation, but it's dramatically uninteresting. Tesla, as far as we can tell, doesn't really need the money, so why should the audience care if he gets it or not? A passive protagonist is the worst kind of protagonist, even if it jibes with the historical record. Worse, the way in which Tesla fails reveals nothing about his character, and foreshadows nothing that's to come. This entire conflict, if I can call it that, is essentially untethered from the larger narrative. It feels like it's only in your story because we all learned about Tesla and Edison in grade school. Here, too, I see an easy fix. You could either make Tesla a bit more active in his quest for the bonus (but still fail, obviously) in a way that reveals earlier on in the narrative that his arrogance is his hamartia; or, you could build up Edison into a more sinister force, instead of the milquetoast huckster he is on the page. Or you could do both! Because Edison frequently pops up in the pages at the big events of Tesla's life, and these visits happen with more frequency deeper into the story and coinciding with Tesla's downward spiral, Edison being a bit more of a malevolent force would resonate a lot more with the audience, and would also mirror Tesla's inner turmoil in a nice dramatic flourish.

CHRONOLOGY VS. NARRATIVE

Readers at production companies are incentivized to pass on scripts. If they go out on a limb and recommend a project, one of the higher-ups in the company is forced to take a look at it. If that director/producer/manager doesn't agree with the assessment, you can bet that there will be some repercussions for the reader. Crap rolls downhill. That's why it's so important for you to follow the 3-Act Structure, or for your screenplay to be in the proper format. If you don't follow the rules, you're just giving the reader an excuse to pass on your hard work. This is also why your screenplay should almost never go beyond 120 pages, incidentally. Unfortunately, your screenplay is at a pretty hefty 142 pages. This is largely an outgrowth of what I talked about earlier, which is that you seem to have had a difficult time distilling all of the wonderful research you've done into 120 pages. Seemingly

each and every gadget Tesla had a hand in inventing makes an appearance in the script, from AC power to a proto-robot to a more efficient light bulb. These are significant achievements in the sweep of human history, but judged in the context of the story you're trying to tell, they're superfluous. More problematically, there are many minor events that have nothing to do with Tesla peppered throughout the script. The one that stands out most blatantly is Edison electrocuting an elephant with AC power to demonstrate how dangerous it is. This is a wonderful scene, perhaps the most memorable in the script. It's macabre, ghoulish, and darkly funny. It also takes 2 pages of your script and has nothing to do with Tesla, your protagonist. This, too, is an easy fix. Just take a look at all your scenes, and mark each one that doesn't directly affect your protagonist's journey in some way. If they can be repurposed to serve the story better, do so. If not, be ruthless with your delete key. I know it's daunting, but trust me, once you get going, it's cathartic.

THE CHARACTERIZATION OF WOMEN

This to me is a very problematic aspect of your script. Three women throw themselves, unbidden, at Tesla. He never approaches them, and he isn't particularly winning or engaging with them when they approach him, either. Nevertheless, they press on, and sing his praises. They are just awed by his magnificence, I guess, and solicit his affections. Marguerite is the most glaring example of this. The first time we meet her, she is on a date with Tesla and acts suspiciously like a tittering school girl, saying fatuous things that earn Tesla's scorn. The next—and last—time we meet Marguerite, she is rushing with her luggage to catch Tesla on a train, begging to follow him wherever he goes. We haven't seen the two interact at all since their disastrous date, and suddenly she's trying to run away to Colorado with him? Why? We get no explanation. She is defined only by her love and admiration for Tesla, and it's jarring.

The portrayal of Katharine is similarly troubling. She, too, throws herself at Tesla after he acts cantankerously towards her, but at least she is given an outside interest by becoming involved with the suffrage movement. Unfortunately, this one outside interest is present only in her discussions with Tesla. We as the audience are told about it, rather than shown. It makes the romance between the two ring hollow, and at the denouement of the story, when Tesla and Katharine are slumped against opposite sides of a closed door, what should be heartbreaking is instead unaffected, because Tesla never put in any effort at all into the relationship. It's a disappointing character, and a disappointing romance, but you've nevertheless set a really promising foundation for both. She's in an unhappy marriage to a loutish society type, and she yearns for something more than what she has, but is doomed by external forces never to realize her desires—a lot like Tesla, in fact. You can play this up to good effect. By making clearer what exactly it is that Tesla is giving up by following through on his crazed pursuit of Marconi, you also significantly raise the stakes of his actions.

UNNECESSARY DETOURS

And then, there are the pages and pages of the script devoted to Tesla's whirlwind tour of Europe at the beginning of Act 2. As he visits his ancestral home in Croatia, Tesla flashes back to his dying mother croaking out the name of his dead kid brother with her last breath. I know you're trying to make this scene his rosebud moment—that his mother's

obvious disappointment that Tesla's brother was dead, and not Tesla in his place, somehow informed Tesla's raging inferiority complex. It's a plausible explanation, but I'm not sure how necessary it is. For one, the beginning of Act 2 is a weird place to put a flashback. For another, the reason for something happening (in this case, Tesla's inferiority complex) is always less interesting than in how that something affects your protagonist's most important relationships. I may be in the minority on this, but it's like Iago said: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know." You have in your script what you need the audience to know. The flashback is too sledgehammer-y. If you moved it around in the chronology, as well making it a bit less obvious, it would serve the story better.

The sojourn in Colorado is similarly strange. You never quite make clear the reasons for Tesla wanting to leave for Colorado. There are plenty of potential reasons—Edison hounding him, losing to Marconi, wanting to run away from true love with Katharine. But none of those reasons are explored, or even hinted at. One scene he's delivering a speech, and the next he's getting on a train. There needs to be a bit more cause-and-effect for the story to flow in the audience's mind. The other problem with this detour is that nothing comes of it. Okay, sure, after a while Tesla thinks that he receives Martian communications. But nothing comes of this discovery. It's forgotten, for a very long time, and then in a near *non-sequitur* he realizes that those communications were actually Marconi's transmissions. There's some poignancy to the tale—Tesla foiled by Marconi once again!—but it doesn't really land with me as a reader, because of the great deal of time that passes between the discovery of the communications and the discovery of their origin. In between the two discoveries, the Martians aren't mentioned at all. You can't expect the audience to remember something minor that happened 20 minutes (20 pages) prior. Happily, it's another easy fix. If you just played up Tesla strutting arrogantly about like a peacock, or him confessing to Katharine that he discovered something wonderful, this discovery would be a lot more meaningful for the audience AND for Tesla.

MONTAGES

I had to count to make sure, but you have 4(!) montages in your script. Don't get me wrong, for the most part they're wonderfully evocative, on the page and in my mind, but at a certain point enough is enough, you know?

CHARACTERS

Nikola Tesla: Tesla is an arrogant, unlikable hothead. He's great. Easily the best thing about your script. I really admire that you never go out of your way to sugarcoat Tesla, and you don't bowdlerize the historical record to make him out to be a misunderstood hero or a reluctant genius. He bankrupts his friends, turns away from true love, and destroys his professional life, all in a mad pursuit to prove to the world his greatness. It's a bold choice, and, I think, a good one. Creating a memorable protagonist is the most difficult thing in the world to do, and you've done it, at least in the script's second half. However, Tesla occasionally suffers from a lack of dramatic purpose, particularly as it relates to Edison in Act 1, or in his presentation of all of his inventions in the first half of Act 2. If you can go through your script and rework or cut all of the scenes that are important to a Tesla biographer but not to you as a storyteller, you'll have something extraordinary on your hands.

Guglielmo Marconi: Despite being Tesla's chief antagonist, he doesn't really have a character at all. He's only in one scene, and in that scene, you have written him as a deferential, polite young man who would never do anything untoward to his self-proclaimed idol Tesla. That's a great start for the character, especially since you make him out to be a canting hypocrite. Alas, all of Marconi's treacheries happen outside of our perspective. He uses Tesla's intellectual property without permission. He speaks ill of Tesla in a newspaper. He's just a jerk, apparently. The problem is, of course, that all of these things are revealed to Tesla through mutual acquaintances. There's no drama, no sparks. Marconi needs to be more than a mysterious figure in the distance if we're going to believe that Tesla would throw away love, money, happiness, and friendship just to defeat him.

Katharine Johnson: The most problematic character after Marconi. She isn't particularly fun-loving or smart, which makes the nominal romance between her and Tesla especially easy to dismiss. She never really gets Tesla to reveal a different side of himself, either. She's also married, so the audience has to get over the icky adultery factor in order to cheer on the star-crossed lovers. That requires a more convincing rapport between Tesla and Katharine than exists on the page, and it also requires a dysfunctional marriage for Katharine. Unfortunately, Katharine's husband, while a bit uncouth, seems like an okay fella. He even lends Tesla some money when he needs it the most. Katharine needs to have a reason to exist in the narrative, beyond being the principal love interest. You need to figure out what it is.

Thomas Edison: Edison starts off as a run-of-the-mill crappy boss, and then disappears for the entirety of Act 2, save for the elephant scene. It's difficult to reconcile the bland bully of Act 1 who reneges on Tesla's promised bonus with the unhinged lunatic who would go to any lengths to discredit a rival, and that's my biggest problem with the character. I think both are interesting takes on Edison, but they are mutually exclusive from one another. There's nothing menacing about Edison in Act 1, and there's nothing mousy about Edison when he's offing an elephant. The inconsistency of characterization is troubling, but I think that combining the two dialectically could lead to a really interesting character.

Westinghouse/Morgan: I lump these two together because they both serve similar purposes—they're the financiers who get burned by investing huge sums of money into their friend Tesla's flights of fancy. They're basically Tesla's only friends, as the only time he acts with any sort of civility is with these guys. They humanize him, and that's great, but their roles are so similar that I think the narrative would be better served by creating a composite character. It's too difficult to follow who lent Tesla what and when. The additional benefit of this is that you develop a strong friendship with one character, rather than two weaker friendships that don't really mean as much. Just a thought.

IN SUMMARY

In Nikola Tesla, you have constructed an extraordinary individual character. He's a dynamo that jumps off the page. Unfortunately, that character is hidden among some serious problems. The characterization of the other principals is incomplete, as with Marconi and Katharine, or it's inconsistent, as with Edison. I think this is largely an outgrowth of the

difficulty you experienced in deciding which parts of Tesla's life are important to the story you're trying to tell, and which parts of Tesla's life belong in his biography.

In other words, you need to focus on your *story*, not on the chronology. So how do you tell a tightly-plotted arc of a man's life when that story might run for years? How do you know which scenes to include, or to exclude? I would suggest watching the greats again. "Citizen Kane". "There Will Be Blood" (in my mind the closest analogue in recent cinema to your Tesla—and believe me, that's very high praise indeed). There's nary a wasted moment in those films, even though each narrative spans decades.

I'm excited to see how you tackle the rewrite. Good luck!