

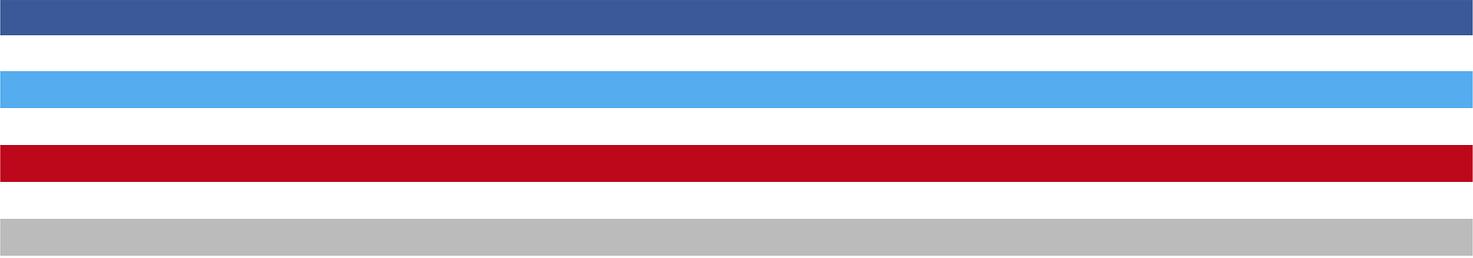
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Binge-worthy show: Pine Gap is both thrilling and enlightening



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Who's watching the watchers? If you watch the new Netflix drama *Pine Gap*, you'll be the one watching them, at least the fictional version of them. In doing so, you'll get a satellite's-eye view into the high-tech world of modern warfare where decisions are made by the men and women who see everything.

As usual, no spoilers.

Based on the real Pine Gap base outside of Alice Springs in the heart of Australia, the show speculates on what really goes on at the top secret facility. It's a joint operation between the United States and Australia that feeds intelligence to the NSA, CIA, and Pentagon as well as the Australian counterparts. Nobody knows the full scope of what goes on at the base because it's been shrouded in levels of secrecy that make Area 51 seem like an open book.

The first thing to know about this show is that it's quite authentic. Only after watching it did I learn 18-year Pine Gap veteran David Rosenberg consulted on non-critical aspects of the show such as language, processes, and at least a glimpse into the politics. Even without this knowledge, one becomes acutely aware that this couldn't be based purely on speculation. Everything seems so realistic that it can actually get a little boring watching these cool cucumbers making decisions off of intelligence on their screens.

A review by The Guardian lambasted the show for this reason. But the clinical nature of the subject matter demands authenticity. Those who respect the powers of the military and the technological monitoring that goes into making it run smoothly will appreciate that the show didn't quickly devolve into common tropes like warmongering generals demanding blood or compassionate intelligence officers abandoning their posts in protest. When the characters are making decisions that will likely result in terrorists being blown up by drone strikes, they aren't lamenting the families that just lost their rocket-wielding daddies.

That's the harsh reality into which the real world officers at Pine Gap signed up and were trained for, and the show captures this reality beautifully.

That's not to say they're all heartless robots picking off targets from 40,000 feet. The lives the characters live in and out of Pine Gap give them a depth that's uncanny in its fullness after a mere 6-episode first season. There's love, loss, drama, and regrets present as they interact with their families, the residence of Alice Springs, and each other.

The geopolitics in this fictional world is close enough to reality to sting while not being reliant on keeping up with world events. Many shows have suffered in recent years as they try too hard to mirror reality. *Homeland*, for example, filmed an entire season with a female United States President who was set up as being very similar to Hillary Clinton. Then, in the season where they were stuck with their Hillary-clone despite Donald Trump winning the election unexpectedly, they shifted gears to make her act more like the current President. It resulted in a sloppy and unbelievable season that missed the mark.

With *Pine Gap*, the world in which they live is purely fiction. The U.S. President is a well-spoken trigger-happy neoconservative who doesn't like Australia's Prime Minister and is itching to start a war with China. No, it's not a trade war as we're currently experiencing, but an actual military confrontation. This gives the show the flexibility to focus on authenticity within purely hypothetical circumstances instead of playing catch up with the news cycle. It was a refreshing choice.

Enlightening

Not since Oliver Stone's semi-realistic *Snowden* has a film or television show been as terrifying when it comes to intelligence gathering. With the stroke of a few keys there are able to fully access emails behind secure connections with ease. They can make a call and have eyes over coordinates at a moment's notice. They can turn on the mic on a phone in someone's pocket thousands of miles away and listen in on conversations. It's wonderfully downplayed since all of the characters are fully aware of their capabilities, but those watching the show may start getting paranoid about how much instant access they have into our lives. While every action seemed justifiable even if it broke the rules, it was still disconcerting to learn how much power these people have at their fingertips.

If it seemed unrealistic, you haven't been paying attention. If anything, their powers were likely understated for the sake of not revealing top secret details about what they can actually do.

Binge it or skip it

This is a not-quite narrow niche show. The traditional action pertaining to warfare is replaced by a separate omniscience surrounding these events. Instead of seeing a fighter jet blown out of the sky, we simply see a blip on a radar screen disappear. Nobody's pulling out guns or doing hand-to-hand combat with each other. Instead, the elements that make this story a thriller are subtle and intellectual. One of the most exciting sequences has characters searching a cafeteria for a cell phone while another character runs towards a computer monitor.

Yes, it's definitely niche.

Thankfully, those who will be able to appreciate it will know it's for them after the first episode. I imagine Netflix sees a lot of people either watching one episode and no more or binging the whole first season in one or two sittings. It took two for me, but only because I started it too late at night.

It appears Netflix has another hit on their hands. There's no way to tell if it's doing well enough to get renewed, but thankfully the first season is self-contained and doesn't require further seasons to make it binge-worthy now.