USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
CTWR 516: ADVANCED MOTION PICTURE SCRIPT ANALYSIS
Spring 2012
Professor: Don Bohlinger

"In dreams begins responsibility." – W.B. Yeats

"Man's greatest misfortune is when theory outstrips performance." – Leonardo da Vinci

In a recent poll taken by the Directors Guild, it was discovered that 75% of their members got their start directing scripts that they wrote or co-wrote. When Alfred Hitchcock and David Lean were asked about film schools and how to teach film directing, both agreed that students should not be given equipment until their second year: "students should first make films with their typewriters." George Lucas looked back at his education at USC and advised more time should be spent on writing. The comment heard most often from graduating production students and alumni over the years is: "I wish I had spent more time on my writing." In fact many students, upon screening their award-winning thesis films and 546's, were not offered a twenty-five million dollar picture to direct, but asked: "Do you have a script?"

Sadly, many of them didn't have a script.

Remember it all starts with the screenwriter. Without your dream, your vision of the film, there is no dialogue for the actors to speak, no fantastic shot for the cinematographer to get, no sound, no costumes, no props, you name it. It all starts with the screenwriter and it is because of this that the screenwriter must be familiar with all aspects of filmmaking as well as human nature, history, psychology, current events, literature, and art. It's the hardest, most lonely job in Hollywood. But it is also the best.

I like to tell my students to imagine the moment just before your movie begins: the room will go dark, the people will sit back, take a deep breath and wait as gradually that flickering light, that music, those words transform this roomful of strangers into intimate friends gathered to participate in your dream.

ADVANCED SCRIPT ANALYSIS is the essential class of any screenwriter's (and director's) time at USC. It is a course whose tradition dates back to the beginning of art: study what the masters in your own field do, and learn, copy, steal, but finally, make it your own.

In this class, we will analyze several very different films. Most of this analysis will be done from the screenwriter's point of view, but since the screenwriter must be familiar with all aspects of screen storytelling, we will also look at the role of the director, cinematographer, editor, composer, etc. We will study how the masters of our art build their characters and tell their stories. We will familiarize ourselves with a wide range of problems writers face when they begin the process of developing a screenplay; and we will be surprised to discover how similar are the resolutions of those problems.

The analyzed pictures are selected in such a manner that they present diverse narrative techniques, story patterns, structures, styles and genres.

The course is designed to give you a firm understanding of three-act structure, character arc, theme, sub-plot, sequence and scene. We will learn specific techniques such as: planting and payoff, point of attack, twist, exposition, use of ellipsis, backstory, polarity, scenes of revelation and recognition and ways of creating audience identification with the central character (the difference between sympathy and empathy).

The purpose of this class is to demystify the screenwriting process and to help you to build your own screenwriter's toolbox (a place to go to find ways of fixing your own screenplays.) By learning how the masters solved the very problems you are facing in your own work, you will gain an understanding of how to achieve better screenplays and characters yourself.

This is not a silver bullet. We will not talk about plot points and obligatory page numbers. Remember, you cannot and should never write to the model. But you can use these techniques and story patterns to help tell your own story more clearly and to better effect. This is not a cookie cutter course: we want to inspire you to tell your stories in the most original and effective way possible.

Class requirements: Some films are screened twice. Attendance is a part of the grade. You must attend class regardless of whether you have seen the film twenty times before. Class participation is essential - I'd like us to have a dialogue about the films. When a film is screened only once you will be required to screen it before class. There will be a MIDTERM and a FINAL (and a quiz to make sure you are keeping up with the required screenings.) There will be some reading required.

Many of the screenplays of the films we will see are available in the cinema library or on-line. Students should read these. Also, any student serious about making films should be reading and analyzing at least one screenplay a week. The library has screenplays for this purpose.

Outside reading will be encouraged but not required. Suggested readings: HUMAN NATURE OF PLAYWRITING by Sam Raphaelson, THE TECHNIQUE OF THE NOVEL by Thomas Uzzel, TO THE DIRECTOR AND PLAYWRIGHT by Michael Chekov, THE TOOLS OF SCREENWRITING (1&2) by David Howard.

COURSE GOALS AND ASSIGNMENTS:
 1. To expose students to the work of great screenwriters and directors. By analyzing effective films and screenplays we will teach filmmakers to understand this work from a professional perspective: not "I liked it" but "Did it work? If so, why?"
 2. To teach writers the basics of good dramaturgy: conflict, tension, theme, character and character development.
 3. To help writers understand the process of visualization: how do you tell your story visually using character, location, props, action and activity?
 4. To familiarize writers with story patterns, especially three-act structure.
 5. To help writers build their "writers toolbox" by screening examples of screenwriting techniques such as: planting and payoff, polarity, sequence, character arc, scenes of recapitulation, revelation and recognition.
 6. To demonstrate how the masters bring their unique characters to life. To study scene writing and what makes good scenes and effective dialogue.
 7. To study genre and how filmmakers use and break genre conventions to make their stories fresh and original.

8. By studying the scripts and films of the masters we hope to <u>inspire USC filmmakers to tell their stories</u>, not the stories Hollywood wants them to tell.
9. We will study how the masters communicate with their audience. How do they tell their unique stories without resorting to tired convention? What techniques do they use to keep the audiences involved, active, and engaged?

ASSIGNMENTS:
Note: since each film will be demonstrating many the techniques and patterns mentioned above, the weekly objective will be fluid; there will be constant review and comparison. However the films have been chosen to explore specific aspects of screen story telling:

The instructor suggests you screen certain films to supplement that week's lesson (not required.) On weeks when the film is only screened once, <u>you will be expected to screen it before class</u>.

Jan. 12:   *Strictly Ballroom*, 1992, Baz Luhrmann,
                Introduction to class, discussion of character and tone, three-act
                structure, comedy, planting-payoff, want vs. need.
                Reading: Martin McDonagh's script for *In Bruges*

Jan. 19   *In Bruges*, 2008, Martin McDonagh
                Discussion of character, three-act structure, planting-payoff, and theme.
                Reading: Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Jan. 26   *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 1975, Laurence Hauben, Bo Goldman,
                writers, Milos Forman director
                Discuss character, goals, sequences, planting-payoff, subplot, building a
                good antagonist, comedy vs. tragedy, theme, adaptation.
                Screening: *Dead Poet's Society, by Tom Schulman, directed by Peter Weir*

Feb. 2:   *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 1975
                Discuss character, goals, sequences, planting-payoff, subplot, building a
                good antagonist, comedy vs. tragedy, first culmination/midpoint, theme,
                adaptation.
                In-class screening/clips: scenes of introduction.
                Required Screening: *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

Feb. 9:   *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 1981, Lawrence Kasdan, Steven Spielberg, Dir.
                Discussion of genre: action. Character, want vs. need, three-act structure,
                the effective antagonist, second culmination, action set pieces, sequences.

Feb. 16:   *Hot Fuzz, 2007*, Edgar Wright, Simon Pegg, Edgar Wright Dir.
                Discussion of comedy (comedic discrepancy) and of the mixing of genres:
                cop movie/action/comedy.

Feb 23:   *The Apartment*, 1960, Billy Wilder & I.A.L. Diamond
                Discuss openings, first sequences, routine and status quo of main
                character, voice over, point of attack/inciting incident, revelation vs.

recognition, dramatic irony, need vs. want/character arc, resolution, planting and payoff.
Reading: Cameron Crowe's *Conversations with Wilder*

March 1:   *The Apartment*, 1960
Discuss openings, first sequences, routine and status quo of main character, point of attack/inciting incident, revelation vs. recognition, need vs. want/character arc, resolution, planting and payoff, voice over.
Reading: Cameron Crowe's *Conversations with Wilder*

March. 8:   MIDTERM
Film TBA. Ten to fifteen short answer questions reviewing concepts discussed thus far in the course.

March 15:   SPRING RECESS.

March 22:   *Lars and the Real Girl*, 2007, Nancy Oliver, writer, Craig Gillespie, dir.
Discuss character, suspension of disbelief, hope vs. fear, want vs. need, resolution, writing parts for actors, second culmination, resolution and "need-based stories."
Other need-based film: *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*?

March 29:   *Diner*, 1982, Barry Levinson,
Discussion of the ensemble film, character and want, multiple character stories, opening and character introduction, defining scene, sense of place, structure and resolution, the memory film.
Required reading: Allan Ball's first draft of *American Beauty*
Required screening: *American Beauty*

April 5:   *American Beauty*, 1999, Allan Ball, writer, Sam Mendes, director.
Discuss character and goal, want vs. need, subplot, theme, culmination and resolution, writing the scene, and the process of rewriting a script.

April 12:   *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, 1987, John Hughes
Discussion of character, want vs. need, three-act structure, buddy comedies, the "trip with destination" genre.
Suggested "Trip With Destination" films: *It Happened One Night*, *Midnight Run*, *Wild Strawberries*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *The Sure Thing*

April 19:   *Winter's Bone*, Debra Granik, Anne Rosellini from a novel by Daniel Woodrell, Debra Granik, dir.
Discuss character, want, independent cinema, research, location and the filmmaker's voice.

April 26:   Semester review with clips. Final film TBA.

TBA   <u>FINAL</u>

EVALUATION CRITERIA:
CNTV 516 grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students' work:
1. Performance on the mid-term and final.
2. Demonstrated understanding of the fundamental principles of visualization, structure, theme, creating compelling characters, tension, conflict, dramaturgy.
3. Keeping up with the homework: out of class screenings. There could be quizzes to insure students are keeping up with the screenings.
4. Class participation. The willingness to engage the instructor in discussion of the weekly film.
5. Attendance. Absences are not allowed. <u>More than one absence will result in a lower grade.</u> Tardiness will not be tolerated.

GRADING WEIGHTS:

CNTV 516 grades are based on:

        Midterm……………………………………………30%
        Final……………………………………………..50%
        Homework/Quiz…………………………………10%
        Class Participation………………………………..10%

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION:
Prof. Bohlinger's contact info: 213 740-7516, dfb@usc.edu
Office hours: Tuesday 1-4, or by appointment, SCA 335.

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:
USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles
of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual
property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted
unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to
protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to
avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to
understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook,
contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the
recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A:
http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/. Students will be
referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards
for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty.
The Review process can be found at: http://www.usc.edu/studentaffairs/
SJACS/.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:
Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is
required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each
semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be

obtained from the DSP. Please be sure this letter is delivered to the Writing Division office as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30am to 5:00pm Monday through Friday. The telephone number for DSP is [213] 740-0776.