USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

CTWR 516: ADVANCED MOTION PICTURE SCRIPT ANALYSIS

2 units

Spring 2016

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Section: 19449R

Day/Time: WED, 1 – 4:50PM

Location: SCA 112

Office hours: By Appointment

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?" Hopefully by the end of CTWR 516 you will have gained a great deal of insight into the workings of feature screenplays, helping you along the path of writing them yourselves.

In this class we will share the experience of viewing and enjoying a number of films - made at different times and with contrasting narrative approaches - and work together to discover how these

films were put together, what screenwriting methods were employed, and how these techniques can help us become better screenwriters and film makers ourselves.

There is no one method, no one story pattern that must be slavishly followed to achieve success in writing screenplays for narrative films. While this course will give you a thorough understanding of three-act structure, we will also focus on more general, fluid screenwriting concepts such as character and character arc, theme, sequence and scene. We will also learn specific techniques: planting and pay-off, deletion (ellipsis), twist, moments of revelation and recognition, exposition, backstory and ways of creating audience identification with the central character (the difference between sympathy and empathy). Most of the analysis will be done from the screenwriter's point of view, but we will also examine the role of the director, cinematographer, editor, composer, etc.

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

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 other filmmakers 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 yours stories in the most original and effective way possible.

Class requirements: Films are screened in class, some more than once. 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. There will be a MIDTERM and a FINAL. 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 Doheny library has screenplays for this purpose, as does the small library in the SCA Writing Division.

Suggested reading:

THE TOOLS OF SCREENWRITING by David Howard

THE WRITER'S JOURNEY by Christopher Vogler

SCREENWRITING: THE SEQUENCE APPROACH by Paul Gulino.

SAVE THE CAT: by Blake Snyder.

These texts will definitely help your understanding of the course.

LAPTOP AND CELLPHONES:

Laptops must be closed during screenings and lectures. Please take notes by hand.

Surfing, checking emails, and checking texts aren't permitted. If you're caught, you'll lose your laptop privileges.

Cell phones must not be used during class. If you need to make a call or text, go outside of the classroom. **More than one violation will result in a lower final grade.**

COURSE GOALS AND ASSIGNMENTS:

1.   To expose students to the work of accomplished 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 develop an understanding of screenwriting techniques such as: planting and payoff, polarity, sequence, character arc, scenes of recapitulation, revelation and recognition.
6.   To study genre and how filmmakers use and break genre conventions to make their stories fresh and original.

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:

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

(**Films are subject to change**)

- January 13: ***The Silence of the Lambs*** – Jonathan Demme, Ted Talley, USA 1991.

- January 20: ***The School of Rock*** – Mike White, Richard Linklater, USA 2003.

- January 27: ***Alfie*** – Bill Naughton, Lewis Gilbert, UK 1966.

- February 3: ***Winter's Bone*** -- Debra Granik, Ann Rossellini, USA 2010.

- February 10: ***Midnight*** -- Billy Wilder, Charles Brackett, Mitchell Leisen, USA 1939.

- February 17: **Sexy Beast** -- Lewis Mellis, David Scinto, Jonathan Glazer, UK 2000.

- February 24: ***Fruitvale Station*** -- Ryan Coogler, USA 2013.

- March 2: **MIDTERM**

• March 9: *Finding Nemo* -- Andrew Stanton, Lee Unkrich, USA 2003.

• MARCH 16: **SPRING BREAK. NO CLASS.**

• March 23: *Bridesmaids* -- Kristen Wiig, Annie Mumolo, Paul Feig, 2011 USA.

• March 30: *Guardians of the Galaxy* -- James Gunn, Nicole Perlman, USA 2014.

• April 6: *Show Me Love* -- Lukas Moodysson, Sweden 1998.

• April 13: *Ex-Machina* -- Alex Garland, UK, 2015.

• April 20: *Broadway Danny Rose* -- Woody Allen, USA 1984.

• April 27: **FINAL EXAM** screening.

EVALUATION CRITERIA:

CNTV 516 grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students' work:

• Class <u>participation</u>. The willingness to engage the instructor in discussion of the weekly film………10%

• Out of class assignments…………10%

• Midterm……………………………………………30%

• Final……………………………………………50%

Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to class discussions.

<u>Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time to class</u>.

You are allowed one unexcused absence (documentation required for excused absences). Beyond one, you will receive a reduction of one-third letter grade for each

unexcused absence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)

Tardiness is unprofessional, and so will be considered unacceptable. You will be allowed one unexcused tardiness. After that, you will have your grade lowered by one-third letter grade for each occurrence. BE ON TIME.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* http://equity.usc.edu/ or to the *Department of Public Safety* http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/ provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.htmlprovides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* *http://emergency.usc.edu/*will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

Disruptive Student Behavior

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.