School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division of
Writing for Screen and Television

CTWR 305
Advanced Screenwriting:
The Relationship Screenplay
Fall 2018

Instructor: Aaron Benay
Class Schedule: Wednesdays, 4pm-6:50pm
Class Location: SCA 361
Office Hours: By appointment
Contact Information: benay@usc.edu

<u>Course Objective:</u>
Students will write an original, feature-length screenplay that will emphasize the development of dramatic relationships between the characters.

<u>Course Description:</u>
An English poet wrote: "No man [or woman] is an island entire of itself; every man [and woman] is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." These words were written in 1624, but the sentiment is as true almost 400 years later. As human beings, we're all interconnected.

Since movies examine the human condition, the fictional characters who are a reflection of real people are also interconnected. Their personalities and actions occupy a full spectrum of possibilities. They love, deceive, yearn, betray, hate, save, steal, and kill. And like real people, each character is the center of his or her own universe. They all have wants and needs, goals and dreams in their lives, which are often at cross-purposes with those of the other figures who inhabit their world.

For this reason, a screenplay that truly explores the human condition must be rich in character and relationship connections. This course title might suggest that we'll be studying a special kind of screenplay—perhaps romantic comedy or indie film writing. But the truth is that <u>all</u> screenplays are relationship screenplays. A relationship screenplay is not limited to a genre—it can be a love story, a comedy, a drama, even a summer action movie.

"The Imitation Game" is a relationship screenplay—that won the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay—in which mathematician and code breaker Alan Turing struggles to connect with others, owing to both his genius and his struggle with his sexuality. But "Guardians of the Galaxy"—a Marvel movie of a totally different budget, scale, and genre—is also a relationship screenplay. Its plot movements rely not only on spectacle, but on complicated relationship dynamics that involve a half-human adventurer, a green alien assassin, a warrior inmate, a tree-like humanoid and a raccoon bounty hunter. And those are all allies on the same team, let alone the film's antagonists!

In writing a screenplay over the course of a semester, you'll develop the building blocks of a script, with a focus on characters in which your reader will be emotionally invested.

You'll start with a simple idea—the seed from which all great movies grow. You'll develop your main character, whose need and want will drive the story from beginning to end, and who will grow over the course of the hero's journey. You'll bring supporting characters to life, who as unique individuals will have their own desires and motivations. They'll interact with and challenge the main character in their own particular ways—and also speak through dialogue in their own distinct voices.

The first few weeks of the course will focus on what the industry calls "development," which is the gathering of these story elements—because only an amateur would attempt to sit down and write a screenplay without any prior thought or planning. You'll then outline your story, with an emphasis on the experience of your characters. You'll pitch your story in class and receive notes to hone your work, just like professional writers do with other producers, writers, and executives who are involved in the creative process.

Then you'll write your screenplay, section by section, building and crafting your story. You'll workshop with and support your classmates along the way, until you have a fully realized relationship screenplay at the end of the course.

Requirements:
By the end of the semester, all students **<u>must</u>** complete a first draft of their screenplay— failure to do so will also mean failure of the course. All assignments must be turned in on time. Students must read all submitted materials by the start of class and be prepared for workshop discussions.

<u>Course Reading:</u>
There are no particular texts for this course. From time to time, the instructor may assign reading of screenplays or key scenes, which will illuminate the concepts discussed in class.

<u>Grading Criteria:</u>
In class, the instructor will direct how the students will deliver assignments, either via email or Dropbox. As the class relies on workshopping each other's screenplays, students are responsible for delivering their own assignments and reading each other's materials BEFORE class. This is essential for the class discussion, and for developing your classmates' and your own screenplay successfully.

<u>MATERIALS FOR WEDNESDAY'S CLASS ARE DUE BY 6PM MONDAY EVENING.</u>

Grading will be dependent on the level of effort, thought, and craft of the writing. As future participants in the entertainment industry, students should conduct themselves in a professional manner. Accordingly, assignments should be delivered on time, and they should be well-considered, neat, properly formatted, and proofread. It's obvious when work is rushed or last-minute, and shoddy work will not be appreciated.

This course is a rigorous class that will prepare students for working as professional screenwriters in Hollywood. You will be expected to work collaboratively, just as any professional writer would work in conjunction with producers and studio executives.

You will be required to accept constructive criticism, as well as give it. It's part of the creative process, and even if you don't agree with notes 100%, you must accept them with good grace and find a way to address them in your own way.

Writers are often called upon to work on the fly. So the challenge to both give and receive notes "in the room" is invaluable training for a future career.

You will be kind to and respectful of your classmates, as writing is a fragile process and we all must work in a safe creative space. Lack of participation or contribution in the discussion of other students' work will adversely affect the student's grade.

Last but not least, you will be challenged to be <u>original</u>. You will be pushed to accept not the first idea, nor the second, nor even the third idea that pops into your head. You will not be permitted to default to ideas that you've already seen in other movies or television shows—because that's what makes for derivative work. After all, the goal in this course is to write an <u>original</u> screenplay!

The final grade will be determined as follows:

Homework assignments:	55%
Verbal presentation:	5%
Classroom participation:	10%
Final Screenplay:	30%
--	
	100%

As per Writing Division policy, the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A	100% to 94%	C	76% to 73%
A-	93% to 90%	C-	72% to 70%
B+	89% to 87%	D+	69% to 67%
B	86% to 83%	D	66% to 63%
B-	82% to 80%	D-	62% to 60%
C+	79% to 77%	F	59% to 0%

<u>Expectation of Professionalism:</u>
All material is expected to be turned in on time and in the proper format. Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos. Please proof your assignment prior to submission.

<u>Internet Policy:</u>
Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, distributed, or posted anywhere else on the internet.

<u>Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:</u>
There are to be no open laptops in class, except for the person whose work is being discussed, exclusively for the purpose of taking notes. Texting is also not allowed during class time. This is the same practice as in the industry—if you're in a notes meeting with producers or studio executives, you must be engaged and participating in the conversation, not on your laptop or phone!

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by 5%. Your grade will be lowered by 5% for every absence after. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

In order for absence to be excused, the student must have approval from the professor and provide documentation at the next attended class session.

Please note that if you are a Writing for Screen and Television major/minor, you must receive a grade of a C or better in order to receive degree credit. If you have any questions about the minimum grade required for credit please check with your home department.

If you have an emergency and must miss class, please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

Class Schedule:

Please note that all dates are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

The following is the general class schedule, but the instructor reserves the right to modify the weekly assignments and deadlines, and will notify students in class.

Week 1: Students will pitch story ideas, which will be the basis for the screenplay they'll write over the course of this semester. Please come to the first class prepared with 2 or 3 ideas. (Writers are expected to have lots of ideas!) The class will have a general discussion about developing a concept and answering a core question: "Whose story is it?"

Assignment: Write a rough 1- to 2-page treatment for 2 or 3 ideas.

Week 2: Discuss story ideas, focusing on who is the main character and what they want vs. need. What is your main character's goal, which will serve as the engine for your story? We will examine both the main character's internal and external story.

Assignment: Expand the treatment for your chosen idea into a 3- to 5-page treatment. Describe what your main character wants, and who or what is stopping him or her from achieving it.

Week 3: Discuss expanded treatments. Also, discuss the "internal character story," which is the emotional heart of your screenplay.

Assignment: Develop a character biography that focuses on your main character's external character want vs. their internal character need.

Assignment: Begin to outline the story for presentation in weeks 6 & 7.

Week 4: Discuss the nature and role of character relationships. How can supporting characters enhance the main character's own story—for instance, by challenging him or her, and raising the stakes of the story?

Assignment: Create at least 4-5 supporting characters with whom your main character interacts. Who are they? What are their backstories? Why are they important to your main character? Do they support your main character, or are their goals in conflict?

Assignment: Create a character wheel for your main character.

Assignment: Continue to outline story for presentation in weeks 6 & 7.

Week 5:   Discuss classmates' character relationships. Discuss the ties that bind characters in a screenplay. Examine how bonds between characters can evolve over the course of the story, and the arc of relationships.

Assignment: Continue to prepare story outline for verbal presentation in weeks 6 & 7.

Assignment: Present class with a beat sheet for your story.

Week 6:   Students will give an verbal presentation of the story outline and relationship development, and receive story and character notes from the class. Pitching story and receiving notes are essential skills in the entertainment industry.

Assignment: Revise and rewrite the outline, incorporating class notes. With the instructor's go-ahead, begin writing the 1st sequence in the script, approximately pages 1-15.

Week 7:   Continue verbal presentations of story outline and relationship development, with character and story notes from the class.

Assignment: Write 1st sequence, approx. pages 1-15.

Week 8:   Discuss first sequence, with the goal of simplifying and clarifying story and plot problems. Focus on the "world" of the story.

Assignment: Write 2nd sequence, approx. pages 15-25.

Week 9:   Discuss second sequence, addressing supporting characters and character relationships, as they begin to intersect.

Assignment: Write 3rd sequence, approx. pages 25-40. By now, you should have established and started to develop the major character relationships.

Week 10:   Discuss 3rd sequence. Discuss how subplots and character relationships can raise the stakes for the main character and help build a strong second act.

Assignment: Write 4th sequence, approx. pages 40-55.

Week 11:   Discuss 4th sequence. Focus on the main character's goal, which will provide the narrative drive for Act 2. Discuss the pivotal midpoint, one of the most important plot turns in the screenplay.

             Assignment: Write 5th sequence, approx. pages 55-70.

Week 12:   Discuss the 5th sequence, with a focus on the key relationship in the screenplay. The major relationships should be well developed at this point, with subplots complementing and/or complicating the main plot.

             Assignment: Write 6th sequence, approx. pages 70-85.

Week 13:   Discuss 6th sequence. As we barrel toward the end of Act 2, the main character should be close to achieving his or her goal. But the complications of plot, subplots, and relationships are undermining this objective.

             Assignment: Write 7th sequence, approx. pages 85-100.

Week 14:   Discuss 7th sequence. In the first half of Act 3, stakes should be raised and tension should be rising. Before the main plot climax, major character relationships and subplots should begin to resolve.

             Assignment: Write 8th sequence, approx. pages 100-115.

Week 15:   Discuss 8th sequence—which now completes a full draft of the screenplay. Discuss how students have progressed and what they should focus on in revisions. Classmates will give notes on a script "polish," which may include character consistency, relationship clarification, dialogue, plot, etc.

             Assignment: Students will deliver a complete revised and polished screenplay by the date of the scheduled final exam.

             Assignment: Students will read screenplays and prepare notes to deliver to instructor and classmates.

Finals Week: Final meeting in class to discuss notes for a future rewrite. The date of this final class will be determined. Please be mindful when making holiday reservations for the winter break.

<center>**Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**</center>

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 Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/.   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.

Support Systems:
Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255
Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/

Sexual Assault Resource Center
For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: http://sarc.usc.edu/

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086
Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. https://equity.usc.edu/

Bias Assessment Response and Support
Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/

The Office of Disability Services and Programs
Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. http://dsp.usc.edu

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710
Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/

Diversity at USC
Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. https://diversity.usc.edu/

USC Emergency Information
Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, http://emergency.usc.edu

USC Department of Public Safety – 213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime.
Provides overall safety to USC community. http://dps.usc.edu

PLEASE NOTE:
FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX