

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS  
CTWR 516:  
Advanced Motion Picture Script Analysis  
Spring 2020 – (Two Units, Required, Section 19449R)

Instructor: Don Bohlinger  
Class Schedule: Friday 9:00-12:50  
Class Location: SCA 112  
Office Hours: Wednesday 11-1, Friday 1-3, SCA 354. Or by appointment.  
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**COURSE OBJECTIVE:**

To give students the essential tools needed to analyze a feature screenplay or film. Students will learn how to identify key story concepts, break down three-act structure, and identify compelling characters by reading screenplays, studying film classics and current award winners.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

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

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

In a 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 that 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.

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 filmmaker'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 the resolutions are of those problems.

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

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.

In the first three weeks we will be screening several short films in order to explore how that short film stories use the principles we are learning.

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. You must attend class regardless of whether you have seen the film twenty times before. Class participation is important - I'd like us to have a dialogue about the films. There will be a MIDTERM and a FINAL. There will be reading required: screenplays and distributed texts.

Many of the screenplays of the films we will see are available in the cinema library or online. 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.

Other 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, ON FILMMAKING, Alexander Mackendrick, YOUR SCREENPLAY SUCKS by William M. Akers

### **COURSE GOALS AND ASSIGNMENTS:**

- 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?”
- To teach writers the basics of good dramaturgy: conflict, tension, theme, character and character development.
- To help writers understand the process of visualization: how do you tell your story visually using character, location, props, action and activity?
- To familiarize writers with story patterns, especially three-act structure.
- 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.
- To demonstrate how the masters bring their unique characters to life.
- To study scene writing and what makes good scenes and effective dialogue.
- To study genre and how filmmakers use and break genre conventions to make their stories fresh and original.
- By studying the scripts and films of the masters we hope to inspire USC filmmakers to tell their stories, not the stories Hollywood wants them to tell.
- 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 of 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 storytelling:

You will be expected to screen certain films to supplement that week’s lesson. On weeks when the film is only screened once, you will be expected to screen it before class.

Week 1-5: The Basics

- Jan. 17        *Strictly Ballroom*, 1992, Baz Luhrmann  
Discussion of character and tone, three-act structure, tone, planting-payoff, want vs. need, into of comedy.  
In-class screening/clips: 3 short films.  
Suggested reading: Cameron Crowe's *Conversations with Wilder*  
Required reading: the structure grid and sequence definitions.
- Jan. 24:        *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.  
In-class screenings: short films.  
Suggested screening: *Dead Poet's Society*, written by Tom Schulman  
Required reading: the glossary of film terms.
- Jan 31:        *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.  
In-class screening: short films  
Suggested screening: *Sorry To Bother You*, Boots Riley
- Feb. 7:        *Middle of Nowhere*, 2012, Ava DuVernay  
Discuss the importance of character and relationships. Need vs. Want. Drama vs. melodrama. Writing from a theme. The writer-director and DP as storyteller.  
Suggested screening: *Carol*, by Todd Haynes
- Feb 14:        *The Piano*, 1993, Jane Campion  
Discuss the importance of character and defining scene, first culmination or midpoint, scenes of aftermath and preparation, dramatic irony, resolution (want vs. need), character change.  
Required reading: story questions.

Weeks 6-8: Comedy

- Feb 21:        *Bridesmaids*, 2011, Kristen Wiig, Annie Mumolo, Director: Paul Feig  
The naughty comedy. Discuss screwball comedies, comedic characters, the naughty situation, want vs. need, the well-meaning comedic character, the "beating heart," comedic family or friendship comedy.  
Suggested screening: *Some Like It Hot*, *Mean Girls*, *Coming to America*

Feb 28: *When Harry Met Sally*, 1989, Nora Ephron, Director: Rob Reiner  
The romantic comedy. Discuss meet-cute. Audience identification.  
 Subplot characters. The love story.  
 Suggested screenings: *Shop Around the Corner*

March. 6: *Parasite*, 2019, Bong Joon Ho  
The dark comedy. Character. Want. Ensemble. Pushing the action. Twist.  
 World of the story. Theme and why we write movies!

March 13 MIDTERM CLASS  
 TV lecture. *Breaking Bad/Watchmen/Scandal*.  
 Midterm: Twenty short answer questions reviewing concepts that have  
 been discussed in lectures and presented in handouts.

March 20: SPRING RECESS.

#### Week 10-11: Genre

March 27: *Silence of the Lambs*, 1991, Ted Talley, writer, from Thomas Harris' novel, Jonathon Demme, director.  
 Discussion of the thriller genre: mood, tone, character, tension, theme, character arc, backstory, dramatic irony, thriller structure, voice.  
 Suggested screening: *Children of Men*

April 3: *Gone Girl*, 2014, Gillian Flynn, writer, David Fincher, Director  
 Discussion of adaptation (Flynn's own novel.) Strong antagonists. Thriller genre. Tension. Dramatic Irony.

#### Week 12-13: Independent Film/Alternative Narratives

April 10: *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?*

April 17: *Moonlight*, Tarrell Alvin McCraney and Barry Jenkins (also director)  
 Character, episodic structure, character arc, mood, place, short-term tension. Twist and character development.  
 Suggested screening: *Touch of Sin* by Zhangke Jia or *Amores Perros* by Guillermo Arriaga, directed by Alejandro Iñárritu.

#### Week 14: The Rewrite Process

April 24: *American Beauty*, 1999, Allan Ball, writer, Sam Mendes, director.

How to rewrite your script once you get notes! Discuss character and goal, want vs. need, subplot, theme, culmination and resolution, writing the scene, and the process of rewriting a script.

Week 15: Review:

May 1: Semester review with clips. Final film TBA. Take home final distributed.

Finals Week:

May 8<sup>th</sup> Take home final due at 10AM.

**EVALUATION CRITERIA:**

CTWR 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 and readings.

Attendance is expected. Lateness will not be tolerated.

**GRADING WEIGHTS:**

CTWR 516 grades are based on:

Midterm.....	30%
Final.....	50%
Homework/Quiz.....	20%

**LETTER GRADES:**

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

**Expectation of Professionalism:**

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.

**Internet Policy:**

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

**Recording Devices:**

You may not record lectures or workshops without the consent of the instructor.

**Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:**

**\*\*LAPTOPS AND CELL PHONES ARE NOT PERMITTED IN THIS CLASS.\*\***

*People with accommodations through DSP will be allowed to use recording equipment/laptops per their accommodations.*

**Writing Division Attendance Policy:**

Students are expected to be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards.

Students are **allowed two absences** throughout the semester.

**On the third absence**, students will have their final grade lowered by 10% and an additional 10% for each absence thereafter. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

**NOTE:** Exceptions will be made in the case of religious holidays and DSP accommodations.

In the case of medical emergencies, family emergencies, or allowances needed for personal well-being, all concerns must be communicated and approved by the Instructor. If there is a difference of opinion, the student can contact the Writing Division at (213) 740-3303 or [writing@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:writing@cinema.usc.edu)

If a student has an emergency and additional accommodations are needed, those accommodations will need to come through the USC Campus Support and Intervention (CSI) office. The Writing Division recommends the student and/or advocate contact CSI at 213-821-4710 and their home department adviser for additional support.

Please be aware 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.

**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 Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://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, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

### **Support Systems:**

*Student Health Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call*

[engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling)

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

*Student Health Leave Coordinator – 213-821-4710*

Located in the USC Support and Advocacy office, the Health Leave Coordinator processes requests for health leaves of absence and advocates for students taking such leaves when needed.

<https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/>

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call*

[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call*

[engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp)

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) | Title IX - (213) 740-5086*

[equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://titleix.usc.edu)

Information about how to get help or help a survivor of harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations.

*Bias Assessment Response and Support - (213) 740-2421*

[studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support)

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions for appropriate investigation and response.

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776*

[dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

*USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710*

[studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa)

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

*Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101*

[diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

*USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call*

[dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

*USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)

Non-emergency assistance or information.

### **Diversity and Inclusion**

Diversity and Inclusion are foundational to the SCA community. We are committed to fostering a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can flourish. The classroom should be a space for open discussion of ideas and self-expression; however, SCA will not tolerate verbal or written abuse, threats, harassment, intimidation or violence against person or property. If students are concerned about these matters in the classroom setting they are encouraged to contact their SCA Diversity and Inclusion Liaison, <http://cinema.usc.edu/about/diversity.cfm>; e-mail [diversity@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:diversity@cinema.usc.edu). You can also report discrimination based on a protected class here <https://equity.usc.edu/harassment-or-discrimination/>

### **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.

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