SCRIPT ANALYSIS FOR THE PRODUCER
CMPP 550

Jessica Sharzer
Fall 2023
Monday 7:00 p.m.-10:00 p.m.
    8/21-11/27
    NO CLASS LABOR DAY
    NO CLASS 9/25 YOM KIPPUR
    9/26 MAKE-UP CLASS 2:30-5:30pm SCA 204

Location: SCA 203
Office Hours: By appointment – in person before
        class or on zoom during the week
Contact Info: sharzer@usc.edu
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Teaching Assistant: TX Tario
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Course Objective

Whether your endgame is to be a writer, producer, executive, agent – you will need to be able to recognize a script's strengths and weaknesses. Deciding whether you like a script is merely a starting point. Being able to articulate why, whether to a studio head, a financier or a lead actor is critical to your success. Being able to give notes on drafts, in terms a writer can both understand and put into action, is critical to your success. (And that's coming from someone who has taken notes, both good and bad, from countless executives over the last twenty years.) By understanding genre and studying some of the great masters and their seminal works, you will gain key concepts of storytelling, specific to cinema as an art form. Because pitching will inevitably be a part of any future career in entertainment, you will also learn how to communicate your ideas clearly by building up to a practice pitch as your final assignment. In order to organize the class, I chose only American films and put them in roughly chronological order, covering all the major genres. As you'll see, genres are fluid and can be creatively combined. I will also be asking you to read TV pilots throughout the semester in those same genres for our discussion. If you have time to watch those pilots, it will serve you better but I recognize your time is limited. The main focus is on reading as many good scripts as possible and understanding their mechanics.

Course Description

Within the fifteen weeks of the course, you will be required to watch and/or read the assigned movie or TV show of the week and complete any additional reading. I recommend group viewing of the movies, both for the social aspect and for the exchange of ideas, but will leave that to you to arrange. You will also be expected to participate in class discussions and turn in any in-class or at-home assignments on time. The class will culminate in a final assignment applying everything you learned to an unproduced screenplay to determine its creative and commercial merit. Start looking for this material as soon as possible. It's your first job as a producer – to find and recognize great material.

I want to acknowledge openly and up front that the majority of the movies chosen are helmed by heterosexual white men. I too am frustrated that the playing field has hardly been level or inclusive in Hollywood until recently, and – quite frankly – we can still do much better. But I also believe, for any of us to succeed, we need a strong grasp of the movies that shaped the industry thus far if we are expecting, much less demanding, a seat at the table. I have tried to pull in a number of recent movies and TV shows helmed and/or written by a more diverse group. As for the older movies, especially prior to the year 2000, there will inevitably be language, depictions and stereotypes that we would all agree are unacceptable.

The movies are chosen in spite of these elements and in no way to defend or normalize them. I'm open to any conversation on this very important topic.

Course Reading
STORY by Robert McKee (available on Amazon, Kindle and in most bookstores) The book was written a while ago so his references are dated, but his concepts are useful when analyzing a script or finished work. If you've read this book, I hope you will give it another read anyhow. I reread it every few years.

Various assigned screenplays listed and articles below. They will all be available on a Google drive designated for the class. It's paramount that you read the scripts and not just watch the movies as the focus of the class is script analysis. If you have to choose for time – read the script rather than watching the movie. I've added television scripts each week. While I'm not requiring you to watch most of them due to time management, it will help you more to watch them as well.

Course Assignments
All written assignments are to be e-mailed to the teaching assistant by 3:00 p.m. on the Sunday before the Monday class date.

Grades
Grades will be based on attendance, outside preparation, class participation, timely completion of the assignments and a review of the work submitted for both their midterms and final projects.
The grade breakdown is as follows:
30% - weekly assignments (including in-class writing)
10% - class participation
30% - midterm
30% - final project
Written work will not be judged on literary merit, but application of lessons learned. That said, please check spelling, grammar, punctuation, and neatness.

Laptop and Cellphone Policy
I prefer no laptops in the classroom, which could distract with texts and emails. I prefer you write notes by hand and type them after class unless there are extenuating circumstances. Cell phones should be silenced if present. I will give a mid-class break to check and return important calls

Food/Drink Policy:
SCA has a strict policy in their classrooms: No food or drinks, except water.

CLASS SESSIONS:

Assignment for week 1: Please read MOONLIGHT and LADYBIRD then watch both movies before the first class. It's important to read the script first before watching.

Week 1 – 8/21: COMING OF AGE

Concepts to discuss: logline, set up, the running start or hook, Hero's journey and other paradigms, coming of age, three act structure, "why now" within the story.

Assignment for week 2: Read short story "The Tin Star" by John Cunningham. Watch HIGH NOON. Read YELLOWSTONE* pilot. Read Story by Robert McKee - Chapters 2 & 3, pp. 31-78.

Week 2 – 8/28: WESTERN

Concepts to discuss: Creation of the hero, Official hero vs. Outlaw Hero, character arc, location, ticking clock, inciting incident, act breaks and climax, scene structure.

Assignment for week 3: Read CASABLANCA screenplay then watch movie. Read THE SOPRANOS pilot. Read Story – Chapters 4, 5, 6, pp. 79-134.

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Week 3 – 9/11: DRAMA

Concepts to discuss: Politics in film, symbolism, theme, reluctant hero, scope, flashbacks, love triangles, family, biography, adaptation, want versus need.

Assignment for week 4: Read REAR WINDOW then watch movie. Read KILLING EVE pilot script. Read Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Read Story – Chapter 7, pp. 135-180. SIGN UP FOR MID-TERM SCRIPT.

Week 4 – 9/18: THRILLER

Concepts to discuss: Creating suspense, point of view and the male gaze, subtext, subgenres including erotic thriller, political thriller, psychological thriller, film noir.

Assignment for week 5: Read BONNIE & CLYDE then watch movie. Watch THE END OF THE F***ING WORLD* pilot. Read Story - Chapters 8 & 9, pp. 181-232. Watch https://collab.sundance.org/catalog/The-Art-Craft-of-Screenwriting-with-Scott-Frank

Concepts to discuss: true stories, violence on screen, love stories, unity of opposites, road movies, outlaw heroes, shot design and innovation, voice over. SCRIPTS HANDED OUT IN CLASS FOR MID-TERM PROJECT.

Assignment for week 6: Read NETWORK then watch movie. Read POSE pilot. Read <u>Story</u> – Chapters 10 & 11, pp. 233-287.

Week 6 – 10/2: ENSEMBLE
Concepts to discuss: introducing characters, interpersonal dynamics, location as character, worlds, institutions, social issues, satire.

Assignment for week 7: Read TOOTSIE then watch movie. Read ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK pilot. Read <u>Story</u> – Chapters 12 &13, pp. 288-316.
Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=752INSLlyf0

Week 7 – 10/9: COMEDY
Concepts to discuss: comedy premise, blind spots, character contrast, spoof, slapstick, romantic comedy, dark comedy, satire, high concept, traveling angel.

Assignment for week 8: Read THE HURT LOCKER* then watch movie. Watch pilot of 24. COMPLETE AND TURN IN MID-TERM ASSIGNMENT BY 10/16.

Week 8 – 10/16: ACTION
Concepts to discuss: love stories/triangles, cross-cultural representation, researching/establishing a period, symbolism, emotional baggage or "ghost."

Assignment for week 9: Read STAR WARS screenplay. Read THE TERMINATOR treatment. Read BATTLESTAR GALACTICA bible. Read STRANGER THINGS format. **Pick one of the projects to watch** (a pilot or film).
Watch: https://www.ted.com/talks/j_j_abrams_the_mystery_box?language=en

Week 9 – 10/23: SCI-FI
Concepts to discuss: high concept, rules, world building, exposition, dystopia, the magic "what if," treatments, bibles, formats.

Assignment for week 10: Read GET OUT* then watch movie. Read THE WALKING DEAD* pilot. I recommend buying the annotated GET OUT script on Amazon.

Week 10 – 10/30: HORROR
Concepts to discuss: grounded vs. supernatural, literal and figurative monsters, surprise/jump scares, psychological horror, horror comedy, horror as mirror of social issues, teens and horror, sins of the past, urban legends, franchise villains.

Assignment for week 11: Read COCO then watch movie. Read RICK & MORTY "Lawnmower Dog" episode. Watch short videos:
https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_stanton_the_clues_to_a_great_story
https://vimeo.com/237921575

Week 11 – 11/6: ANIMATION
Concepts to discuss: animation vs. live action, Pixar process, magical realism, world building, non-human characters, music, coming of age tropes, taken from fairytales.

Assignment for week 12: Read WONDER WOMAN and BLACK PANTHER and THE BOYS pilot. Watch SPIDERMAN: ACROSS THE SPIDERVERSE.

Week 12 – 11/13: SUPERHERO
Concepts to discuss: origin story, hero, antihero, villain, end-of-the-world stakes, philosophical stakes, competing values, epic battle, team-up, setting up a franchise.

Assignment for week 13: Read pilots of INSECURE, BARRY, BEEF, GREY'S ANATOMY. Pick one and watch pilot episode. Watch short video:
https://www.ted.com/talks/shonda_rhimes_and_cyndi_stivers_the_future_of_storytelling?language=en

Week 13 – 11/20: TELEVISION DRAMA, COMEDY AND DRAMEDY
Concepts to discuss: half-hour vs. one-hour, ongoing series vs. limited, single lead vs. ensemble, procedural vs. soap, network vs. streaming, target audience, act breaks, pitching TV, how a writer's room operates.

Assignment for week 14: FIND AN UNPRODUCED SCREENPLAY OR PILOT AND ANALYZE IT USING THE CONCEPTS YOU LEARNED IN CLASS, INCLUDING GENRE, STRUCTURE, STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES, COMMERCIAL POTENTIAL, RELEVANCE, AUDIENCE. GIVE 5-MINUTE VERBAL PITCH IN CLASS.

Week 14 – 11/27: PITCH FEST!

*Content warning. If you are bothered by violence on screen, you may bypass viewing the material and solely read the script.

Stark Attendance Policy

The Stark attendance policy is based on the professional expectations held by our industry. Treating every class as a valuable business meeting with a high-level industry pro (which your faculty are) will bode well for your future. Arriving late, or unprepared, or not showing up at all will harm the most valuable asset at your disposal at this stage of your career… your reputation. Professionalism is part of the Stark curriculum, and it starts with attendance.

Being on time and prepared for every class is a professional expectation of all Stark students. Most of what is taught by the faculty in the Stark program is not available through textbooks or online sources. It is therefore in your best interest to attend every class session. Missing lessons puts you at risk of failure.

In the event of illness or other unexpected circumstance students may miss two classes without penalty. Upon the third absence and for each subsequent absence, the student's grade will be lowered 1/3 of a grade point, ie. A to an A-. Missing more than 15 minutes of a single class will count as ½ an absence. If class is being held virtually, attendance with cameras on, ready to participate is required to be counted as present. Once a student's absences approach 50% of the class sessions in a given course, they will be advised to withdraw or risk failing the course.

Please note the degree requirement for the MFA in Producing for Film, Television, and New Media is a grade of C or better in every required course and a GPA of 3.0 or better across all course work.

As ever we are interested in your success. If you feel you have extenuating circumstances which excuse you from these policies, please contact your SA, Faculty, and Advisor for review of your situation.

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.

Stark Artificial Intelligence Policy

In your Stark classes, every word you submit for assignments must be written by you, or if you are using the words or ideas of others, properly cited by you. This includes words and ideas generated by artificial intelligence. To do otherwise is to commit plagiarism which puts you in violation of USC Academic Integrity policies, which is cause for failing an assignment, failing a course, or expulsion from the program.

To be clear you can use AI for help before you begin writing, in the pre-drafting process, as you might use any research source. You could talk with it to brainstorm ideas, come up with lines of enquiry, get perspectives on a topic, find pointers towards fruitful areas of research, and so on. If you do use AI in this way you must follow MLA AI citation rules, which can be found here, just as you would when paraphrasing, quoting or otherwise incorporating any ideas that are not your own in your writing.

However, you cannot use AI when it comes to writing words you will submit for an assignment. You cannot use AI to edit or revise your text, for example by putting your words into a prompt and asking AI to alter the style, form, or voice, clean up the grammar, or make similar, global revisions, and then submit this as your work. If you prefer to write in a language that is not English and use AI translators to convert your text into English, you must cite this use. You can use spell checking and grammar checking tools like Grammarly in all your classes.

Faculty may give specific guidance about the use of AI in particular assignments, and you should follow these instructions carefully. Some classes may have different or more rigid AI policies than this policy. All work may be screened by AI detection and plagiarism tools.

Your default assumption should be, don't use AI unless you know how to cite it. If you are in any doubt, speak to your instructor for guidance. Feel free to speak with the Stark Office as well. We are all finding our way in this and should expect to discuss surprises and find solutions together. We are in the business of creating and stewarding intellectual property, it's in our interest to perform and model behaviors that protect our own creative work and that of others.

For any issues or concerns related to **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**, please email https://scacommunity.usc.edu/secure/diversityEquity