

Screenwriting Through the Director's Lens

Faculty: Jay Craven.

Meeting Times: Monday through Friday, July 23 – August 3 --- 9am-1pm

Overview

Effective screenwriting requires an understanding of story structure and an ability to shape character, theme, tone, and incident to dramatic effect. For the director, screenwriting provides an opportunity to start anticipating the specific needs and dynamics of production, especially for casting, locations, design, cinematography, scene blocking, and more.

A film director takes the screenplay as a starting point for understanding complex characters and relationship dynamics. Story is about character. And character is action. A director uses a script as a blueprint for the production where they work to enlarge upon the script, to tell an original story by creating conditions that facilitate each of his collaborators' best work. Through these interactions with actors, the cinematographer, producers, production designer, and key set personnel, the director works to draw everyone's creative work into a unified and expressive whole.

This is a screenwriting class — so students interested in screenwriting should enroll. But the class will also include consideration of screenwriting from a director's unique point of view. Students who do not wish to direct will do fine — and simply gain additional perspective on the director's role. Daily classes will include writing exercises, discussion, and the study of screenplays and films for pictures including Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Patty Jenkins' *Monster*, Jason Reitman's *Juno*, Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket*, and others.

Students will be expected to complete a short screenplay (10-20 pages) that they revise, applying the principals of screenwriting that we examine in class. Student scripts will be critiqued as part of daily class meetings.

This class is appropriate for students who like creative writing, film studies, theater studies, acting, English, psychology — and/or students who enjoy writing imaginative stories and characters. Our goal will be to initiate and continue a multi-faceted conversation about screenwriting and to enlarge that discussion through examination of produced screenplays and films, along with careful consideration of your own script-in-development.

Required Screenplay Readings (w/ selective in-class screening)

- *Chinatown* (Polanski)
- *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn)

- *Three Colors: Blue* (Kieslowski)
- *Exotica* (Egoyan)
- *Blood Simple* (Coens)
- *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Minghella)
- *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Zeitlin)
- *Do the Right Thing* (Lee)
- *The Verdict* (Lumet)
- *Casablanca* (Curtiz)
- *Pickpocket* (Bresson)

Texts

Selections will be studied from the following texts:

Books

Screenplay (Syd Field)

Story (Robert McKee)

Movie Makers Master Class (Tirard)

Making a Good Script Great (Segar)

Creating Unforgettable Characters (Segar)

Reading for a Living (Katahn)

Directing Actors (Weston)

The Anatomy of a Story (Truby)

Film Directing Fundamentals (Proferes)

Periodicals

The New Yorker

The New York Times

Chicago Reader

Sight and Sound

Village Voice

LA Weekly

Los Angeles Times

Film Comment

Cineaste

Criterion Collection essays

Course Learning Goals and Competencies

Successful completion of this course will provide students with the ability to understand, discuss, and practice screenplay writing theory and practice. Students will understand what is required for effective story structure, character development, and scene analysis along with the ways in which a film director approaches the various elements contained in a good script and works to translate them for the screen. Students will also acquire the tools needed for in-depth screenplay analysis.

Statement on Academic Honesty

Students should familiarize themselves with standard practices on academic dishonesty before submitting their work. All written assignments handed in during the semester must be written by the student alone. Plagiarism is highly penalized and undesirable.

Course Requirements

- **Attend class:** Due to the condensed nature of the class, attendance at each and every meeting is critical. Two unexcused absences will lead to a reduction of your final grade. Three or more unexcused absences will lead to failure.
- **Be prepared for class:** Read all the assignments by the day due and come to class prepared to discuss them. You can expect about two hours of nightly reading and/or writing assignments.
- **Your screenplay.** You will be expected to write and revise your own 10 to 20-page narrative screenplay during this class. In-class time will be provided, as will regular opportunities to share your work-in-progress in class for constructive (and supportive) critique.
- **Response papers:** Typically, any assigned response papers, including the final exam, should provide a personal and detailed response to the assignment. Take the reader into the world of the film and/or screenplay - to specific moments that support your thesis. Cite cinematic elements that also illuminate your position. Don't just re-tell the story—engage the elements that speak to you or fail to do so. Take chances with the ideas you put forward. Submit polished work that has undergone revision.
- **One Written Exam:** The student will be asked to demonstrate his / her knowledge of the screenplays and/or films examined in the course, as well as an ability to synthesize information to answer critical questions related to this intensive two-week study of screenwriting theory and practice.
- **Pre-requisites.** There are no pre-requisites for this class. Any student is welcomed. Students with an interest in film, theater, creative writing, and English, and psychology, are especially appropriate for the class.

COURSE OUTLINE

The following topics will be included in our two-week intensive.

- Development of good story ideas
- Guidelines for screenplay structure and plot development that create high stakes that will give life to your story.

- Story themes. What does your script say—and how will its meanings percolate and resonate?
- Creating an active protagonist to drive your story.
- Effective characterization, character development, and character relationships.
- Character goals and needs.
- How to analyze and animate a scene.
- Creating obstacles, conflicts, and complications to bring your screenplay to life.
- How directors can work effectively with actors and what that means for writers.
- The Inciting incident.
- Dramatic turning points in your screenplay.
- Writing an effective climax and resolution
- How to write screenplay coverage
- Creating a visual world on the page.
- Now what? How can screenwriters get their films made?

EVALUATION

Attendance & participation 30%

In-Class Presentations 15%

Your screenplay 35%

Written exam 20%
