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ENGL 204-01, Introduction to Screenwriting, Fall 2009

Item Type	Syllabus
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Publisher	Memphis, Tenn. : Rhodes College
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Download date	2025-07-09 21:53:45
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/4837

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ENGL 204/01
Introduction to Screenwriting
Fall 2009
12:30 – 1:45, Tuesday/Thursday
Buckman 325

Overview

In this screenwriting workshop, you will read and analyze several mostly contemporary screenplays; you will review one current film; you will write a variety of scenes exercises, to be discussed in class; and you will workshop three one-act screenplays. At the end of the semester, you will revise and compile these three individual acts and turn in a final screenplay portfolio.

In our workshop critique and screenplay analysis, we will be most keenly concerned with narrative structure, how different screenwriters do the same essential task of conveying a narrative dramatically and visually within the confines of cinema. We will ask less the questions of what a film means and more the questions of how a film was written—the kinds of narrative decisions made and how they could be made differently and what the consequences might be.

We will also read a practical text to guide our efforts, as well as a handful of essays related to screenplay craft.

Texts¹

North by Northwest by Ernest Lehman
Chinatown by Robert Towne
State and Main by David Mamet
When Harry Met Sally by Nora Ephron
Goodfellas by Martin Scorsese & Nicholas Pileggi
Pulp Fiction by Quentin Tarantino
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind by Charlie Kaufman & Michel Gondry
Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting by Robert McKee

Workshop

This class is not really a lecture. No doubt I will do a lot of talking and you will do a lot of listening but the primary goal is to force you to write and to force the rest of the class to discuss that writing in sympathetic and constructive ways. Your task as a student is split between writing a screenplay (and the exercises) and discussing the work of your peers, which means your in-class discussion/comments and your written critiques are as important as your own writing. It will not only help your fellow students—giving them valuable feedback, giving them an actual audience, turning a private creation into a public act—it will sharpen your own critical skills. You will be able to view your own writing differently after critiquing your peers' work.

¹ Some of the texts are available both through the bookstore in old-fashioned hard copy and through our library's American Film Scripts Online database. You are free to obtain your scripts through either source.

What to say? You should look at your classmates' writing with an eye toward *how* it works, as a piece of drama, and you should evaluate how *well* it works according to some simple conventions of dramatic writing we will discuss.

The Three One-Act Screenplays

Over the course of the semester you will write three one-act screenplays, or three miniature movies. Each one-act should be between 20 and 30 pages. Each screenplay *submitted for discussion* should be "complete," with a worked-out ending, i.e., character reversal, even if it's a bad one. (Fixing bad endings is one of the things workshop is for.) At the end of the semester, you will hand in a portfolio of your original screenplays, your revised versions, and my initial workshop comments. The portfolio must be at least 80 and no more than 120 pages. In assessing the merit of the completed screenplay portfolio, I will pay special attention to the *revisions* you have made and how you have made use of the workshops.

Though the three acts you hand in over the course of the semester do not have to be dramatically contiguous—that is, sharing the same sets of characters, occurring in some chronological or thematic relationship, or extending the same mode of conflict—they certainly can be, if you prefer. (However, if you do make your acts dramatically contiguous, each draft must be its own separate act, with all the narrative ingredients that comprise a screenplay act; you cannot hand in a revision of a previous act. Each piece submitted for workshop must be its own distinct dramatic unit.) The resulting portfolio won't necessarily be a complete, seamless screenplay. But the goal is to put you through the necessary procedures of screenplay writing—in miniature—so that by the end of the class you should have the skills necessary to embark on a full-length, 90-120-page, three-act screenplay.

During workshop weeks, we will workshop roughly 5 plays per class period. You will submit your screenplays to me via email attachment, and I will then compile all the screenplays into corresponding packets for the upcoming workshop days and email them back to the class. Each of you is then responsible for printing out that day's packet. Moreover, you will write *at least* a half-page of typed, single-spaced comments for each screenplay up for discussion. Please bring two copies of these typed-out comments, one for me and one for the author up for workshop.

The Exercises

You will write 4 exercises over the course of the semester, which I will grade. I will give you specific instructions. On your specified Exercise Day, you are to bring multiple copies of your typed exercise—one for me, one for yourself, and one for each additional speaking part in your exercise script (please include one copy for someone to read the narration). The class will read aloud from your exercise scripts and then we will discuss them.

The Review

Though you aren't required to view the film versions of the screenplays we will read, you are strongly encouraged to do so, because reading screenplays is like reading blueprints; it's nice to see how the house turned out. We will watch clips from these movies in class to isolate certain techniques and moments for discussion.

However, in addition to all of this, you are required to see and review one contemporary movie that's either currently playing in the theater or has been released within the last few years. You must clear this movie with me by **Sept. 29**. Your job is to write a 2-3-page, double-spaced review of the movie, focusing on the craft issues we discuss in class. If you are at a loss for what movie to pick, I have a list of movies that I'd like to see reviewed.

In addition to the written review, you will give a brief oral presentation in class based on your written work. These should run between 4 and 6 minutes and should feature only minimal plot summary, focusing instead on narrative technique.

Attendance

You are allowed to miss two classes for any reason. For every missed class after two, your final grade for the course will be reduced by one third. I make no distinction between “excused” and “unexcused” absences. **If you miss more than 4 classes total, you will fail the course.** In addition, consistent tardiness will be counted as an absence.

Quizzes

We’ll only have quizzes if class discussion lags. If these occur, they’ll be folded in with your participation grade.

Grade Breakdown

4 exercises—20%

1 movie review/presentation—10%

Screenwriting Portfolio (three individual one-acts and their revisions)—60%

Participation (written comments, class discussion)—10%

Your individual pieces of writing won’t receive a letter grade but written and verbal feedback instead. How can you make a good grade? Hand in complete drafts and exercises on time; contribute constructive, energetic feedback on your peers’ work throughout the entire semester; contribute something to class discussion at each class meeting; engage in concentrated revisions of your screenplays, not simply fixing the spelling and changing characters’ names; and meet the other particular requirements for the various exercises along the way.

The three screenplay one-acts and their three corresponding revisions constitute major assignments for this course; as such, if you do not hand in one of these major assignments, you will fail the entire class.

Late Papers

Each assignment is due on the day stipulated on the syllabus. Any late assignment will be reduced 1/3 of a letter grade for each day that it is delayed (A- to B+, etc.). Any assignment turned in 7 days past the original due date will receive a grade of F and can result in failure of the course itself. Also, if you don’t hand in a story in time for it to be properly workshopped, you will fail the class.

Plagiarism

As per the Honor Code, all work you hand in during the semester must be entirely your own and produced exclusively for this class.

Disability Accommodation

If you need any accommodations related to a disability, please schedule an appointment with Melissa Butler McCowen, Coordinator of Disability Services, 843-3994, mbutler@rhodes.edu.

This syllabus and the following daily schedule are subject to change with adequate notice.

Tentative Daily Schedule

8/27	Introduction to class	12/1	workshop
9/1	<i>Story</i> : Part 1 (all) and ch. 19 (in Part 4); Part 2, ch. 2-3; read two beginnings	12/3	workshop
9/3	Exercise #1 due; <i>Story</i> : Part 2, ch. 4-6; read two beginnings	12/8	workshop
9/8	<i>North by Northwest</i>	12/12	Portfolio due by noon
9/10	<i>North by Northwest</i> , cont.; Exercise #2 due; <i>Story</i> : Part 3, ch. 7-10		
9/15	<i>Chinatown</i>		
9/17	<i>Chinatown</i> , cont.; Exercise #3 due; <i>Story</i> : Part 3, ch. 11-13 Alumnae Poetry Reading, 7:30 p.m., Blount Auditorium		
9/22	<i>State and Main</i>		
9/24	<i>State and Main</i> , cont.; Exercise #4 due		
9/29	<i>When Harry Met Sally</i> ; Movie review selection due		
10/1	<i>When Harry Met Sally</i> , cont.		
10/6	Handouts; Act 1 due		
10/8	workshop		
10/13	workshop		
10/15	workshop		
10/20	Fall Break		
10/22	Movie review presentations, movie reviews due		
10/27	Movie presentations, cont.; <i>Pulp Fiction</i>		
10/29	<i>Pulp Fiction</i> , cont.		
11/3	<i>Story</i> : Part 4; Act 2 due		
11/5	workshop		
11/10	workshop		
11/12	workshop		
11/17	<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i>		
11/19	<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i> , cont.		
11/24	Conferences; Wiggle Day		
11/26	Thanksgiving; Act 3 due by Sunday, Nov. 29, 9 p.m.		