COURSE OBJECTIVE:

To prepare the student for drafting an original feature-length screenplay, through the creation of an effective one-sheet, oral pitch, three-page treatment, eight-page step outline, the first ten pages of a drafted script in standard format, and practice in editing and script doctoring.

Alternatively, to draft two original short screenplays, through the creation of one-sheets, oral pitches, one-page step outlines, and complete first drafts of each screenplay.


January
19 – Group Workday
24 – Group Presentations
26 – Pitch Presentations
31 – “ “ “ “

February
2 – “ “ “ “
7 – Rewrites: Pitch: Vote of Confidence
9 - “ “ “ “
14 – “ “ “ “
16 - Treatment Assignment – Anecdotal Model
21 – “ “ “ “
23 – Treatment Workday
28 - Treatment Presentations (3 pgs.)

March
1 – “ “
6 – “ “
8 - “ “
13 – “ “
15 – “ “
20 – Step Outline Assignment
22 – Script Formatting
27 - SPRING BREAK
29 - SPRING BREAK

April
3 – First Ten Pages Assignment
5 – Step Outline Presentations (8 pgs.)
10 - “ “
12 - “ “
17 - “ “
19 - “ “
24 - ” ”
DESCRIPTION OF TERMS:

THE PITCH/ONE-SHEET – Title, two-sentence premise, and a brief synopsis tracing the essential irony of the story (see example below).

TREATMENT – Tracing the same irony of the premise - in an anecdotal, beat-by-beat telling of the story (this happens, then this happens, etc...), from disordering event, to happy/sad ending, in 3 pages. See “Manual” p. 217.

STEP OUTLINE – A scene-by-scene outline of the entire story in 8 pages.

See “Manual” p. 223.

FIRST TEN PAGES – Script in standard format (see class handout) arranged according to scene structure - NOT SHOOTING SCRIPT - that fleshes out first page of treatment. See “Manual” p. 3.

EDITING - For clarity and strength, 1.) Eliminate repetition and anything that does not work toward the essential line of action, 2.) Withhold information as late as possible, 3.) Get into a scene as late as possible, and get out of the scene as early as possible.

GRADING POLICY:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One-sheet/Pitch Presentation (1 feature, or 2 shorts)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewrite: One-sheet/Pitch Presentation (1 feature, or 2 shorts)</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment Presentation (1 feature, or 2 shorts)</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step Outline Presentation (1 feature, or 2 shorts)</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Ten Pages</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edited First Ten Pages</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Class participation</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vote of Confidence</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL POINTS</td>
<td>100</td>
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1. Assignments shall be submitted a.) type-written, b.) on the date due.

Editing assignment will be submitted as hand-written notes in the margin of the edited script.

2. Late Presentations are not allowed. If for any reason you miss your assigned presentation you may submit the written portion on that date via e-mail for reduced grade.

3. Absences - two unexcused absences permitted (USE THEM WISELY!), five pts. per absence thereafter. Six absences - no matter the excuses - constitutes course failure in accordance with departmental attendance policy.
WHY NOT WRITE A SCREENPLAY ON MY OWN?

There is nothing stopping you from writing a screenplay on your own. However, there are several advantages to writing a screenplay in a class, 1.) You will be held accountable to deadlines similar to a WGA contract, 2.) Using your peers as a preliminary audience you should be able to gage the effectiveness of your story in process, 3.) Functioning as a script doctor for your peers you may learn how to turn a critical eye on your own work, 4.) You will be guided through a typical script development process, as they say “no script is ever written, only re-written”.

Although film is a relatively new art form, it’s all about telling a story, which is as old as the hills. Like other forms of oral storytelling, film is primarily a created experience. Filmmaking, however, is unique in that the experience is primarily a visual medium. Screenwriting - like other forms of dramatic writing - is NOT a literary form. They are not written to be read by the general public. They are written to plot out the action, in a precise format to convey technical information necessary for making the film by professionals.

Therefore, you will be guided in the development of a script that will plot the action of a story for the creation of a dramatic experience, written for professional filmmakers, as a visual medium. Your assignments will be presented orally to the class as is fitting for this type of storytelling.

DRAMA RESIDES IN IRONY

What makes a story dramatic is its irony, action that seems to be going one way but ends up the opposite. Irony has to do with truth and where it resides, as deceptive appearances give way to what’s really going on. This is the twist that makes a story dramatic. Without it a story is dissatisfying because it doesn’t seem to go anywhere. Irony, you might say, involves the destination of a story, and the distance it travels from first appearances to the revelation of what’s really going on. This distance is called the dramatic arc.

The premise “A man wins the lottery and becomes a millionaire” lacks irony, but “A man wins the lottery and it destroys his life” is a more dramatic. There is nothing in the former that we can’t see all at once. But in the later, we are compelled to know “how did winning become an unexpected way of losing?” In this way drama explores the irony of the human condition, offering a more truthful perspective than is afforded by merely a surface view of life.

However, creating a story with a good dramatic arc can be difficult because most of us lack the insight and experience. For this reason, I will be offering two techniques that I
hope will help you create a dramatic arc for your story. One technique will be the use of a well-known proverb as template for tracing a dramatic arc. Another technique is to look for a real-life story with a twist to it as a basis for developing your screenplay.

“YOU MUST LOSE YOUR LIFE TO FIND IT” or “WHAT DOES IT PROFIT A MAN TO GAIN THE WORLD BUT LOSE HIS OWN SOUL?”

Here are a couple of proverbs for you to start with. They describe essentially two different dramatic arcs, hitting bottom as a way of reaching the top, or reaching the top as a way of hitting bottom. The appearance of things going one way, but ending up the opposite.

Notice that each proverb has essentially three parts. First, there is the former state of the person, which constitutes the deceptive outward appearance of things. Secondly, there is the revelation of what was really going on the whole time. Thirdly, the connection between the first two parts is the means by which the former became the later [i.e. “losing one’s life” is the WAY of “finding it”, and gaining the world is how the soul becomes lost.]

Tracing the shape of one of these proverbs – with characters and circumstances - should help you create a story with dramatic irony. However, be warned, using proverbs as is no simple formula, as if a story could be automated by simply filling-in-the-blanks. To correctly employ proverbs as an aid to storytelling, use them as tools to keep you honest, a way of reaching for greater and deeper irony in your story.

George Lucas has said that “every good story is about transition”. This transition can also be described as taking an audience from an outside view of things to an inside view, where they are allowed to see the truth of what’s really going on. To successfully write a screenplay means that it is essential for you to know the inner aim of your story. Similar to how taking a trip requires knowing the destination, or telling a joke requires knowing the punch-line. Without a sense of where your story is going will leave you groping around in your own storytelling.

“BASED ON A TRUE STORY”

How many times have you heard that before? Well, guess what, real life can get pretty twisted! There is a reason why we value someone who has “learned from experience” because it means they hit bottom to reach the top, or the opposite. However, this is not to suggest that a story based on a real experience should be structured as it really happened. Real life stories with dramatic merit seldom occur in 100 consecutive minutes, but it must do that in a film.

The trick here is not only finding a good story (from the newspaper, or a grandparent, etc.) but finding a way to encapsulate it within the time frame of a film experience. “Sculpting in time” as Tarkovsky called it. While it might be tempting to think that all you need to do is get all the facts in there, the danger is that they will only play like “one
damn thing after another”, with no real investment from the audience, which is to say, BORING.

Rather, real life experiences must be adapted for film. And adaptation requires an ability to discern a dramatic through-line of action, and taking liberties with the actual story, so that by fictionalizing the story it can be told more truthfully. Finding a “proverb” within a true story, is one technique for doing this.

And so, you may begin with a proverb to help you create your story, or you may find a real story and use a proverb to help you discern the dramatic action within it. Either way, the proverb you use will not only be useful for developing your story, but also useful to the class as a way of responding to the kind of dramatic experience you will be developing in your script.

GETTING STARTED

Your first two assignments will be to pitch pithy little stories to the class, first as a group, then individually. In both cases, try to hook us with a twisted tale that will capture our attention and create a desire to become more involved. To do this, try to make your story as clear as possible, so your audience can follow it. The best stories are generally very simple. Though telling a simple story can be very difficult.

At the same time, the rest of the class will be responding to these pitches. It’s often the case that students feel they could write everyone else’s screenplay easier than their own. But this is because most of us have a better sense of what works as an audience member, than we do as a performer. So, becoming a good “script doctor” will help remedy this problem. As you become more skilled in seeing the dramatic arc in other’s stories, it should help you develop a dispassionate and corrective view of your own work, enabling you to see what should stay and what should go, what is contributing to the action, and what is getting in the way of it.

As you begin to develop an idea for a story (either from a proverb or from real life) remember, drama is an oral tradition. Practice telling your story to friends and family before attempting to pitch it in class. Watch how they respond. Do they get it? Do they get it? Are they excited by it? Are they confused? Deep in thought? Laughing? Completely lost? You’ll learn more by being attentive to your audience than just about anything anybody can tell you in words.

Learn to read the reaction of your audience, not by what they tell you, but by their spontaneous, physical response (in fact, generally speaking, don’t trust anything they say!) When you have found something that seems to be “playing” among family and friends you should be ready to bring it to class and begin.
SAMPLE ONE-SHEET/PITCH

THE OPPORTUNIST
By Philip Atlakson

A woman helps a refugee overcome his “backward ways” by teaching him how to get ahead in America. But when she comes between him and an opportunity to hit it big, he turns on her with all the ruthlessness she herself has taught him.

SYNOPSIS
Dora is a tough, trailer-park woman, who is out for revenge against her sexually crude and powerful boss at a major car dealership. For years he has promised her the moon in exchange for sexual favors. But instead, he dumps her into a low-level position, with meager benefits, burned and bitter.

Her plan for revenge is to plant an illegal alien, Vedran, inside the company and then report the company to INS for illegal hiring practices. Dora drills into Vedran the kind ruthlessness required to rise in the ranks of the company. He is desperate and learns to adapt quickly.

However, as she gets to know Vedran herself, his ethnic ways reveal a love more profound than any man she’s ever known who simply “used her and then dumped her like trash”. She decides to bail on her scheme for revenge, and attempts to find a way to help Vedran secure a legitimate place at the dealership, despite his illegal status.

He ascends so rapidly that his secret association with Dora threatens to expose the truth of his illegal status. Dora, convinced of the love he has taught her, is ready to risk “going public” and suffer whatever consequences may come, as long as they can stay together.

But when Vedran is faced with an opportunity to get rid of her, he turns on her with all the ruthlessness she has taught him, allowing her to die an “accidental death” so he can cinch a high position at the company.