READING SCREENPLAYS

Instructor: Jerónimo Arellano
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T & F, 11-12:20 a.m.
Office hours: Th & F 1-2:00 p.m.
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Description:

How to read a screenplay? Are screenplays artworks in their own right, independent from the film they were turned into or might become?

Addressing these and related questions, this course offers an introduction to the emergent field of screenwriting studies and demonstrates the professional application of screenplay analysis in the contemporary media industry.

One of the paradoxes we will confront is that although screenplays have existed for almost as long as cinema itself the screenplay remains in many ways an object hiding in plain sight: we all know it exists, hundreds of courses and workshops on writing screenplays are taught every year around the world, yet only very recently, in our present century, we have seen a concerted effort to define how and why we read a screenplay within academic circles.

At the same time, a neglected yet vital aspect of the contemporary media industry is that screenplay readers are as necessary as screenwriters to the creative development of a film project or digital media property.

In this course, we will attempt to connect the embryonic academic study of the screenplay to the practice of screenplay reading and analysis in the contemporary film and new media industry. Towards the end of the semester, we will videoconference with a creative development executive and a professional script reader, and students will have the opportunity to work in teams to present a “producers’ pitch” of an unproduced screenplay currently under consideration with film studios.

Readings (available at the bookstore; all other readings available on latte):

Syd Field, *Four Screenplays: Studies in the American Screenplay*
Diana Ossana, Larry McMurtry, and Annie Proulx, *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay*
Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction*
Course Requirements and Grading

a. Class participation and attendance (15%)
b. Weekly latte posts (10%): Brief, informal responses to the readings assigned each week
c. Two Group Presentations (10% each):
   1) Concise overview of a text discussed in class
   2) Unproduced screenplay development pitch
d. Midterm Exam (15%): Open notes, short answer/essay format.
e. Screenplay Coverage Report (10%): A short written report on the potential weaknesses/merits of an unproduced screenplay, in industry format.
f. Final Paper (25%)

Grading scale:

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Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

Tentative Course Outline:

F 01/15
Introduction and Overview

I. What is a Screenplay?
T 01/19
Pier Paolo Pasolini, “The Screenplay as a Structure That Wants to Be Another Structure”
Ted Nannicelli, “Why Can't Screenplays Be Artworks?”
Michael Winterbottom, Dir., The Face of an Angel

F 01/22
Osip Brik, “From the Theory and Practice of a Script Writer”
Ian McDonald, “Theoretical Approaches”
Christopher Nolan, Inception (excerpt)
II. Film Scenarios, Silent Film Scripts, and the Early History of Screenwriting

T 01/26
Edwin S. Porter, *The Great Train Robbery* (shooting script)
George Méliès, *A Trip to the Moon* (shooting script)
Edwin S. Porter, *The Great Train Robbery* (film)
George Méliès, Dir., *A Trip to the Moon* (film)
Grieveson and Kramer, Intro., *The Silent Cinema Reader*

F 01/29
Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, *Un chien andalou* (shooting script)
Carl Mayer, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (script)
Chad St. John, *Motor City* (read 30-35 pages; optional to read entire script)
Steven Price, “The Silent Film Script in Europe” (skim)

T 02/02
Anita Loos and John Emerson, *How to Write Photoplays* (excerpt)
Anita Loos and John Emerson, *The Love Expert* (screenplay)
Marsha McCreadie, *The Women Who Write the Movies: From Frances Marion to Nora Ephron* (excerpt)

F 02/05 (sections)
Lambert Hylier, “Love or Justice” documents (scenario and continuity script)
Kevin Alexander Boon, “The Evolution of the Screenplay”

II. The Classical Hollywood Screenplay

T 02/09
Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Wells, *Citizen Kane* (screenplay)
Steven Price, “The Coming of Sound”

F 02/12
David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production* (excerpt)
Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*

T 02/23
Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, *Sunset Boulevard* (screenplay)
Ian David, “Screenwriting and Emotional Rhythm”

F 02/26 (sections)
Robert McKee, *Story: Style, Structure, Substance and the Principles of Screenwriting* (excerpt)
Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush, *Alternative Scripwriting: Beyond the Hollywood Formula*
Matti Brutsch, “The Three-Act Structure: Myth or Magical Formula?”
V. The Screenplay and/as Literature
T 03/01
Midterm Exam

F 03/04
Ingmar Bergman, *Smiles of a Summer Night* (screenplay)
Roland Geertz, “Literature as Screenplay as Literature. Or, How To Win a Literary Prize Writing a Screenplay”

VI. New Hollywood Screenwriting
T 03/08
William Goldman, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (screenplay)
Mark Harris, *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of New Hollywood* (excerpt)

F 03/11
Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction* (screenplay)

T 03/15
Charlie Kaufman, *Adaptation* (screenplay)

F 03/18
[No class/at conference]

VII. World Screenwriting
T 03/22
Pedro Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* (screenplay)
Sue Clayton, “On Screenwriting Outside the West”

T 03/29
Alejandro González Iñárritu, Nicolás Giacobone, Alexander Dilenaris and Armando Bo, *Birdman* (screenplay)

VIII. Minority Screenwriting in the United States
F 04/01
Cary Fukunaga, *Sin Nombre* (screenplay)
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What is a Minor Literature?”
*Short analytical paper due*

T 04/05
Diana Ossana, Larry McMurtry, and Annie Proulx, *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay*

F 04/08
Spike Lee, *Bamboozled*
IX. “Development Hell” and the Unproduced Screenplay
T 04/12
*Project Greenlight* (selected episodes, seasons 2 & 3)
Rona Edwards and Monika Skerbelis, *I Liked, Didn’t Love It: Screenplay Development From the Inside Out* (excerpt)

F 04/15 (sections)
*Mock screenplay development pitches*

X. Reading and Writing for Television
T 04/19
Tom Steward, “Guest and Returning Writers in American Television Drama Series”
Ian McDonald, “The Screen Idea Work Group: *Emmerdale*”
Felicia D. Henderson, “The Culture Behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers’ Room”

Th 04/21 (Brandeis Friday)
Script Reading Beyond the Film Screen—The Script Reader in the TV, Video game, and Transmedia Industry
Conclusions and Review
*Final paper due during finals week*