

# Short Film Writing and Production

ENGL 244 O / FAAH 292

AUB Spring 2014

Tue/Thur 12:30 – 1:45 / Fisk 204A

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## Course Description and Objectives

This course is a writing and production workshop in which we will conceive cinematic story ideas, develop and write well-crafted original screenplays, shoot the scripts, edit the footage and, finally, present a series of fully realized short films.

This will involve both individual and collaborative work. We will work in groups on a variety of projects – filling different roles on each occasion. At some point during the semester each of you will write, direct, crew, edit video, design sound, etc.

Each of you will be integrally involved in the production of three short films (2-10 minutes) over the course of the term.

This course will be a supportive and challenging community that will experiment and take creative risks together. We will learn to make films by making films.

## Methods / Approach

We will read screenplays and texts about screenwriting / film-making in order to understand the written dimensions of cinematic storytelling – and then apply this knowledge to writing our original scripts.

We will also view several films (both shorts and feature-length) from a wide spectrum of genres, artistic sensibilities, historical periods and cultural origins. In class discussion and written responses, we will analyze these films from both a *content* perspective and a *form* perspective.

*Content:* How does the film establish the characters and the world they live in? What is a particular character's story purpose? i.e. What does she *want*? What will she do to get it? What is standing in her way? What is at stake? What is the story set-up and progression? What combination of elements draws us (the viewer) into the film and keeps us there – for three minutes or three hours?

*Style:* What cinematic approach does the entire production team (actors, director, cinematographer, editor and sound designer, etc.) use to present the content? What style of

performance and interpretation of the script is employed by the actors? What visual look and feel is established through shot composition and use of light? What rhythm and flow of information is managed through the editing? What barely noticeable but very important subliminal impact is created through sound design? How does the director guide and make all these elements work together in a coherent and artistically compelling whole?

When viewing films, we will be able to dissect how each shot or sequence was made – in terms of shot composition and camera movement, editing choices and sound design. All this will be with an eye towards distinguishing which kind of sequences would be doable in our own projects with the relatively limited (though potential-rich) tools of production that the class will use.

### **Equipment / Production Philosophy**

We will take advantage of some exciting relatively recent technical developments in the world of film-making, mainly: the ability to create impressive looking content using affordable and readily available tools of production. Following a "Guerilla Filmmaking" philosophy, we will make films using tools that many of us already have: iPhones and iMovie. (And yes, Samsung Galaxies and LightWorks). Put simply – our goal is to create the most impressive films we can for little or no money.

### **Course Breakdown**

1. Foundation: Film Study and Analysis
2. Generation of Original Texts: story planning, script-writing
3. Production:
  - Script breakdown, storyboarding (shot planning)
  - Directing Actors
  - Cinematography (shot composition, movement, lighting)
  - Production Planning
4. Post-Production:
  - Editing
  - Sound Design

### **Participation**

As previously stated, a significant part of this class will be collaborative, so everyone's participation is crucial and will constitute a significant part of your final grade.

Participation includes coming to class having done the required readings and viewings and being prepared to discuss them in depth. It also includes having read your fellow students' film treatments and screenplays and being ready to actively engage in workshops.

Having no opinion or ideas to offer to the conversation is not an option.

Once we move into production mode – everyone's participation and ability to do her/his work with rigor and on time will be even more crucial – as you will be part of team that depends on your production duties to be executed in a timely and professional manner.

### **Phones and Computers**

We will be using our computers and phones extensively during class meetings – for one purpose only: making movies. Not emailing, texting, whatsapp-ing or whatever-ing.

### **Attendance**

Come to class and be on time. In the film production business there is zero tolerance for flakiness. Treat this course like a dream job you're *thrilled* to have.

You will lose grade points – and the good will of your fellow classmates – if you regularly arrive late. Arriving 25 minutes late 3 times = 1 absence.

Missing class sessions for anything other than documented medical reasons will be constitute an unexcused absence. If you miss 1/5 of class sessions (5.2) you can be dropped from the course or given a failing grade.

Please note I will not excuse you from class to take quizzes, exams, "mandatory" presentations for your other less important courses. Period.

I promise not to schedule mandatory sessions during your other course meeting times and your other professors are not allowed to require you to be anywhere Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:30 – 1:45. I'm well aware that many professors abuse the spirit of this very clear AUB policy. If they try, please bring it to my attention in advance.

### **Evaluation / Grade**

Your grade will be determined by the following:

- |    |   |      |
|----|---|------|
| 1) | Engaged Class Participation   | 20 % |
| 2) | Assignments (written responses, Screenplays, production plans, films) | 55 % |
| 3) | Final Film Project and Portfolio                                      | 25 % |

## Texts

will be provided to you via email / Moodle in PDF format – free!

They will include the selections from the following:

*Screenplay* – Syd Field

*Film Art* – David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (9<sup>th</sup> Edition)

*The Conversations* (Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film) by Michael Ondaatje

*Film Directing Shot by Shot* – Steven Katz

*Cinematic Motion* – Steven Katz

Screenplays (various)

## Films

will include the following (in their entirety or excerpts)

*Traffic*

*City of God*

*Breathless*

*Wings of Desire*

*Battle of Algiers*

In some cases you will be required to watch one of these films at home. You will either need to get the DVD (I can arrange this, cheaply) or you can stream it, steal it, whatever. We will also be viewing many short films – both in class and home online.

## Software Resources

celtx.com

(screenwriting)

finaldraft.com

(screenwriting)

Adobe Premiere

(video editing)

iMovie

(video editing)

LightWorks

(video editing)

Final Cut Pro

(video editing)

Mpeg Streamclip

(footage conversion)

Audacity

(sound design)