

Short Video Writing and Production

English 254A / MCOM 290G

Spring 2015-16

Tue/Thu 3:30 – 4:45 Fisk 313

Doyle Avant

doyleavant3@gmail.com

Fisk 215 Ext. 4130

Office Hours: Tue / Thu 11:15-12:15 + by appt.

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, plan the various stages of production, shoot the scripts, edit the footage and – finally – present a series of fully realized short films (2-10 minutes, depending on the assignment).

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 in order to understand the written and production dimensions of cinematic storytelling – and then apply this knowledge to writing our original scripts.

We will also examine several films (both shorts and feature-length) from a wide spectrum of genres and artistic sensibilities. 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? How does she try to get around that obstacle?

What is at stake? What is the story set-up and progression? What question does the film ask and answer? What combination of elements draws us into the film and keeps us there – for three minutes or three hours?

Form: What cinematic approaches does the entire production team (actors, director, cinematographer, editor and sound designer, etc.) use to create 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? What rhythm and flow of information is orchestrated through the editing? What barely noticeable but very important subliminal impact is created through the 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 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 sequences would be doable in our own projects with the relatively limited (though potential-rich) tools of production that we will utilize.

Equipment / Production Philosophy

We will take advantage of some exciting and relatively recent technical developments in the world of film-making, mainly: the ability to create impressive looking (and sounding) 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 Samsungs and Premiere.) Simply put – our goal is to create the most impressive films we can for little or no money. That said, if you own or have access to nicer equipment (i.e. a DSLR camera), by all means use it.

Course Breakdown

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

Participation

As previously mentioned, 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 contribute to the conversation is not an option – and I will assume that this means you haven't done the reading/viewing.

Once we move into production mode – everyone's ability to do her/his work with rigor will be even more crucial – as you will be part of team that depends on your 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. If you use them for other things I may end up owning your iPhone and/or counting you absent. If you want to know what time it is, they've invented this really cool thing called *the watch*.

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 participation points – and the good will of your fellow classmates – if you regularly arrive late. 3 late arrivals = .5 points. Arriving 25 minutes late 3 times = 1 absence.

Missing class sessions for anything other than documented medical reasons will be constitute an unexcused absence.

Life is full of the unexpected, so you can miss one class session without excuse or explanation. After that, unexcused absences cost you .5 points per absence. Missing 1/5 of class sessions can result in your being dropped from the course or, if the drop period is over, receiving a failing grade. This is the last thing I want to do, so come to class.

Assignments

Complete all assignments and readings before class. Late assignments will be penalized by one letter grade (10 points) per day. Every assignment will be submitted as:

- 1) a hard copy and
- 2) an e-copy via Moodle.

If you are having difficulty with a deadline – talk to me or email me about it well in advance. It is almost always better to turn in something imperfect on time than something perfect two or three days late.

All those Other Classes

Please note that I will not excuse you from class to take quizzes, exams, "mandatory" presentations for your other much 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 3:30 – 4:45. I'm well aware that many professors violate this very clear AUB policy. If they try, please bring it to my attention – well in advance – and I will work something about with him or her that will not get you in trouble. If you inform me at the last minute and miss class, you will be counted as absent.

You have the right to attend all the class sessions for any course you are registered for. As far as this course is concerned, you have a professor (me) and a department chair (Dr. Sonja Mecher-Atassi) who will back you up fully if any professor tries to deny you that right.

Evaluation / Grade

1)	Engaged Class Participation	15 %
2)	Assignments (written responses, Screenplays, production plans, films)	60 %
3)	Final Film Project	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

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 (subject to change):

Traffic

Michael Clayton

The Camera

City of God

Café Regular

Fasateen

Hello Caller

Thelma and Louise

Erin Brockovich

You will be often required to watch part of the films we study at home. In some cases, you will either need to get the DVD (I can arrange this) or you can acquire it or stream it on your own.

Software Resources

celtx.com	(screenwriting)
finaldraft.com	(screenwriting)
iMovie	(video editing)
Adobe Premiere CS6	(video editing)
Final Cut Pro	(video editing)
Audacity	(sound editing)
Mpeg Streamclip	(footage conversion)
VLC	(video player)
Quicktime / Pro	(video player)

Special Needs

If you have documented special needs and anticipate difficulties with the content or format of the course due to a physical or learning disability, please contact me and/or your academic advisor, as well as the Counseling Center in the Office of Student Affairs (Ext. 3196), as soon as possible to discuss options for accommodations. Those seeking accommodations must submit the Special Needs Support Request Form along with the required documentation.