Dramatic Screenwriting – Tuesday class
ENG 411 – CRN 37176
Spring Quarter, 2011
Instructor: Michael Janover – mike@uoregon.edu
Tuesday, 4:00PM – 6:50PM; 132 Lillis Business Complex

INTRODUCTION

This class is primarily focused on learning the basics of screenwriting and the building blocks to storytelling and movies. It’s my belief that there are three essential aspects to learning screenwriting: 1) Watching, 2) Reading and 3) Doing it. Simple, no? So that is what we’re going to do.

WATCHING means watching movies, DVDs and television -- but not passively. I want you to take any insights or knowledge you manage to gain from this class and/or other sources and apply them to the films and stories you watch. You need to get aggressive about your entertainment consumption if you want to be able to create some good entertainment yourself.

READING means reading screenplays, teleplays, and good books about screenwriting when you can find them. I can help in this regard and will. You need to read them not just to see the formatting, which is unique to the medium, but also to see how you translate an essentially visual & sound medium to the printed word – sort of like reading stage plays, but different. If you know anything about comic books, you’re also ahead of the game.

DOING IT should be obvious. Ask yourself: What have I ever learned in this life without actually going through the trial-and-error process of doing it first? Did you learn how to walk by reading the Little Golden Book of Walking? Life is trial and error. Fall down, get up, fall down, get up. Before you know it, you’re walking. And before you know it, the sequel, you’ll be writing screenplays.

OK. Now for some detailed, practical information to get you started.

CLASS ESSENTIALS

I see this class mostly as a workshop. This means that your participation is critical to the success of the class. I don’t see learning as a one way process, where I pour my so-called wisdom into your open heads, like elixir from a god. I believe that learning works better when it travels back and forth, me to you and you to me. Your opinions matter. Even when they're based on ignorance.

Everybody is ignorant at some time or another. Believe it. It’s especially true of know-it-alls. I see myself as mostly ignorant; and I have plenty of opinions. Not so much about high fashion or particle physics, but lots about entertainment.
My intention is to ground you in the elements of story structure, plot, scene development, character, theme, genre, and dialogue, etc., and show you how it all works together to grab an audience’s attention and manipulate their emotions. Your emotions. You will create and evaluate story ideas; explore how characters’ inner needs and immediate goals shape and drive a screenplay's action; see what constitutes compelling plots and subplots; and learn how to construct a scene.

My god, that sounds thrilling.

As a last resort, I can also console you with the knowledge that even badly written films and scripts can succeed as long as they are sufficiently entertaining. Isn’t America great? It never hurts to be entertaining. It never hurts to be able to make people laugh, cry, or jump with fear in a theater, while watching TV, or playing a video game. You can millions with these skills

Let me tell you what this class is NOT about. It’s not about writing documentaries or experimental movies – although the principles of dramatic structure certainly can be used to make better documentary films. It’s just that writing documentary screenplays prior to shooting them is, for the most part, impossible. And although we will talk plenty about feature-length movies, you won’t be writing a feature-length screenplay in this class. Instead, you’ll use what you learn to write scenes and short films and later become YouTube celebrities.

GOALS

- Refining and stretching your ideas and notions as to what movies and story really are. And without drugs!
- Developing better work habits. Finding time to write and/or complete assignments will take discipline and organization in a world that's distraction-rich. You need to set priorities and find the best way to do that, probably through trial and error again. Perhaps one way we can work together on this, is for us to change any preconceptions of writing and creating as work. Instead, let’s think of it as fun. We can start by changing this goal to “developing better fun habits.” Wow. Is that as good for you as it is for me?
- Developing revision/rewriting skills. Professional writers are wont to say that writing is rewriting. I want to help you go about this process with more purpose and focus. That’s all. The desire to improve and aim at perfecting your work comes naturally, when you begin to realize how rewarding it is to entertain others with it. And you begin to realize the full meaning of entertainment. Since you’ll be getting and giving feedback on your work in this class, why not use that feedback to improve what you do – and make it more effective. And fun. (There’s that word again.) It’s an attitude can help you in all areas of your life. It’s also one of the things that distinguish a professional from a dilettante.
Honing your critical feedback skills. The concept of “criticizing” carries negative baggage, like when your parents or friends criticize you. Who needs that! So we’ll call it feedback instead. Learning to give helpful, honest feedback is great for everybody. It helps your classmates; but in the end, it helps you more, because it makes you a better writer. It might even make you a better person.

Finally, I want to help you cultivate an understanding of and appreciation for the creative process at the same time you continue to use the analytical skills you need for writing.

DESIGN OF THE CLASS

By now, you may already be aware that I am a fan of trial and error. Seriously, I could have revised all of Darwin’s Origin of the Species with just one sentence: “Life on this planet adapts through a process of trial and error.” If Charles were still alive, he’d be so grateful. With all the extra time I’d be giving him, he could learn to play Flamenco guitar.

Even taking into account Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, I’ve been teaching screenwriting for a long time. Plus, I worked in Hollywood as a screen and TV writer. Even back in the silent movie days, I was teaching Buster Keaton how to take falls better. And yet, after all that, I’m still learning, still finding out what works and what doesn’t work, or what works better. One thing that seems to work better is being flexible. Say one or more of you feel that things aren’t working as smoothly with the class as they might be, and maybe you come up with some ideas or suggestions to improve things. Well, you can feel free to tell me, because … I’m flexible! I’m willing to try something different if it improves the class and improves our odds for success.

I’ve taught screenwriting in live classrooms, and I’ve taught screenwriting online. Both situations have their advantages. And since we have Blackboard available to us, and all my online classes use Blackboard, I’d like to take advantage of it here.

Each week, before we meet, I’ll make the appropriate lecture available to you on Blackboard. If there are any handouts, I’ll make them available, too. I want you to read required reading before we meet in class. That way, when we meet in class, we can discuss what you read. You can ask questions, disagree with me, tell me any insights you may have had, or why you think it was one of the dumbest things you’ve ever read. Really, I want you to speak your mind. It’s your First Amendment right, as long as you realize by First Amendment, I mean that you really should do the reading first, and then the commenting. I like the idea of not wasting class time with me lecturing. I’d much rather we discussed things, improvise and exchange ideas.
Any assignments for the coming week, will be discussed in class ahead of time, so we can be sure everyone understands what to do and why we’re doing it. Hey. How about home\textit{fun} instead of homework? (I could be taking this fun thing too far. Not all learning is fun. I mean, learning how to take a punch, projectile vomit, or study Disco? There are limits.)

When you finish your assignments, I want you to post them long enough before our class meets so others have time to read them. There are roughly 20 students in the class, so I won’t ask you to read and comment on everybody’s work. Or fun.

As we progress, you’ll also work toward a \textbf{Final Project: The screenplay for a short film}. By short, I mean something that might be feasible for college students to actually produce with limited resources and later enter in a festival or throw up on YouTube. Experience tells me that a 10- to 15-page script is about right. More on that, in class.

We’ll take it one step at a time. Don’t worry.

\textbf{YOUR JOB}

Half the battle is showing up. The other half is staying involved.

Here’s what you can do to maximize the benefits of this class and the likelihood of your success. Copy the purple parts down on an index card and tape it to the wall by your work (or fun) space:

1. \textbf{Do the reading}. The lectures are from me, outside reading and some handouts come from somebody else. It’s good to get input from many sources. It all comes together at some point, and that point will be somewhere and sometime in your writing.

2. \textbf{Do the exercises and assignments}. They’re intended to help you and give you some insight.

3. \textbf{Do it all on time}. It’s great practice for what matters in the real world, when others are depending on you.

4. \textbf{Read your classmates’ work}. Skimming is not reading, and reading other people’s work is not a waste of your time. The more people who read and comment on other people’s work, the more this class improves. It’s also more fun for everyone. Group involvement and fun are directly related. I just know they are. But if you’re a geometry whiz who can come up with \textit{proof} that demonstrates the relationship of involvement and fun, you get five bonus Euripides points.

5. \textbf{Give feedback}. And give it on time. This is a class \textit{obligation}. It not only helps your friend, and it helps you. The better your
feedback, the better the help given will be, which makes for a better class, which leads to more that you will get out of it! And here’s another side to it. I’ve noticed that when people give meaningless or unhelpful feedback or no feedback at all, people stop giving them feedback. You reap what you sow and all that. Here are examples of what I would call useless feedback: “I really liked it.” “LOL.” “I didn’t get that part the other guy said.”

Do all that, do it consistently, and your chances for an ‘A’ in this class are excellent, even if you’re not a gifted, natural writer with an Oscar about to be engraved with your name.

**MY JOB:**

My job is to help keep you involved. I will give you the information and help you develop the skills you need to write your screenplay. I promise honest-but-respectful feedback. I will do my best to point you in the right direction. If want to kindle a flame. I want you to succeed. It makes me feel good.

**MORE ON FEEDBACK**

The number one thing I ask of my students is **honesty.** Honest and frank feedback is one of the most important rewards of any good writing class. You won’t get honest feedback about your writing from your mother, father, sister or brother. You won’t get it from your friends. You won’t get it from your lover. They all care about you too much and don’t want to hurt your feelings. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, either, but I do want you to know when something doesn’t work or can be improved. If your feelings are hurt, either someone has inappropriately attacked you, the writer, or you are inappropriately confusing yourself with your writing. You will get honest feedback here, so cherish it, even when it’s not what you want to hear.

The second thing I ask, and it’s as important as the first, is **mutual respect.** I don’t expect this to be a problem. You have my permission and support to speak and write openly and freely, as long as you remember to speak and write with respect. Humor is good most of the time, but be careful about **online sarcasm.** It can easily be misread – and cause unnecessary pain.

None of us should get so carried away that he or she starts using feedback like a club to beat on another writer. Remember that our intent is to HELP, not crush, our classmates. We want this to be a safe
place for risk-taking, so don’t ever forget that there are real human beings on the other side of that monitor.

It is also possible, especially with beginning writers, that someone is so fragile and defensive that any feedback may be interpreted as a personal attack. Please don’t assume the worst. Keep reminding yourself, “She’s talking about my writing, not me. She wants to help me – even if she isn’t.” Whatever you do, don’t whine, don’t make excuses, don’t counter-attack. If you don’t agree with someone’s feedback or worse, feel wounded by them, just say thanks for the comments and then don’t incorporate them. Even if they’re wrong, even if you violently disagree with somebody, even if you feel like setting yourself or the other person on fire, always thank them for their comments. Before you set them on fire. Thank them because they took the time to read your stuff, and because they told you what they honestly believed to be true and helpful.

Look, if everybody tells you the bit with the laughing gas in your story doesn’t work, shouldn’t you at least think about it? At the end of the day, if you’re still in love with the stupid laughing gas ... go ahead! It’s your story! You own it. Use it. In the end, you may even be right.

MORE ABOUT NETIQUETTE:

For a more thorough summary of Internet Etiquette, check out the following site: [http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html](http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html)

NUTS AND BOLTS OF THE CLASS:

My office and office hours

Knight Library, Room 405.
Wednesday, 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Class Deadlines

TBA.

Format issues for Blackboard

The format I’m referring to is PC vs. Mac and MS Word vs. PDF. We’ll get into screenplay formatting during the class.
Most of the time, when you post feedback, questions, and comments online, you’ll just use the little Blackboard dialogue windows. They can take a little getting used to, and it’s a virtual lock that I will lose at least an hour’s worth of my writing by accidentally erasing everything before I post it. You don’t have to worry about that happening if you’re careful. Once you learn the basics, it isn’t that difficult. And if you do have a proclivity to lose things to Blackboard before you post, write them in your word processor first, and then copy and paste it into the dialogue window.

If you want to attach a piece of writing for an assignment, do it one of two ways:

1) Write it in MS Word and save it as an RTF file. That way, both PC users and Mac users can read it. The advantage of this, is people can comment in the body of your work.
2) Write it in any format you like, and save it as a PDF file. The advantage of PDF files is that you can maintain any style, including screenwriting formatting, and make it legible to anyone who has Adobe Reader (a free program). The downside is you can’t receive comments in the body of your work – if it’s important.

Do I recommend using a screenwriting software program? Sure. It can definitely make your life – all our lives easier. On the other hand, if this is the one and only time you’ll be writing a script, why buy an expensive screenwriting program, when you can download an inexpensive or free one from the Internet that will probably work fine for your needs. You still must learn and understand the reasons behind proper formatting – and use it. By magical coincidence, our required text is a screenplay formatting book! It’s good, very good, in fact. You might as well get this book now and start reading it. The author makes great sense, and will make even greater sense as the course proceeds. And if you continue to write screenplays, the book is a solid reference for you.

ABOUT THE READING:

This is a course in writing movies. With that in mind, I’d like to recommend that you actually see more movies. (Oh, the pain!!) But don’t just sit there and get lost in them; try to be more active about the experience. At the very least, spend some time afterwards evaluating what you experienced. Evaluate the film in light of what gets discussed in this class or in terms of issues you’re dealing with in
your script. Movies bombard your thoughts, feeling, senses and spirit. So don’t be passive about it. Be aware of what’s happening to you. Be aware of how and why each movie does what it does, and also be aware of what it doesn’t do. In the long run, watching movies -- good movies, bad movies, it doesn’t matter -- will help you be a better movie writer.

If this were a novel writing class, you know we’d be reading novels. Well, it’s a script writing class, so is it too obvious to suggest that you maybe read a few movie scripts?

Scripts can also be purchased from various sources, mostly in the Los Angeles area, but they can also be downloaded from the Internet. I checked with the legal department of the Writer’s Guild in Los Angeles, and they have no problem with downloading online scripts, as long as it’s for educational purposes. That’s good enough for me. And since the studios and networks, who own the rights to most of the posted scripts, are well aware of these sites and have done nothing to stop them, I can only assume they feel similarly.

Be aware, however, that if you want to read the original writer’s work, avoid “transcripts” that are done by someone who “writes” the script while watching the finished movie on a DVD. The closest version to the writer’s original intent will be the first or earlier drafts. But even a shooting script, which is the writer’s version as “improved” by the director, producer, actors and actors’ girlfriends and boyfriends and gardener, is better than a transcript.

REQUIRED READING or BUY THIS NOW:

The Hollywood Standard : The Complete and Authoritative Guide to Script Format and Style by Christopher Riley
This book is written by a professional script reader and screenwriter. He’s read thousands of scripts for studios, networks, and various producers. I like what he has to say, and I trust his judgment. Be sure to get the most recent edition.

SUGGESTED READING:

1) Save the Cat! by Blake Snyder
Blake was a clever, perceptive writer with an ability to see new connections and patterns in screenplay structure and the process. Many of my students found his book extremely helpful. The last book he wrote, before his sudden death, is “Save the Cat! Goes to the Movies.” which takes the principles of this book and applies them to several movies you most likely have seen.
2) **The Writers’ Journey** by Christopher Vogler  
Chris does something truly amazing here, as he uses Joseph Campbell’s ideas from *The Hero’s Journey*, and applies them to writing. It can be an enormously helpful guide toward building your own story structure and even examining your own life! Not every story will fit smoothly into the hero structure, but a surprising number do; in any case, it’s a treasure trove of insight.

3) **Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting** by Robert McKee  
A veritable bible on storytelling and dramatic principles, full of wisdom and insight, and, consequently, NOT a light read. It’s dense, but as you gradually learn to make writing second nature and intuitive, this book will ground you in fundamental principles. Not so much a how-to guide as an eloquent explanation of the dramatic universe.

4) **Bird By Bird** by Anne Lamott  
A fabulous book on writing in general. Smart, funny, quirky, even bitter at times. It has a way of reminding you why you wanted to be a writer in the first place—and she gives you permission to write “shitty first draft.” Anne writes like a personal friend who’s been there and cares about you. I don’t know anyone who didn’t get something out of this book.

5) **Writing From the Inside Out** by Dennis Palumbo  
If you have any dreams or hopes of becoming a Hollywood screenwriter, picking up this book is not a bad idea. Dennis is a screenwriter, sitcom writer, novelist, teacher and a certified therapist who specializes in counseling writers! The book is a wonderful insight into working – and non-working – writers. I love this book.

6) **Understanding Comics** by Scott McCloud  
I came across this book because I love comic books and graphic novels. It was a real find. So much of it is pertinent to telling stories for film and television, and not just because we use story boards – but because we write in images. But here’s the real bonus. It’s not just about comics, it IS a comic. Scott shows you everything he talks about, and some of it is mind-blowing.

7) **Screenplay** by Syd Field  
It may not be the most innovative screenwriting manual out there, but Syd was the first “guru” and that’s worth something. He was first to address the special issues of screenwriting as opposed to novels and stage plays, and do it through classes and traveling seminars, selling his magic “paradigm” and “plot points.” Never mind that Aristotle came up with most of Syd’s material first; Aristotle never drove a Mercedes.
There are many more excellent books. I have a more extensive list of sites and resources listed in the External Links section of Blackboard. Please check it out. And let me know if you’re aware of something I might want to add! I haven’t added to the list in some time.

**GRADING:**

Some of you come to this class with more experience than others. Some of you may have taken a screenwriting class or read some screenwriting books. Wonderful. You’re already ahead of the game.

Some of you are more talented than others. Fabulous. Talent will guarantee you many rewards, including getting by with less effort. I know that one firsthand. But here’s the thing: I don’t grade talent or imagination. If I did, I’d be an agent or producer, or, worse yet, a sniper critic.

But since grades are a fact of life in college, here’s a fresh idea I’d like to try with you. Rather than seeing your classmates as competition, what if they’re your *friends* who are here to *help* you reach your goals? When you learned to read, did you need competition to motivate you, or was it enough motivation just to figure out the mystery technique to unravel the secret code to all those books?

Anyway, it doesn’t matter if you see competition as necessary, because I don’t, and I’m calling the shots. This is how I will figure out your grades: 40% participation and attendance; 40% assignments; 20% completion of the final project.

So I grade you for effort. I grade you for improvement. I grade you for participation in class. Do you give feedback on your classmates’ work? Do you make suggestions, ask questions? Do you thank them for the feedback they give to you? Good. Do those things, and your grade is improving. On the other hand, do you slack off? Are your assignments late or missing. Do you shrug when I ask your opinion about something? I see that as coasting, and your grade will also coast – downhill, because coasting downhill takes less effort.

Believe me, I love it when I can give everyone an A. I want all of you to succeed.
FINALLY, KEEP THIS IN MIND

Writing is work and fun, maddening and enriching. It’s inevitable to feel stress, especially when other responsibilities compete with class deadlines. Don’t be put off by failures along the way. Embrace them and learn from them. You’re going to fall down. Just get up and start walking again. Whatever you do, don’t stop. Don’t tell yourself “I can’t.” Tell yourself, “Damn it, I will!” and keep going. Amaze yourself.

Week-by-Week Schedule

To give myself (and you) the maximum latitude and flexibility, I’m only listing the written lectures for each week. Actual assignment details will be covered in class. Here is the sequence of lectures you’ll be getting. It’s also a quick glance of the material we’ll cover.

**Week One** – STORY and EXTRA TOOLS

**Week Two** – STRUCTURE

**Week Three** – ROAD MAP
Week Four – CHARACTER

Week Five – CONFLICT

Week Six – SCENES

Week Seven – FORMAT

Week Eight – REVISIONS

Week Nine – LOOSE ENDS

Week Ten – LAST WRITES