

English 235 – “The Art of Moviemaking”

ESSENTIAL STUDIES

This class will satisfy the university’s ESSENTIAL STUDIES requirement for Fine Arts, with an emphasis on creative thinking. Students will exercise their abilities to think creatively, both individually and as a group, by developing story ideas and screenplays during a movie’s preproduction phase, as well as learning to improvise during the movie production phase when original plans are not feasible, and modifying existing material into a completed creative work during the postproduction phase.

SYLLABUS

Each week the class will view one or more episodes of “Project Greenlight,” which was a reality-TV series following the production of a low-budget feature-length film. Several feature films (Hollywood and independent) may also be viewed in or outside of class, and discussed as examples of motion picture production realities and/or what can be done with limited means. Each student will write one script (from which the class project(s) will be chosen) and occasional short critical papers may be assigned. The first several weeks of class will involve some heavy reading assignments, and the last half or more of the semester will be primarily devoted to shooting and editing the class movie(s). **NOTE:** The final grade will depend heavily upon class participation, as the main project(s) for the class will be a group effort. There will be no exams.

The bulk of the semester will be devoted to making a movie, using digital video equipment. It will require a substantial time commitment during the preproduction, production, and post-production stages that will most likely require occasional large time blocks outside of the scheduled class period.

The approximately three months of class will be divided roughly equally into

PREPRODUCTION - PRODUCTION - POSTPRODUCTION

These three phases of moviemaking will be divided into eight segments, most of them approximately one or two weeks each, that focus on

- basic production concepts and elements of screenwriting for a low budget
- the producer's responsibilities for organizing the project so it can be completed
- basic principles of camera composition and lighting for a "film look"
- effective and efficient methods of shooting scenes for editing, and working with actors
- actual production of the class script(s)
- evaluating raw footage and possible post-production fixes for faults
- editing the footage for maximum impact
- adding sound effects, ADR, and music scoring; finecut

Depending upon student interest, previous experience, and equipment availability, the class may make either several short small-group productions or one longer full-class production with different teams producing different segments. While group projects are encouraged, certain students may prefer to work on their own, and should consult with the instructor in such a case. The final, completed project(s) will be viewed and evaluated by the class during the period scheduled for the final exam. After viewing and class discussion, students will write a brief evaluation of the movie project(s), including their own if there are more than one, reflecting on how well they met their goals, how they might have done things differently, and what they learned from the overall experience.

CONSIDERATIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- Develop story ideas from recent news stories, personal experiences, favorite movie genres
- Be sure to take into account how you might actually produce the concepts you have in mind
- Make an outline of your basic plot development (setup, confrontation, payoff), then fill it in with descriptions of the action, and finally the dialogue
- Ask yourself seriously whether you or people you know would want to watch a movie like this:
 - have friends or even strangers read your script, and then listen to their reactions for possible changes
 - you don't necessarily need to follow the advice of others, but you need to consider your target audience
- Contact friends and acquaintances about using locations and/or props
- Set aside a realistic amount of time for shooting and editing (typically an hour or two per minute on screen for *each* phase) -- the producing part is often the hardest!

- What sort of transitions between scenes will make things easier for the audience to follow?
- How might music and/or extra sound effects help intensify your scenes?

UNDERSTANDING VIDEO IMAGES (vs. FILM)

- Video is *not* film: the technology for each medium is completely different, although many areas are starting to overlap and most films today are edited digitally on computers, as is most video each medium has its limitations and its advantages
- The basic movie story-telling concepts and many production techniques are identical, whether using film or video as a medium
- Film production equipment and film itself remain very expensive. “Film quality” video is gradually becoming a reality, but the high costs of acquiring one’s own production and post-production equipment are still well outside the range of amateur and most independent moviemakers.
- Broadcast quality “standard-definition” video, once only possible to achieve through commercial video production facilities, is now affordable by nearly anyone, using widely available consumer equipment and videotape. Higher definition video (still a fraction the quality of film) has dropped to a moderate price range suitable for the serious moviemaker. Note that most consumer HD camcorders use a format that is too highly compressed to maintain its apparent sharpness through typical post-production processes.

As of 2013, a very basic movie production setup (including both a camcorder *and* computer editing system) may range from as low as \$500 to \$5,000 for standard definition video, roughly \$2,000-\$50,000 for HDTV-quality “hi-def,” and perhaps \$50,000-\$500,000 and up for “film quality” HD video suitable for mixing with footage actually shot on 35mm movie film. (Note that the price of recording media also jumps substantially with each higher level of quality.)