Background

The catalogue description of FILM 490 “Film Senior Capstone” reads, “Creation and defense of a full length screenplay or teleplay.”

The screenplay is required to be classically structured, not less than 88 or more than 124 pages and to adhere to industry standard formatting. The Senior Capstone students are challenged at the beginning of the course to

1. demonstrate mastery of subject matter via the writing of a feature length screenplay and oral examination of the same,
2. demonstrate the ability to analyze screenplays in terms of structure, plot, character and ability to be produced,
3. synthesize material learned in the course of study for the film major using the self-authored screenplay as the basis.

The writing of feature length screenplay is a major project that begins in the Fall with the creation of a story, goes into the Winter with the generation of a rough draft and culminates in the Spring with the completion of a polished first draft. Students are provided the following prompt:

Complete a first draft of a plot driven feature-length screenplay (88–124 pages) that demonstrates the writer’s mastery of classic structure defined as...

Definition of classic structure (design): “… a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against the primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute and irreversible change.” (McKee, Story, p. 45)

Or, a feature-length screenplay that at a minimum has the following elements as defined by Truby: Weakness/Need, Desire, Opponent, Plan, Battle, Self-revelation, New Equilibrium. Of course, there must be a story world, etc.

Successful completion of the project demonstrates the student’s ability to navigate screen story and structure while taking into consideration actual production parameters. It may, or may not, demonstrate knowledge of film history or major theories of film.

In order to assess critical knowledge and the ability to apply it students are required to complete two additional projects. The first of these are three-four
Screenplay Analyses of other student’s screenplays that address the following points:

- Structural analysis of the story
- Genre analysis including adherence to or variation from generally accepted genre definition demonstrated by the author’s model film
- Character structure
- Plot analysis
- Applicable critical theories

The second assignment is to write a self-analysis paper that addresses the points above plus the following

- What you learned about the process and yourself as a writer.

**Evaluative Criteria**

Screenplays are evaluated based on the following criteria:

Screenplays that do not adhere to the format presented in Trottier, have misspellings, grammatical errors or other problems of sufficient magnitude as to prevent easy reading of the screenplay, or that do not meet the minimal criteria for a 2.0 will be assigned a 0.0.

2.0 – Screenplay meets the structural criteria defined above, page count adheres to range specified and script is formatted correctly.

3.0 – Story adheres to a recognizable genre and demonstrates at least two of the following dimensions: unique/rich characters with characteristics that supplements action, complicating sub-plots that relate to the spine and amplify the controlling idea of the story, rhythm and pacing appropriate to genre, and/or a story world that adds depth to the narrative and or multiple reveals, symbolic web, etc.

4.0 – Story meets the standards of a 3.0 screenplay and adds dimensions.

The other two papers were evaluated based on whether they addressed all assigned areas in such a manner that demonstrated the ability to use skills learned in FILM courses.

**Results**

Fifteen students enrolled in FILM 490 in the Spring Quarter of 2010. Fourteen students submitted screenplay that met the 2.0 standard. The one that did meet the 2.0 standard failed to submit a screenplay that met minimum standards for structure, format and grammatical errors. He received an X based upon superior work in other assignments.
The class average of the papers that analyzed screenplays of others averaged a 3.9. Students used a variety of analytical methods including McKee’s plot driven strategy and Truby’s character focus. In addition, the comments made by students in the oral exams were insightful. The papers are given to the screenplay writers and are not available to post-class analysis. The sheer number of pages turned in (700+ pages this year) make copying impossible given the short time frame between submission and return.

The self-analysis/reflection papers were also good, a 3.7 class average. One student partially completed the assignment.

Student comments were interesting. On the relationship of his screenplay to Michael Mann’s *Heat* one student wrote,

… Mann creates men who are incapable of having worthwhile relationships due to overwhelming duty/loyalty/belief in the work/job. This worldview I believe to be integral to achieving the message of my story.

Another student seeking to relate his screenplay to a critical theory wrote,

“With the movie being about a treasure hunt, the story applies mostly to film theorist Robin Wood’s theory of capitalist ideology.”

Another also using Wood wrote,

*The Remus Legacy*… employed elements of Hollywood ideology... specifically portrayals of the “ideal man” and “Ideal woman.”

Another wrote,

My script would probably be of interest to Marxist ideological studies. There is an idea running through the script that poor, postindustrial economic conditions contributed to the creation of the pathetic characters and situations...

Finally, this student writes,

A capitalist critique could find Brian’s attempts to maintain a ‘normal’ family despite his lustful and immoral hidden life (Laura and drug abuse) to be a symbol for the struggle of American societies to accept alternatives to the standard Americana. A feminist reading could paint Laura, despite and because of her faults, as the only truly self-actualized character. A woman who may break social taboos to attain her ideal way of life, and suffers at the inept hands of her delusional male counterparts.

Looking at his screenplay in terms of genre, this student writes,

… I see that I have missed what is essential to the redemption plot, which is that change from bad to good.
Another,

I definitely found myself looking back at *The Odyssey*... The Hero's Journey.

And finally,

As if a stoner lesbian romantic comedy wasn't genre bending enough, I decided to have something of an action film ending.

**Analysis**

From the data it appears that the writing of a feature length screenplay is successful at showcasing FILM majors “... disciplinary knowledge, methods and skills.” Students, with one exception, wrote producible, classically structured, feature length screenplays. Students excelled at analyzing other students’ screenplays as well as their own and successfully found links between genre and other critical/film theories and their own work.

It should be noted that this is the first academic year in a decade where a major failed to submit an acceptable screenplay.

Recently, the Program changed foundation texts for the FILM 221 course that is an introduction to narrative writing. Previously, the course used Robert McKee’s text that emphasizes plot structure. Last academic year, we changed texts to one that used a more character-centered approach. This class was a product of the former approach but used the latter in developing their stories. We anticipate that we’ll be receiving a different kind of screenplay in the coming years.

For the Department of Theatre & Film

Marvin Smith, Chair

24 June, 2010