

## USC CINEMA 290 (23448) CLASS SYLLABUS (Spring, 2005)

Class meeting times: Wednesdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. in RZC 124  
Office hours: Immediately before class, by phone and by appointment.

### Directing-Editing:

DUKE UNDERWOOD 213-740-7374 Email: duke@cinema.usc.edu

### Cinematography:

MARK W. GRAY 818-787-3110 (home) Email: mwgray@mac.com  
310-989-1520 (cell)

### Class Assistant (CA):

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### CLASS OVERVIEW:

The Beginning Production Class (290) is designed to introduce you to the basic technical and aesthetic concepts underlying motion picture production. You will make 5 short digital video projects in an organic exploration of storytelling. These projects will have fully synchronous sound tracks but not dialogue (although voice over is permitted as long as it supports rather than carries the story). The emphasis of the class is to communicate ideas, feelings, moods etc. through the use of images and sounds and to explore the various filmmaking forms, including narrative, experimental and documentary modes.

There will be an emphasis on experiential learning as each student is fully immersed in process of writing, producing, directing, shooting and editing their own projects. Ideas will be explored before shooting and screenings will be followed by discussion and constructive analysis and criticism. The heart of the program is an exploration of visual language on a practical level through your individual projects. We wish to create an environment that encourages honesty, experimentation and growth while working cooperatively and collectively with your colleagues. Think of these projects as an artist's scratch pad. They are not meant to be precious, finished works, but stepping stones to developing your skills and understanding. We are looking for the freedom to experiment without fear of failure.

The essential study material is provided by the class in the form of projects and the most interesting subjects arise when students tap into their inner resources of memory, feeling and imagination. This is a class about ideas and your ability to communicate aurally and visually. You will learn the basics of craft, criticism and good deal about your own creative potential. Have fun and make the most of this opportunity.

### **COURSE GOALS:**

- Investigate the underlying aesthetics of visual and aural communication as applied to cinema.
- Master the basic elements of characterization and story structure.
- Learn how to tell a story effectively through the use of sound and image.

- Explore a range of forms and genres- documentary, narrative, personal essay, poetic.
- Deliver and receive cogent and constructive critiques of work in progress.
- Become aware of the cultural impact of cinema.
- Establish ethical standards for filmmaking and critiquing.
- Develop fundamental skills in the areas of directing, cinematography, editing and sound design.

### **GENERAL REQUIREMENTS:**

1. Complete five short projects on digital video. Length is limited to between 3 and 7 minutes; faculty approval is required for projects exceeding 8 minutes.
2. Sound is not to be used on project #1 and required for projects #2 through #5. Tracks should be carefully mixed and probably will include music, effects, ambience and possibly narration. Dialogue is not permitted under any circumstances and it is therefore advisable to avoid "lip flap" i.e., characters talking on screen even though the dialogue is not heard. Films #2 through #5 should have mixed tracks blending a minimum of three sound elements.
3. You must write, produce, direct, shoot, light, edit and sound design each project yourself. Sub-contracting any of these responsibilities is the equivalent of intellectual plagiarism.
4. Attend all classes and participate constructively in class discussions including oral and written critiques. This is your opportunity to be creative and to share your ideas.
5. Deliver all projects and written assignments promptly at 9:00 AM on their due date. Even if a film is not perfect or even complete, it should be screened for the class as a work in progress. Projects, which are late or lack all the required documentation, will not be screened.
6. Prepare a detailed treatment for each project and then discuss the idea with your instructor as per the class schedule. All written materials should be typed and submitted in duplicate.

### **SUGGESTED TEXTS:**

- Arijon, Daniel. ***Grammar of the Film Language***. London & Boston: Focal Press, 1976.
- Ball, William. ***A Sense of Direction***. New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1984.
- Dmytryk, Edward. ***On Filmmaking***. Boston & London: Focal Press, 1986
- Katz, Steven D. ***Film Directing Shot by Shot***. Stoneham: Mass: Focal Press, 1991.
- Lumet, Sidney. ***Making Movies***. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.
- Malkiewicz, Kris and Robert E. Rogers. ***Cinematography***. New York: Van Nostrand, 1989.
- Malkiewicz, Kris and Barbara J. Gryboski. ***Film Lighting***. New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1986.

Mamet, David. *On Directing Film*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.  
 Moore, Sonia. *The Stanislavski System*. New York: Penguin Handbooks, 1976  
 Murch, Walter. *In the Blink of an Eye*. Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1995.  
 Zettl, Herbert. ***Sight Sound Motion***. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing  
 Company, 1990  
 Egri, Lajos. ***The art of Dramatic Writing***

### **GRADES:**

You will be graded A through F (including pluses and minuses) upon completion of the course. Each student must complete all five films to receive a grade. Incompletes are given for medical emergencies only. Grades will be based on both subjective and objective judgments. We will be looking for the intelligence, clarity, craftsmanship and emotional depth indicative of a growing mastery of the art form. Success is necessarily predicated on an energetic and ongoing interaction between all members of the class. So, late projects, tardiness and absences without notification will have a negative impact on your grade. Late projects will be docked half a letter grade ( B to B- for example). Similarly any combination of three absences or tardies will reduce the final grade by half a point. If you must miss class, call your instructor as soon as possible and always before the class begins.

### **Grading Criteria:**

#### **D (Below Average)**

- Projects exhibit basic technical and/or aesthetic deficiencies which make it obvious the student has not mastered the techniques necessary to handle more advanced classes.
- Inability to demonstrate satisfactory growth by integrating feedback in subsequent work.
- Minimal participation in class discussion and exercises.
- Poorly developed written and/or oral critiques.
- Failure to meet deadlines.
- Inability to develop accessible characters and stories.

#### **C (Average)**

- All assignments completed on time.
- High level of constructive class participation in discussions and written critiques.
- A minimum of two projects which clearly demonstrate technical proficiency.
- Evidence that feedback has been integrated into subsequent work.
- Steady improvement in the ability to tell a story simply and concisely whether it be in the narrative, documentary or experimental mode.

#### **B (Very Good)**

- All of the above plus; student attempts projects which explore original concepts.
- A minimum of three projects which are both technically and aesthetically outstanding.
- A unity of form and content.
- A sound design which is consistently creative and brings added depth to the projects.
- Student assumes a leadership role in class discussions and exercises

## **A (Superior In All Respects)**

- All the above plus; projects exhibit a unique application of visual and dramatic structure
- Exceptional ability to use craft technical skills to enhance story.
- Thematic concepts are communicated with great intensity on both an emotional and intellectual level.
- Innovative use of sound to open up new and unexplored levels of meaning not inherent in the visuals.
- Consistently original and fully developed characters.

## **GRADING WEIGHTS:**

<b>Project #1</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Project #2</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Project #3</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Project #4</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Project #5</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Participation</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Written Material</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Attendance</b> .....	<b>5</b>

## **LETTER GRADES:**

<b>93-100.....A</b>	<b>74-76.....C</b>
<b>90-92.....A-</b>	<b>70-73.....C-</b>
<b>87-89.....B+</b>	<b>67-69.....D+</b>
<b>84-86.....B</b>	<b>64-66.....D</b>
<b>80-83.....B-</b>	<b>60-63.....D-</b>
<b>77-79.....C+</b>	<b>0-59.....F</b>

## **Procedural Issues:**

### **1. Sound Design:**

For these films, we would like you to focus on the expressive potential of visual and aural images. There is no sync dialogue. Use body language and physical behavior to reveal a character's emotions and ideas. It is what the characters do rather than say that is important. Remember what Hitchcock said: "to photograph people talking is not filmmaking." Your films should not have "lip-flap" (characters talking without being audible) unless you are deliberately doing this for an artistic purpose. Thanks to the AVID editing systems all sound effects, music cues, voice overs etc. can be placed in an exact and permanent relationship with the picture. Take advantage of this to create an expressive sound design which builds emotional impact

### **2. Deadlines:**

All due dates as outlined in the class schedule are firm. Deadlines are sometimes onerous but they are a harsh reality in the film business. All projects and written assignments are to be delivered to the instructors at the beginning of class. If a film is not complete, we will screen it as a work in progress. But being on time is a good professional habit and an integral part of the discipline of filmmaking. Late projects will be marked down as detailed below.

The class will be divided into three groups—A, B and C.. Projects due dates are staggered by group as per the class schedule. Group A films , for example, are all due the same day followed a week later by group B and so forth.

Every project is to be turned in at the BEGINNING of the class, even if the filmmaker feels that it is unfinished. films are often works-in-progress and the emphasis is on process. Being on time is part of the craft of producing films and we encourage you to work on your time organization skills if you have trouble meeting deadlines. We will work with you to develop “back-up” ideas that you can turn to in the event that the film you are working on proves impossible to finish on time. NOTE: Films arriving late (after the start of class) will have a grade penalty and will be screened at the instructor's discretion. We encourage you to review your films again after your critique session. You may wish to re-edit them and bring them to class to be screened again.

### **3. Facilities:**

The school will provide digital cameras, hard drives and editing stations. Students must purchase headphones and DV tapes which are available in the Cinema Store. The cameras, hard drives and editing stations will be assigned on a rotating basis between the groups. In general, after each group shoots, they will hand off the cameras to the next group. For most of the semester, projects are due on a rotating schedule. Equipment will be made available based on this pattern.

Lighting equipment can be checked out from the Equipment Window in the Zemeckis building but supplies are limited so get your orders in early. To reserve any equipment, you must have paid all your fees and secure a **Production Equipment Center** card.

### **4. Titles & Credits:**

Each project should include the title of the film and credits listing the director, cast, crew, others if needed. Be sure to acknowledge copyrighted material, music and story sources, etc. Ideally the credits should be integrated into the work both in terms of structure and design so as to reveal important information about the story or character.

### **5. Reel Preparation:**

Each reel or tape should be clearly labeled with you name, class number, title and project number. Begin each show with the SMPTE countdown leader which is on the computer desktop. After the 2 seconds of black fade in the first shot or title card of your project. Put each project on a separate tape. At the end of the class you can consolidate all five pieces onto a single DV tape for convenience.

## 6. Director's Self-Critique:

This self-critique is an important part of your film project (and grade) and reflects the learning process you went through. TWO copies of your TYPED critique (using the following format as a guide) must accompany each film (films will not be screened without this critique):

- Filmmaker's name. Project # , title and date.
- Brief, clear synopsis of the story- what we actually see onscreen.
- Intent- how you wanted to affect us.
- Source of the main idea that you started with and its importance to you.
- Theme or premise of the piece as you discovered it after finishing the film.
- Main tension/conflict: be specific, look for this element in all genres of film.
- Strengths of the film.
- Problem areas and "what I want to learn to do better."
- Journal-type notes on your own learning process, discoveries, and frustrations.

## 7. Project Critiques:

After each movie is screen we all write critiques on two part NCR forms. The white copy goes to the filmmaker; the other will be saved in your file as part of the written assignments for the class. The most helpful critiques are concise, insightful and specific (identifying specific characters, shots cuts etc.). Just remember, we are all colleagues here so endeavor to be honest yet encouraging. We suggest the following format:

Name of film maker	Title	Project #
Intent:	What you feel the artist was trying to communicate in terms of themes, ideas and emotions.	
Synopsis:	Your impression of the story line.	
Strengths:	Specific areas or moments that worked well and why.	
Suggestions:	Aspects of the project that were weak or confusing. Possible ways to make the work richer.	
Your Signature		

## 8. Crit-on-Crits:

This critique is written by the filmmaker after the class has critiqued their film and is due one week after the film screened. Turn in TWO TYPED copies to instructors using the following format:

- Filmmaker's name.
- Project # and title, date.
- Major suggestions by other students were:
- I agree/disagree with the critiques in the following areas:
- After studying the critiques I learned the following:

## 9. Safety:

Filmmaking can be an unpredictable and even dangerous undertaking at times so use common sense when shooting. Under no circumstances is it permissible to do projects that require stunts or special effects, which might compromise the safety of the crew, the actors, or passersby. Such things as **explosions, falls, car chases, fires, blood spurts, real weapons, tying into electrical mains, shooting in unsafe areas, interfering with the flow of traffic etc. are strictly forbidden.**

Prop guns and other prop weapons are allowed if you have the proper permits (for both on and off-campus shoots) and have discussed safe handling techniques with us for the protection of cast and crew. Failure to procure permits for weapons or to adhere to safe shooting procedures or consult your instructors in advance, can have a range of consequences - from loss of a grade to suspension.

Most effects can be suggested more effectively through creative directing and editing than by actually showing the event on-screen. **CONSULT WITH YOUR INSTRUCTOR ABOUT ALL WEAPONS, PROJECTILES OR STUNTS AND BEFORE SHOOTING IN ANY SITUATION OR LOCATION, WHICH MIGHT BE CONSIDERED DANGEROUS.**

### **IF YOU CANNOT REACH US IN TIME, POSTPONE IT!**

Protect yourself and your equipment: do not shoot alone at night, do not leave equipment in your car (not even the trunk) for any length of time. Work with others in the class whenever possible. There is so much to pay attention to while shooting (the artistic, the practical and the safety issues) that it is difficult for one person to do it all well.

Contact the **SAFETY CONSULTANT** if you plan to use a weapon or projectile of any kind. He is an experienced stunt and weapons consultant. You must get his signature on the form and attach it to your film critique. He has posted office hours (see Pablo Frasconi's office door) on the Cinema loading dock.

## 10. Health & Well-Being:

Film school is intense. However, one important part of production is managing one's time, energy and health. This translates into scaling projects to a size that is do-able, having back-up ideas, locations, equipment and actors in case of problems (weather, accidents, etc.) and realistically estimating time. If you are feeling overwhelmed, discuss your experiences with fellow students. Chances are they too are feeling the

stress but as the semester progresses you will be amazed at how much you are capable of and how quickly you are becoming a seasoned filmmaker.

Regardless of the circumstances, don't hesitate to ask for help, that's what your instructors and PA are here for. If you have an ethical or professional dilemma or need to discuss your story ideas or progress, call your instructors. You can reach us by phone, fax or e-mail. There are no dumb questions and to struggle alone is not necessary or recommended. Ask for and offer your classmates help on their projects, filmmaking is collaborative! Many students need extra technical help with camera, lighting and sound mixing techniques. Our PA is available to answer your questions, check you out on equipment and give you support. S/he will be available before and after class and by phone.

One important bit of advice is to stay organized and be realistic. This translates to:

- Keep projects small and feasible.
- Don't overshoot.
- Always have a few back-up ideas in case the current project falls apart.
- Work well in advance. Be planning project # 4 while cutting #3.
- Work with a script, storyboards and a production schedule.
- Be prepared!

### **11. Ethics & Expectations:**

It is extremely important to guard your opportunity to learn. Do not hand it over to someone more experienced. We expect you to operate your own camera, set your own lights (with help from BPS colleagues), direct your own actors and edit your own film. Feel free to act in other projects but not in your own since directing takes one's full attention. Do not allow people outside the film school or in advanced classes to crew for you, this is the equivalent of asking someone else to write your paper which is a violation of academic integrity. Keep projects simple enough to handle with the help of one or two other film students. Work together, it's safer, more effective and more fun!

The USC Student Conduct Code fully discusses issues of academic integrity and student conduct (see your issue of Scampus). Motion picture production involves additional issues of professional conduct off campus. Student filmmakers need to observe the highest professional standards of behavior, with actors, crew and location owners. The reputation of each class affects the reputation of the entire School and our relationship with the rest of the campus, SAG, plus local governments.

### **12. Copyrights, Internet and Festivals:**

BPS students own the copyrights of their films but must clear all additional material used in the film that is copyrighted such as music, photographs, logos, etc.

### **13. Use of Minors:**

Any use of minors in your projects must conform to state regulations limiting the number of work hours and requiring the presence of a teacher/social worker. You can get more information from Joe Wallenstein's office in Lucas 400.

**AND FINALLY:**

This is a class about developing your ability to express your ideas visually and aurally. They should be ideas that are important enough to you to spend a great deal of time and energy to communicate them to the rest of us. It is equally important to develop the skills of critiquing others' films and receiving feedback on your own films. It is a demanding and rewarding experience. Make the most of it!