“I like the end of the writing process very much. The actual physical business of sitting and writing, I despise for about the first four-fifths of any project. Then when I get into what I think of as the home stretch, where I’ve solved eighty percent of the problems and I’ve picked up a lot of momentum, I’ll have the time of my life because at that point the characters become alive, the story is sort of a juggernaut — you know, it’s a living, breathing entity. That’s the only part I enjoy. The blank page — I’ll circle around that sucker for weeks.”

JAMES CAMERON on writing “The Terminator”

“We had to go through all this because my screenplay was so f**ked up. They were going to do it in spite of the structure, but I had to rearrange efficiently and take all the slack out. It was just like shuffling cards. I had to have the director and the producer help me with this, I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I mean I wrote some great stuff but they had to tell me how to put it together...I wrote thirteen drafts of it.”

RICHARD PRICE on rewriting his first produced screenplay, “The Color of Money” for director, Martin Scorsese

“If you think that perhaps you should cut, cut.”

David Mamet, Oscar nominated screenwriter for “Wag the Dog” and “The Verdict”

This semester you will write a SECOND DRAFT and a POLISH of the first draft screenplay that gained you admission into this class. Since a step deal for a project in development generally calls for two drafts and a polish, your progress will conform to the minimum professional requirements of a Writer’s Guild contract for a writer-for-hire.

Through table readings and story sessions, you will hear your work and receive feedback that will help you devise a strategy for your rewrite. We will consider typical second draft concerns, including structure; flow; set-ups and pay-offs; character arcs; length; natural-sounding dialogue; ways to make the script more active; image systems and maximizing the script’s visual potential. Now that you’ve done the hard work of “getting something on the page”, you are ready to begin the exciting work of discovering ways to fully explore your choices.

We will begin next week by studying the first draft of a script that was destined to win an Academy Award—Robert Towne’s Chinatown—and comparing it to the film directed by Roman Polanski. How did the project change from the screenwriter’s initial pass, to the story on the
screen? What can you learn here about the writing process, about writing to please yourself vs. writing for production, about discovering and fully exploring the potential locked within the initial concept?

Each week afterwards, one of you will select a screenplay of a current movie of note, which the entire class will read before class. The more good scripts you look at, the better you will come to understand what makes a good read. This will improve your own writing. Make a point of reading these scripts with a pen in hand—analyze their structure, make note of choices you find especially effective, let these scripts inspire you as you rewrite your own screenplay. Come to class each week with three examples of noteworthy choices the screenwriter(s) made; share your impressions in class.

The following weeks, each class will be devoted to a table read of a draft written by a member of the class. You will be assigned a specific day to present your script. On other weeks, your feedback on your classmates’ scripts will be a vital part of our work. You will learn as much from understanding what works or doesn’t work in the drafts of others as you will when your own work is presented.

Once you complete your SECOND DRAFT AND TURN IT IN, you will turn your attention to completing and HANDING IN A POLISH. The polish should incorporate any new thoughts that arise from the table read, and tie up any general “loose ends”.

We will close our semester with a screening of The Player, directed by Robert Altman, from the book and screenplay by Michael Tolkin. The film will inform a discussion of approaches to pitching your script. You will then prepare a pitch of your movie—because writing the screenplay is both a significant achievement...and... but the beginning of the journey.

Our workshop will meet as follows:

WEEK 1 (2/3) INTRODUCE YOUR PROJECT TO THE CLASS—CAN YOU TELL YOUR STORY IN 2 OR 3 SENTENCES, SUCCINCTLY? DISCUSS the responsibility of the screenwriter to get out of his/her head—rewriting is largely about shaping your initial inspiration into a CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE for the viewer. SCREEN Steven Soderbergh’s reworking of director Steven Spielberg’s Raiders of the Lost Ark—story by George Lucas & Philip Kaufman, screenplay by Lawrence Kasdan. How can Soderbergh’s homage inspire us to “write with the camera”? ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK: SKIM (or, if so inclined, devour) the STORY MEETING TRANSCRIPTS in which newly hired screenwriter, Kasdan, prepares to write the first draft of Raiders by meeting with Spilleberg and Lucas to REVISE the Lucas & Kaufman treatment. Be a “fly on the wall” as A list talents spitball h brilliant (and not so brilliant) story ideas. COME TO CLASS WITH 3 EXAMPLES OF CHOICES YOU FOUND INTERESTING ABOUT THEIR COLLABORATIVE PROCESS. Your examples may relate to budget, tone, characterization...or...? Below is a LINK to the transcript:
WEEK 2 (2/10) SCREEN Chinatown. DISCUSS successful elements of the film as you THINK about your rewrite strategy for your own screenplay. ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK: READ the first draft of Chinatown. READ (or reread) Chapter 6 (Structure), Chapter 11 (Genre) and Chapter 14 (Rewriting) in Screenplay: Writing the Picture. WRITE A TROUBLESHOOTING CHART FOR YOUR SCRIPT AND HAND IT IN NEXT WEEK. WRITE A LOGLINE FOR YOUR PROJECT.

WEEK 3 (2/17) DISCUSS Chinatown changes from page to screen. Benefits and pitfalls of writing “on spec”. Distance and the “pet project”. Screenwriter as collaborator. SHARE YOUR LOGLINE FOR YOUR SCRIPT. TALK THROUGH your goals for the next draft of you screenplay.

WEEK 4 (2/24) FIRST TABLE READ! Feedback READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK: Writing Screenplays for Fun & Profit by Lennon & Garant. REWRITE during the week by addressing at least one major goal and one lesser concern from your trouble shooting chart, such as plot holes, character arcs and/or pacing.

WEEK 5 (3/03) TABLE READING. REWRITE by tackling another issue on your Troubleshooting chart.

WEEK 6 (3/10) TABLE READING. KEEP WORKING ON YOUR REWRITE.

**SPRING BREAK. No class on 3/17. NO EXCUSES, WRITE!!! YOU HAVE A WONDERFUL IDEA AND IT’S WORTH TAKING IT TO THE MAX, YES??

WEEK 7 (3/24) TABLE READING. KEEP WORKING ON YOUR REWRITE.

WEEK 8 (3/31) TABLE READING. KEEP REWRITING.

WEEK 9 (4/07) WE TABLE READ, WE GIVE GREAT FEEDBACK, WE DRAW INSPIRATION AS WE WORK ON OUR OWN SCRIPTS...WE GET BETTER AND BETTER, YES...?

WEEK 10 (4/14) TABLE READING. ***FINISH YOUR SECOND DRAFT AND HAND IT IN NEXT WEEK!!!*** Congratulations.

WEEK 11 (4/21) SCREEN The Player, screenplay by Michael Tolkin, from his book; directed by Robert Altman. DISCUSS what these wry, entertainment industry veterans can show you about PITCHING. (Now that you have a script, it’s time to start thinking about what to DO with it, yes?) ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK: Prepare a 3 minute (max) pitch of your screenplay....If you finished your second draft, put it in a drawer and do not look at it for a week. (This is not a typo!) Do you find yourself thinking, maybe even dreaming about your story/world/characters? If so, jot down those notes to yourself. Otherwise, give yourself a well-earned break from those pages, so you can return to your screenplay with fresh eyes
WEEK 12 (4/28) PITCH YOUR MOVIE TO THE CLASS. Who’s buying? ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK—READ YOUR SECOND DRAFT ALL THE WAY THROUGH, IN ONE SITTING. TAKE NOTES AFTERWARDS. COME UP WITH A REWRITE PLAN. START TO BANG OUT A POLISH!

WEEK 13 (5/05) DISCUSS how a bit of critical distance can help you see your story in new ways. How does the screenwriter stay “fresh”? Let’s talk. If you have questions, now is the time to ask them. BRING IN ANY SCENES YOU WANT TO HEAR READ/GET FEEDBACK ON. WORK ON THE POLISH DUE NEXT WEEK.

WEEK 14 (5/12) **NOTE THIS IS NYU READING DAY, IF YOU CANNOT ATTEND,, PLEASE LET ME KNOW IN ADVANCE AND ARRANGE TO HAND IN YOUR WORK. THIS CLASS IS DESIGNED TO MAKE UP THE ONE WE LOST TO A SNOW DAY IN JANUARY** TURN IN YOUR POLISH. CONGRATULATIONS. Are there any new pages you’d like to try out in class? Let’s end the semester hearing some scenes!

REQUIRED READING


*Writing Screenplays for Fun & Profit* by Lennon & Garant (Simon & Schuster)

Assigned screenplays TBD. Check out simplyscripts.com. If you do not find the script you seek, talk to me because I may have a paper copy.

GRADING

50% Second Draft
30% Polish
10% Generous and engaged participation
10% Showing up (more than one absence may lower grade—we are all in this TOGETHER)

*Achievement “above and beyond” will be lauded—as will hard work, intelligence, and a helpful attitude toward your fellow screenwriters (i.e. the people with whom you may later work professionally.)*

A NOTE ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

"As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please
consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website
(http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)

Seriously, claim somebody else’s screenplay as your own? Or pass off someone else’s contributions to the script as yours? How stupid would that be? I apologize for insulting your intelligence by even bringing this up, except the school (rightly) requires the above paragraph be included on all syllabi. As a Lifetime Member of The Writers Guild and a member of their Credits Arbitration Committee, please know that stealing people’s work is taken as seriously, if not more so, within the film industry as it is here at Gallatin.