

FILM 172: MANIFESTO FOR STUDENT FILMMAKING

1. MAKE FILMS ABOUT SOMETHING YOU REALLY CARE ABOUT! This may sound really obvious, but it can't be overstated. It takes a huge amount of time, energy, and resources, to make even a short film. Before you get started, ask yourself: why this film? Is it something you feel passionate about (and, just to clarify, passionate doesn't have to mean dark, brooding, and depressing)? Does it feel like something you *have* to make? Do you care about it enough to stay up all night watching it hundreds of times in the editing room? Can you explain why it's so important to you? If not, don't be afraid to throw an idea away and try something else. You'll thank yourself later down the line. Expect to be asked to explain why your project matters to you in class.
2. Related to #1, I tend to believe that the best student films (actually the best films, period) are films about topics and stories that are close to the filmmaker. It's almost always the case that the most compelling and gripping storytelling comes from the investment and intimacy of real experience. Did you grow up hanging out with mafia gangsters or pirates or cyborgs? Do you have a lot of time to immerse yourself in research about what life is really like for an undercover FBI agent? If not, it's probably going to be hard for you to really bring that world to life in a way that is plausible to your viewer (and, connected to this, it's going to be very hard to resist falling back on clichés and imitation of other movies, even if the imitation is subconscious). Do you have an incredibly strong, detailed childhood memory of waiting for your mom to pick you up from school and watching all the other kids get picked up first? Try writing about it. Even if it sounds trivial, small, and not dramatic, good filmmaking often comes out of a careful, genuine, and lifelike rendering of the every day.
3. Don't depict scenes of graphic violence unless you are drawing from personal experience. This is not negotiable. For those of you who find this constraint limiting, think about the fact that what we imagine / don't see is often more evocative than actually seeing something.

4. **Less is more:**
 - a. Your films in this class absolutely can not be longer than six minutes, including credits. If you think there's no possible way to cut your film any shorter, challenge yourself to find places to cut anyhow. You're likely to discover that your film is better with that extra 10 seconds cut out.
 - b. Try to minimize your use of scripted dialogue. If you can't figure out a way to tell your story without constant talking, this might indicate that you're not thinking visually enough, or that your premise is not cinematic. Go through your entire screenplay, and try to imagine how you might tell the same story with no talking at all. For each line of dialogue, try to imagine some way to communicate the same thing with images alone. There may be some places where dialogue is indispensable, but it's a great exercise to go through line and by line and ask hard questions about how little talking you can get away with – you'll probably be surprised to find that you need much less than you think, or that a well-chosen image can communicate your ideas much more eloquently than words.

5. Details really make a difference, so spend enough time and plan ahead to get the details right. Don't cast your friends in your film just because they're around. Don't film in your dorm just because it's there. There's no substitute for thoughtful, careful casting of skilled actors, and atmospheric locations that work visually.

6. Eradicate clichés! Be hard on yourself and try to catch elements in your work that seem hackneyed or derivative. And don't be afraid to point out elements of cliché in the work of your peers.