

George Mason University
College of Visual and Performing Arts – Department of Theater

THR 482 Advanced Screenplay Workshop
Spring 2012 – Friday 10:30 – 1:10

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Office Hours Mondays, Wednesday & Fridays by appointment.

A copy of the full course syllabus can be found online: theater.gmu.edu/academics

Course Description

THR 482 Advanced Screenplay Workshop (3:3:0) Prerequisite: THR 382 *The Screenplay* or permission of the instructor.

Screenwriting workshop emphasizing student development in screenplay form, structure and storytelling with emphasis on craft, character and story culminating in a screenplay.

Course Texts and Materials

Story by Robert McKee

The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Screenwriters and Storytellers by Christopher Vogler

“CRASH” – The Screenplay by Paul Haggis

“The Shawshank Redemption” – The Screenplay by Frank Darabont

“Stranger Than Fiction” – The Screenplay by Zach Helm

“Catfish” by Nev Schulman (May not yet be available. Film will be screened.)

NOTE: All texts may be purchased at the GMU Bookstore. If you intend to download screenplays from such resources as **simplyscripts.com** or **screenplaydb.com** all screenplays **MUST** be printed out in hard copy.

Nature of Course Delivery

This course is taught through studio practice, lectures, discussion, and workshop. The coursework includes assigned readings, viewings of films, discussion, and a weekly craft-oriented writing assignment designed to build the students toward completion of both a short screenplay project and a longer one.

Goals of the Course and Learning Outcomes

The objectives of the course are to expose students to the distinctly 20th Century art form of the screenplay, the significant critical writers about the form, several contemporary screenwriters and their works, and through example, craft-oriented exercises and workshop discussion, encourage the development of students' own writing in the screenwriting form.

In addition to the writing requirements, the course asks students to participate constructively in discussions, to offer their writing for workshop critique, and to conduct themselves with academic integrity.

THR 482 fulfills the Writing-Intensive requirement in the Film and Video Studies Major.

This course is designed to develop the foundations of craft for writing for the screen. Through participation in this course you will be able to:

1. Analyze screenplays in a personal, creative, and responsive way.
2. Demonstrate your ability to express in writing an understanding of the craft of screenwriting.
3. Discover and employ the tools necessary to express a personal, artistic vision.
4. Engage in storytelling in this distinctly 20th Century art form.

Course Requirements and Grading Policy

Grading: 70% written work, 25% workshop participation, 5% attendance.

Philosophy of the Course

The art of story is the dominant cultural force in the world. 'Stories are equipment for living,' writes screenwriting guru Robert McKee. The way we often make sense of our bewildering lives is to tell a story. Telling stories is how we understand each other, and our quest is to understand our own story. The poet David Whyte writes of, "...the lost sense that we play out our lives as part of a greater story." Many great stories share a similar structure and concern a rescue of the human heart.

Written over two thousand years ago, Aristotles' POETICS, by focusing on Greek tragedy, still gives us an overview of the dramatic art form. Music, spectacle, diction/language, character, plot, thought/theme (the sacred ground of the unconscious). Screenwriting is our dominant dramatic form of storytelling and the current variant on playwriting. There are fundamental story patterns writers have found in their creative response to experience.

An individual has a problem or has experienced a grave loss. He or she must undergo an experience, a ritual, to mark the change psychically and socially into adulthood (present action). He enters the large cave, the dark forest, the deep sea, often accompanied by others, is oriented, and then encouraged to go on alone. He feels inadequate, afraid. His

choice to continue on the journey propels him into the narrowing tunnel, the darker part of the forest, the deepest part of the sea. Claustrophobia, stones, monsters, drowning, danger ... his courage is threatened, a sense of crisis builds, yet he doesn't dare stop, but goes forward. There is a death, a sacrifice or a celebration. But what is done is done and he emerges, his life is changed forever. There has been a moment of transformation, revelation, redemption, or grace. He is home. He is at a new beginning.

The action of the drama is an engine of transformation. The immediate action forces the hero/heroine to go back to the problematic past in order to resolve the present and then go forward. The problems (or loss) existing in the past are resolved in the course of resolving the immediate difficulties of the rite (ritual) or the story. Past and present are always reconciled in the end. Loss is what defines us. The journey is difficult beyond words. We are all just trying to make our way home.

Course Outline -

Week One:

Finding the stories you want to tell.

Daily writing practice.

Clustering. Using the sketchbook.

Creating a story with given elements.

The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell

Writing Assignment: Event/Story

Assign screenplay to read.

Week Two:

Discuss screenplay

Assigned readings: McKee, Vogler

Read and discuss Event/Story

Writing Assignment: an idea you want to develop

Week Three:

View film. Discuss.

Character Work

Choose a children's story to adapt.

Writing Assignment: The Two-Minute Movie

Week Four:

Discuss screened film in terms of character work

Discuss McKee and Vogler readings

Review student story ideas

Finish Event/Story pieces

Assigned reading: McKee and Vogler

Writing assignment: The Two-Minute Movie

Week Five:

Transforming their children's stories into screenplay.
Discussion of screenwriting format
Character Lecture
Assigned reading: McKee and Vogler
Assigned reading: 2nd screenplay
Writing assignment: Character/Event
Music Video Project

Week Six:

A "Heroine's Journey"
In-class character work
Read: The Two-Minute Movie pieces
Reading: McKee and Vogler
Discuss, 5 questions on 2nd screenplay.
Music Video Project

Week Seven:

View film.
Handout: Character Work
Handout: Aristotle's Poetics
Reading: McKee and Vogler
Writing: Character work short exercises

Week Eight:

Presentation Music Video Project
In-class brainstorming on their Final Projects
Assignment: Tell your idea in a 3 page story.
The "fairy tale" or mythic structure/hero's journey version of your idea.

Week Nine:

Finish Music Video Projects
Discussion of Final Projects
Handout on Story Ideas
Handout on Character
Assigned reading: 3rd screenplay

Week Ten through Fifteen:

Screening film.
Moving them toward completion of their screenplays.
In-class writing exercises. Assigned scene work as appropriate to each student.
Assigned readings from both the critical texts and the screenplays.
Viewings of other relevant films.
Workshop critiques of student writing as it progresses

Grading Standards:

- A grade of “A” is given for superlative work that demonstrates a profound commitment to the course material, and further, that goes on to employ this material as a springboard for independent thought and work.
- A grade of “B” is given for very good work that completely fulfills all the requirements of the course in a conscientious and dedicated manner, and that demonstrates mastery of the course content.
- A grade of “C” is given for work that fulfills all the requirements of the course in a satisfactory manner, but that falls short of demonstrating rigor and mastery.
- A grade of “D” is given for work that is unsatisfactory
- A grade of “F” is given for work that fails to fulfill the requirements of the course.

GRADES. Grading in a creative writing class is subjective, but there are concrete things I assess. Attendance. Lateness. The quality of the assigned exercises. Class participation. Respect for others. Focus during class time. Completion of the short writing assignments and a final project. 70% written work (creative writing, critical writing and reading work aloud), 25% class participation (contributing to discussions and critiques and reading one’s work in class) and 5% attendance. There will be a mid-term course evaluation. **Final Class and due date for Final Projects is 5/11.**

GMU Add/Drop Policy: The last day to drop this class with no tuition liability is 2/24/12. It is the student’s responsibility to check to verify that they are properly enrolled as no credit will be awarded to students who are not.

All communications regarding this course are to occur using GMU email accounts.

Honor Code, Copyright, & Computing Policies: *To promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of the George Mason University community and with the desire for greater academic and personal achievement, we, the student members of the university community, have set forth this honor code:* Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work.

You are expected to adhere to all University policies and guidelines during your participation in this course. All work must be your own. Inappropriate use of the work of others is a George Mason University Honor Code violation. Please review the University’s website for information on the following: Honor Code and Judicial Procedures; Copyright/Fair Use; and Responsible Use of Computing.

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 703.993.2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office. Students must inform the instructor at the beginning of the semester, and the specific accommodation will be arranged through the Disability Resource Center.

Writing Center: Students who are in need of intensive help with grammar, structure or mechanics in their writing should make use of the services of the Writing Center, located in Robinson A116 (703-993-1200). The services of the Writing Center are available by appointment, online and, occasionally, on a walk-in basis.

Other GMU resources: <http://www.gmu.edu/departments/freshman/resources.html>
University Policies: University Catalog can be accessed catalog.gmu.edu
University Libraries “ Ask a Librarian” <http://library.gmu.edu/mudge/IM/IMRef.html>
Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) caps.gmu.edu or (703) 993-2380

It is not possible to receive an incomplete grade in this class. If you anticipate difficulty in completing this course see your instructor immediately to discuss your options.

You are encourage to sign up for the Mason Alert System by visiting the website <https://alert.gmu.edu>. An emergency poster exists in each classroom explaining what to do in the event of crises and that further information about emergency procedures exists on <http://www.gmu.edu/service/cert>.

NOTE: Cell phones, pagers and alarms must be turned off in class. No exceptions. Laptops may be used but ONLY for class work.

Magic & Medicine: I want to tell you a story ... quotes ...

“Our greatest life is in our dreams.”

Federico Fellini

“In a dark time, the eye begins to see.”

Theodore Roethke

“When an inner situation is not made conscious, it appears outside as fate.”

Carl Jung

“The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

Ernest Hemingway

“Wherever you are is the entry point.”

Kabir

“The soul thinks in images.”

Aristotle

“It does not matter how badly you paint so long as you don't paint badly like other people.”

George Moore

“What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well.”

St. Exuperay

