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Writing a Story: the art of captivating people through storytelling

PROF. MARA PERBELLINI AND VISITING PROF. JULIA LISELLA

Term	Summer 2026
Area of study	Cultural Studies
Area Code	LT/AR 320su
Credits	6 ECTS
Dates	22 June – 3 July 2026 (2 weeks)
Method of instruction	In person

Course description

Storytelling is not just for writers. It is for whoever needs to present an idea in a salient manner. If you want to discover the potential of creating a well-told story, if you want to learn how to engage, persuade and inspire people, this course is for you.

You will learn storytelling skills to present ideas in a successful way. What's the key to set people on fire? Uniting an idea with an emotion! Martin Scorsese said that "a director is a manager of emotions": you can learn the same writing and cinematic techniques to captivate people.

We will analyze these techniques "in action" through screenwriting, and in particular through a pillar of Hollywood, Cinecittà and the television networks: Adaptations.

We will analyze important adaptations of novels and true-life stories for the seventh art, understanding the changes from the source material to the new text and identifying the resistance of literature and true-life story.

Our visiting instructor will introduce a classic American short story and a number of writing exercises to demonstrate the ways that literary analysis and expressive writing techniques can be applied to the drafting and revising stages of storytelling for the screen.

This course includes a creative experience: the writer's lab. Each student will be given tools to create compelling characters, a well-told story, shading style and mood, and to write short film scripts.

Prerequisites

None

Method of teaching

Lecture and Writing Lab.

Readings of stories and excerpts of novels. Screening and analysis of clips of important films adapted from literature and true-life stories. The source material will be compared to the adaptation, revealing the essence of each medium.



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Course requirements

The reading of the book *Pinocchio* (Carlo Collodi) is recommended prior to the beginning of the course, as is the short story by Edith Wharton, "Roman Fever". Ideally students should read both the novel and the short story (which will be sent to the students via email) from beginning to end, before they are analyzed in class.

Learning outcomes

Students will learn narrative techniques and how Literature and Biography can be manipulated to create an original piece of art: the screenplay. Students will discover great examples of Italian novels and films and, through them, they'll acquire a deeper knowledge of the Italian Culture. Students will learn how to engage, persuade and inspire people through storytelling. Students will practice various approaches to drafting and revision through writing prompts designed to develop emotional clarity and depth in their writing.

Grading

Class participation	30%
Final exam	40%
Creative work: Short film script.	30%

Rules of conduct

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory and no absence/s will be excused. Please consider that Field Trips are considered equal to regular classes and indeed you are expected to attend the visits. Unexcused absences will not be accepted. An excused absence will only be granted if you are seriously ill and can support your claim with a local doctor's certificate dated the day you missed class (therefore you must go to the doctor that same day) that has to be delivered to the Professor or to Cattolica International Office. Any other absence will not be excused and will result in not being admitted to the final exam, which corresponds to a 0 (zero) in the final exam.

Exam Date: The exam date cannot be re-scheduled. Should the dates of the final exams be moved for force major reasons, Cattolica International Office and the Professor will promptly inform you in class and/or via email on the new date agreed. Unexcused absences to the exams will result in a failing grade in the course. In cases of unforeseeable circumstances such as illness or injury on the day of the exams, you must submit a medical certificate and communicate your absence to the Professor and Cattolica International Office via email prior to the exam. If the student does not justify his/her absence through sufficient documentation and with adequate notice before the final test, you will receive an automatic Failed. Absences for other unforeseeable circumstances will not be accepted and will result in a failing grade.

Course reading and materials

All the required readings will be available in a course pack and the lecturer's slides will be available on Blackboard.

Required reading (excerpts):

- Robert Mc Kee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and The Principles of Screenwriting*, Harper Collins Publishers, NYC



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- Linda Seger, *The art of adaptation: turning fact and fiction into film*, Owl Book, NYC 1992.
- Luigi Pirandello, *The wheelbarrow* (short story)

The following Italian novel (in English, to be read prior to course):

- Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio*.

Required short story (to be read before our first class meeting):

- Edith Wharton, “Roman fever”

Required films (they will be shown in class):

- *Pinocchio* (2002) by Roberto Benigni.
- *Pinocchio* (2019) by Matteo Garrone.
- *Il divo* (2008) by Paolo Sorrentino (in the movie theater at MIC).

Schedule

WEEK 1	
<p>Lesson 1: 22 June 5 h: 2pm-7pm</p>	<p>Introduction to narrative techniques: clear vision. Why we need stories and the beginning of the writing process: concept and premise. Analysis and discussion of “Roman fever” with Prof. Lisella: short fiction as inspiration and writing model. Guidelines to short film: The dramatic moment. Screening of short film.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing lab: Exercise on location.
<p>Lesson 2: 23 June 5 h: 9am-2pm</p>	<p>Morning writing warm up with Prof. Lisella—using our powers of observation. The story triangle. Script format. Text and subtext.</p> <p>Writing lab: location script, to be sent by 5 pm.</p>
<p>Lesson 3: 24 June 5 h: 9am-2pm</p>	<p>Feedback on location script. Structure. Using a “backward outline” to analyze how characters and stories develop: Prof. Lisella.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing lab: Work on story ideas for final project (NB: final project will be individual or in pairs, depending on the number of students). • Read “The wheelbarrow” by Pirandello.
<p>Lesson 4: 25 June 4 h: 9am-1pm</p>	<p>Character. The example of “The wheelbarrow” by Pirandello. The structure of a story: the Hero’s journey as a pattern for epic tales and fairy</p>



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	<p>tales. The example of Pinocchio. The art of adaptation – literature and cinema.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing lab: Exercise on character.
<p>Lesson 5: 26 June [4 h – 9 am-1 pm]</p>	<p>Discussion on your story ideas for final project. Feedback. Adaptation: literature & cinema. The case of “Pinocchio” by Benigni</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch “Pinocchio” by Benigni. • Writing lab: Work on outline. • 26 June by midnight: <u>Deadline</u> for submitting the outline of your short film
WEEK 2	
<p>Lesson 6: 29 June 5 h: 9am-2pm</p>	<p>Feedback on outline. The art of adaptation: discussion on Benigni’s adaptation. Introducing “deepening” writing techniques developed from expressive writing field with Prof. Lisella.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing lab: Work on screenplay.
<p>Lesson 7: 30 June 4h: 10am-2pm</p>	<p>Visit to MIC + screening of “Il divo” by Paolo Sorrentino/Prof. Lisella in attendance.</p> <p>Creating and shading style, mood and tone. Adaptation from true life stories: the case of Andreotti.</p>
<p>Lesson 8: 1 July 5 h: 9am-2pm</p>	<p>Analysis of “Il Divo” by Sorrentino as an example of adaptation from a true-life story and style.</p> <p>The case of “Pinocchio” by Garrone. Scene analysis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch “Pinocchio” by Garrone. • Writing lab: writing your screenplay. • Deadline for first draft of screenplay: July 1 by midnight.
<p>Lesson 9: 2 July 5 h: 9am-2pm</p>	<p>Feedback on your screenplays with Profs. Perbellini and Lisella. Rewriting your script.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing lab: rewriting your script.
<p>Lesson 10: 3 July 2 h: 9-11am</p>	<p>FINAL EXAM in class. Last draft of screenplay by midnight</p>



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Bios of instructors

Mara Perbellini is a dramatist, headwriter and scriptwriter for major film and TV production companies. After her B.A. in Italian Humanities and her master's degree in Screenwriting at Università Cattolica of Milan, she studied filmmaking at the New York Film Academy (NYC and L.A.-Universal Studios) and at the London Academy of Radio, Film & TV: while there, she directed, wrote and edited 4 short films.

In 2006 Mara joined the Faculty of IES Abroad Milan, where she teaches History of Italian Cinema. In 2012 she joined the Faculty of Università Cattolica where she teaches Italian cinema. She teaches courses for the Screenwriting Master Program (MISP) at Università Cattolica and at the film-making summer course at the School of Visual Arts in NYC (2009-2019).

She worked as a story analyst for Rai Fiction and Eagle Pictures. She also worked as assistant director on the TV-movie "Una famiglia per caso" for RAI 1.

Her first commissioned work was the TV animation series *Uffa che Pazienza!* (Rai) which earned the Pulcinella Award at Cartoons on the Bay 2008. Since then, she wrote many prime-time mini-series and series, such as *Distretto di polizia 8* (Canale 5), *Ci vediamo a Portofino* (DAP), *La vita che corre* (Rai 1), *Eleonora Duse* (Publispei) and *Ombre sulla neve* (Casanova Multimedia). In 2009 she got an Award for best screenplay at the Fiuggi International Family Film Festival with the film "Il sirenetto".

Recent filmography

- 2021-24: Head-writer of the tv series *Dakota* (Swiss e-motion / RSI / C-films)
- 2022: Writers' room co-producer for the HBO Max series "Home sweet Rome"; writer of episode 8 (story and teleplay)
- 2022: Writer of 2 episodes of the prime-time tv series "Che Dio ci aiuti 7" (LuxVide / Rai1)
- 2021: Writer of 1 episode of the prime-time tv series *Viola come il mare* (LuxVide / Canale 5)
- 2020-2021: Head-writer of the tv series *Marta & Eva* (2 seasons of 20 episodes; 3zero2 / Rai)
- 2020: Writer of 7 episodes of the animated tv series *Nina & Olga* (enanimation / Rai), winner of the Pulcinella Award at Cartoons on the Bay 2021, in the category Upper Preschool Tv Series
- 2019: Screenwriter of *The last days of the Republic*, an epic historical film that won the StoryLab competition 2019.
- 2016-19: Writer of 2 episodes of the TV series *Made in Italy* (Taodue – The family for Mediaset / Amazon Prime, 2016-19).
- 2018-19: Head-writer of the TV series *Penny on M.A.R.S.*, seasons 2 (10 eps) and 3 (13 eps; 3zero2-The Walt Disney Company Italia).

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Julia Lisella is a poet and a scholar of women's writing, and a professor of English at Regis College in Weston, Massachusetts. She holds a B.A. from Barnard College, an M.A. in Creative Writing from New York University, and a PhD in American Literature from Tufts University. Her poetry collections include *Our Lively Kingdom* (finalist for the Paterson Book Prize 2023), *Always*, and *Terrain*, and a chapbook, *Love Song, Hiroshima*. Her poems appear in a wide range of journals and anthologies, including *The Common*, *Ploughshares*, and many others. She has published essays on a number of modernist American women writers, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Muriel Rukeyser, Rosa Zagnoni Marinoni and Genevieve Taggard, and is co-editor of the essay collection, *Modernist Women Writers and American Social Engagement* (2019). She has received fellowships from the MacDowell, Millay, and Vermont Center for the Arts, and from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, as well as a "Reading Frederick Douglass" grant from Mass Humanities and the John Clive Teaching Award for her work as an instructor at Harvard University. At Regis College, she teaches courses in creative writing, American literature, and the medical humanities. She has guest lectured (via Zoom) at the University of Calabria's Italian Diaspora Studies program, and looks forward to this on-campus teaching experience at Università Cattolica in Milan. For more about her work as a poet, see www.julialisellapoetry.com.

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